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Interplay Wellbeing Framework: Community Perspectives on Working Together for Effective Service Delivery in Remote Aboriginal Communities

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Interplay Wellbeing Framework: Community Perspectives on Working Together for Effective Service Delivery in Remote Aboriginal Communities

Abstract

Access to effective services and programs is necessary to improve wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote Australia. Without genuine participation of Aboriginal community members in the design, governance, and delivery of services, desired service delivery outcomes are rarely achieved. Using a "shared space" model, Aboriginal communities, governments, and scientists came together to design and develop the Interplay Wellbeing Framework. This Framework brings together stories and numbers (or qualitative and quantitative data) to represent community values for the purpose of informing program and policy agendas. This article unpacks what community members saw as making a service work well and why. The domains of empowerment and community functioning are discussed and their relationship to effective service delivery demonstrated.

Keywords

Interplay Project, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, remote Australia, well-being, service delivery, empowerment, community functioning, local governance

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The holistic nature of wellbeing for Indigenous Peoples, including the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, has been recognised in the literature for more than 25 years (National Aboriginal Health Strategy Working Party [NAHSWP], 1989). However, in dominant statistical data Indigenous Peoples continue to be represented primarily in terms of comparisons with non-Indigenous populations with emphasis on poorer outcomes in relation to health, education, and employment determinants. Despite such recognition, policies and programs focused on closing “the gap” between non-Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia are not achieving the desired results (Australian Government, 2017).

The [Interplay Project](#) (Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation [CRC-REP], n.d.a) therefore aims to drive positive policy change and program delivery for the benefit of Aboriginal communities, particularly those residing in remote Australia (Cairney, Abbott & Yamaguchi 2015; Cairney, Abbott, Quinn, Yamaguchi, Wilson, & Wakerman 2017). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in remote Australia are often distinct from those in more urban and regional settings. Local Indigenous languages often dominate and lives are predominately lived and governed by locally specific and unique cultural worldviews, which can be quite different from dominant Australian (or more Western) orientations. Taking diversity into account, this article presents a mixed methods approach emphasising that accountability in numbers (quantitative data) needs to be accompanied by accountability in stories (qualitative data). The aim of this article is to explore what makes a service work well and why, from the perspective of local people living in four discrete remote communities.

An overview of the Interplay Wellbeing Framework and a subsequent quantified interrelationship identified between empowerment, community functioning, and service delivery (derived from surveys with 842 Aboriginal adults) will be discussed. This interplay will then be further explored through analysing qualitative data collected between 2014 and 2015, which involved a range of focus groups and semi-structured interviews with 75 adults (91% local Aboriginal people).

The quantitative interplay will be positioned alongside the dominant theme of “working together” (and the interrelated subthemes of consultation, engagement, and the role of local representation on boards, community driven agendas, and local employment opportunities). This analysis, supported by a large body of existing literature, emphasises the relevance of strong local governance for effective program delivery in the social services space. The article proposes that resources should be redirected from supporting top-down engagement agendas and processes towards more recognition, strengthening, and building of local engagement capacities and capabilities.

Literature Review

There is substantial evidence, collected over decades of rigorous evaluative work, that demonstrates without genuine local engagement and involvement (empowerment and community functioning) desired service delivery outcomes are rarely achieved in remote Aboriginal Australia (The Australian National Training Authority Research Advisory Council, 1998a, 1998b; Dudgeon, Milroy, & Walker, 2014; Fisher et al., 2011; Ivers et al., 2006). The Desert Services that Work Project (2006-2009) found that many initiatives and programs in remote Australia concentrated on developing and delivering their

own services to a particular standard and therefore focused mainly on the supply side of the service equation. This extensive research demonstrated that “there is a significant mismatch between supply-side activities and demand-side realities” (Fisher et al., 2011, p. 92).

The following key elements for the effective functioning of services in the education sector (Burton & Osborne, 2014; Guenther, Bat, & Osborne, 2014; Tjitayi & Osborne, 2014; Young, Guenther, & Boyle, 2007), the training and work sector (Australian National Training Authority Research Advisory Council, 1998b; Guenther, Castle, Raymond, & Berschl, 2011; Guenther, Falk, Arnott, Lucardie, & Spiers, 2008; McRae-Williams, 2014), the health and wellbeing sector (Arnott, Guenther, Davis, Foster, & Cummings, 2010; Dudgeon et al., 2014; Smith, Grundy, & Nelson, 2010; Tsey & Every, 2000), and in the domestic violence, child protection, and justice sectors (Arnott, Guenther, & Cummings, 2010; Arnott, Guenther, & Williams, 2009; Blagg, 2016) and more across generally across the board (Arbon, 2008; Fisher et al., 2011; McRae-Williams, Guenther, Jacobson, & Lovell, 2016; Morley, 2015; Verran & Christie, 2011) have been consistently identified:

- Local ownership, leadership, and control over decision making;
- Inclusion of local cultural priorities and values;
- Local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff working on the program;
- The harnessing and building of local strengths and resilience;
- The importance of flexibility in timelines and operations (context specific);
- Building an evidence base with local involvement in research design, monitoring, and evaluation; and
- The value of partnerships based on trust and long-term relationship building.

In this large body of literature, programs found to be the most successful are those where local people defined their own needs, and then they designed and controlled the response through partnerships based on mutual trust. Yet, from a service provider or governmental perspective, community engagement is usually understood as sitting along a hierarchy of levels from informing and initial consultation to community decision making and full control (Milton et al., 2012). While the successful programs outlined above sit high on this hierarchy, many (or most) interventions in remote Aboriginal Australia continue to operate much further down this ladder.

As Eversole (2011) has highlighted, there is now an evident and common belief that governing is more effective when governments and/or service providers and communities work together, an idea that extends well beyond the remote Aboriginal community domain. However, Eversole (2011) also argued that engagement remains framed on the government’s terms and that costs and frustrations surrounding this engagement become the burden of communities. She stated, “By valuing communities in theory but failing to recognise how they work in practice, policy makers saddle themselves with an uphill battle for community engagement, even as they risk undermining existing community capacity” (p. 68).

In a recent keynote address at the Developing the North Conference in Darwin, Australia, Peter Yu (2016) also raised the issue of differences in our understandings regarding the nature of engagement. In his critique of the Developing the North White Paper (Australian Government, 2015), he argued that, while partnerships and working with Aboriginal peoples are mentioned, it is unclear and questionable how true and meaningful this engagement would actually be (see also McRae-Williams & Guenther,

2016). He concluded by emphasising, “We need new, innovative and creative Indigenous engagement and consultation strategies” (Yu, 2016, n.p.). Fisher et al. (2011) similarly warned that failing to distinguish between true engagement and simply talking to the community can undermine good program design.

As Eversole (2011) pointed out, bureaucratic institutions have particular ways of working, which involve formal structures of authority and control, as well as legal frameworks and paid administrators. In this context, the logic that good engagement is represented through signed forms, detailed and documented processes, risk assessments, and so forth is not questioned. Community-based processes, on the other hand, represent different ways of operating and are based on “personal and relational networks of trust and influence, informal rules and norms, enforcement via social pressure, and work done primarily by unpaid volunteers with a personal stake in the outcome” (Eversole, 2011, p. 65). The Interplay Project survey results below indicate a significant interrelationship between empowerment, community functioning, and self-reported satisfaction with service delivery. An analysis of Interplay Project qualitative data provides further depth in understanding how these interrelationships unfold in practice.

The Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation (CRC-REP) Interplay Project

The Interplay Project found that, while tailored government health and wellbeing frameworks exist for Aboriginal populations (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2011; Australian Health Minister’s Advisory Council [AHMAC], 2015), these frameworks failed to adequately address cultural diversity, community development, or empowerment components relevant to the remote context (Nguyen & Cairney, 2013). Over 4 years, remote Aboriginal communities were consulted and their corroborated priorities of culture, empowerment, and community are represented as domains in the Interplay Wellbeing Framework, alongside the government priorities of education, employment, and health (Abbott & Cairney, 2014; Cairney et al., 2017; CRC-REP, n.d.b).

Ethics statement. Ethical clearances were obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) of the Northern Territory Department of Health and Menzies School of Health Research, and from the Western Australian Aboriginal Health Ethics Committee. Additional approvals and support were received from local health and education boards, government data-linkage services, land councils, and local partner organisations. All participants gave written informed consent to participate.



Figure 1. Interplay Wellbeing Framework.

Quantitative Survey Methodology

From the foundation of this framework, a rigorous process was undertaken to develop a survey tool with cultural and scientific validity (Cairney et al., 2015, 2017). The survey was designed to collect subjective quantitative data against the Interplay Wellbeing Framework in order to build an evidence base (numbers story) to inform policy and practice. The development of the Interplay Survey involved a comprehensive review of all measurement tools related to wellbeing or any of its subcomponents that have previously been developed and validated (both scientifically and culturally) for use with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Cairney et al., 2017). Secondly, all questions and strategies used in comparable research were reviewed, including the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC, n.d.; also see Biddle, 2001), the West Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey (Zubrick et al., 2005), the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS, 2014), Strong Souls (Thomas, Cairney, Gunthorpe, Paradies, & Sayers, 2010), the Global Empowerment Measure (GEM; Haswell et al., 2010), the SeIQOL (Chenhall, Senior, Cole, Cunningham, & O’Boyle, 2010), the National Indigenous Languages Survey (NILS; Marmion, Obata, & Troy, 2014); the Caring for Country questionnaire and the SF36 (Burgess, Berry, Gunthorpe, & Bailie, 2008; Burgess et al., 2009). The Ngurru-Kurlu was also used to inform cultural indicators (Pawa-Kurlpurlurnu, Holmes, & Box, 2008).

A case study approach was undertaken and four communities (3 located in the Northern Territory and 1 in Western Australia) were engaged in the project. These four communities represent diversity across geography, culture, language, population size, models of infrastructure, and service delivery. Aboriginal community researchers from all sites reviewed the drafted survey questions and worked with the

research team to tailor and contextualise to their local environment. As such, the final survey questions reflected in-depth discussions between Aboriginal community researchers, with their knowledge of everyday scenarios faced by people in remote communities, and scientists, with their knowledge about how to represent these scenarios in statistically sound survey questions. The framework has been statistically validated as a collaborative or holistic approach to assessing wellbeing (Cairney et al., 2017). The survey was administered by Ninti One (n.d.) [Aboriginal community researchers](#) using iPads loaded with the iSurvey software. Each individual survey took approximately 1 hour to complete. The final survey cohort comprised 842 participants (353 males, 489 females; mean age 25.2 years, standard deviation 5.3). The quantitative survey questions associated with the Interplay Wellbeing Framework domains and subdomains were modelled with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*Not at all*) to 5 (*Lots*; Cairney et al., 2015, 2017). Higher scores indicate higher levels of the variable or latent trait.

Survey Findings—Empowerment, Community Functioning, and Service Delivery

This article explores one particular statistical interrelationship identified between the key domains of empowerment, community functioning, and service delivery. Table 1 identifies the latent trait (domain) and the survey item (focus of the question asked).

Initially used to validate the Interplay Wellbeing Framework and survey, the following was then applied to understand the interrelationship discussed in this article. Using the statistics package SPSS and Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS) version 23, bivariate Pearson's correlations were calculated between each pair of measures and a structural equation model (SEM) was conducted to examine hypothesised relationships between the latent traits. The SEM was validated by checking a variety of model fit indices, including chi-square, goodness of fit (GFI), adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI), comparative fit index (CFI), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). The resultant measurement model is presented in Figure 2.

This figure shows that personal empowerment was found to have direct positive impacts on both community functioning and service delivery. It also shows that improved community functioning has direct positive impacts on service delivery. Participants with higher self-reported scores for personal empowerment also reported higher scores relating to their satisfaction with community functioning and service delivery. Importantly, this suggests that individual empowerment is a key underlying factor in community perceptions around healthy community functioning and effective service delivery. This suggests that improved community functioning builds from the actions of individuals who feel empowered. Yet, the influence of local contexts, social determinants, and power structures adds certain complexities and challenges to this process. This will be explored through an analysis of the qualitative data below.

Qualitative Methodology

The qualitative data involved contributions from 75 individuals who resided within the same communities where quantitative data was collected. Between June 2014 and June 2015, 14 focus groups and 8 semi-structured interviews were undertaken. In each of the four research sites, consultation with local Aboriginal community researchers and key research partners was used to identify main programs or services that were perceived to work well (Cairney et al., 2015).

Table 1. Latent Trait and Related Survey Items

Latent Trait	Survey Item areas
Empowerment	Identity Self-efficacy Resilience
Community Functioning	Community safety Community working well together Trust and respect Leadership
Service Delivery	School/education Employment Health

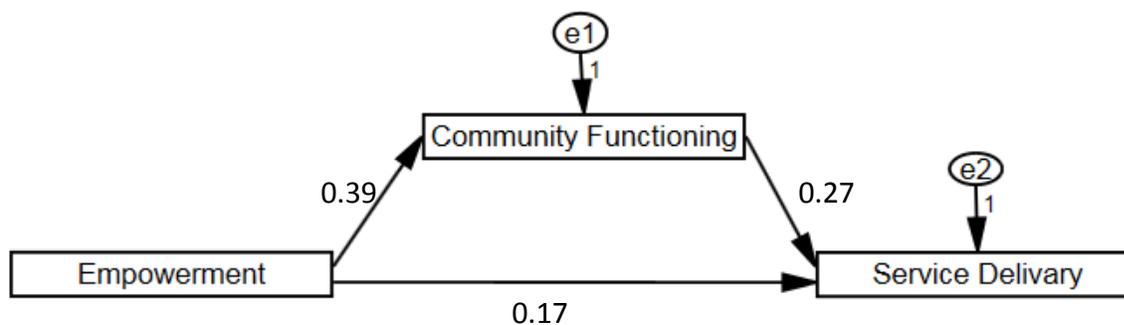


Figure 2. SEM model. Chi-squared (χ^2) = 2.93; goodness of fit index (GFI) = 0.98; Adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI) = 0.96; the competitive fit index (CFI) = 0.99; root mean square of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.05 with PCLOLSE = 0.60. All paths are significant ($p < 0.001$).

The services identified included Aboriginal corporations and associations holding diverse portfolios including programs in areas such as education, consultancy and research services, homeland management, land and sea management, municipal services, work programs, community patrols, home

and community care and rehabilitation services, and small independent enterprises operating under their umbrella. A number of health services and programs and one family-owned business enterprise were also included.

Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal individuals involved and/or employed in these services participated in focus groups and interviews. Users of these services and or those targeted by these services were also included in discussions and there was considerable overlap between different roles. For example, individuals may have been community members, service users, program managers, employees, association members, or service founders, often representing a combination of these positions.

Table 2 identifies the number of participants from each service or program, Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal status, and their gender.

In total, 75 people participated in this study with the large majority ($n = 68$) being of Aboriginal heritage and only 7 identifying as non-Aboriginal. Almost all (91%) of participants were long-term, local residents in the research sites. Focus groups and interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes and a relatively informal approach was taken to promote spontaneous directions of discussion. Drawing from a yarning method (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010), recognised as culturally relevant in Aboriginal research contexts, the facilitators used guiding questions such as:

- What was the service or program they were involved with and what did they do in their role;
- What was good about the service or program; and
- What other programs and services did they think worked well in their community and why.

All focus groups and interviews were recorded, and one of the research team members also took notes during discussions. Using an inductive approach, the audio and expanded notes were jointly analysed by the team for core meanings relevant to the key question: What makes a service work for the people they are serving and why? Inductive logic and reasoning was used to code the data using the software NVivo.

Limitations. A limitation of this study is that participants were not drawn from a more representative landscape of services and programs. For example, services like power and water, telecommunications, Australia Post, Centrelink, or transport services were not represented. However, this reflects our quantitative data that focuses on service delivery related to health, education, and general employment sectors. The prevalence of Aboriginal associations and/or corporations with large portfolios included in this study reflects a context where such organisations are the common contact point or umbrella for many community services. It is also worth mentioning that the Interplay research team were all female and that 59 percent of participants were also female; therefore, a potential bias towards female perspectives should be acknowledged.

Table 2. Qualitative Study Participants

Service	Aboriginal		Non-Aboriginal		Total
	M	F	M	F	
Aboriginal Corporations and Associations	7	17	1		25
Women’s Council		4			4
Health Services	10	1	1	3	15
Ranger Programs	7		2		9
Small Enterprise	1				1
Community Focus Groups	1	20			21
Total	26	42	4	3	75

Qualitative Findings

When participants were asked what makes a service work well, a number of interrelated themes emerged. The overarching theme focused on understandings of “working together.” Under this umbrella, three other themes were evident. These included:

- Consultation, engagement, and the role of local representation on boards,
- Community-driven agendas, and
- Local employment opportunities.

Unpacked below, to a certain extent, these reflect the interrelationship identified in the Interplay project quantitative data between empowerment (self-efficacy), community functioning (working well together, trust and respect, leadership), and satisfaction with service delivery.

Working together. All participants couched their responses within narratives of people working or not working together. Particularly strong in these narratives was an emphasis on working with and engaging with people in their own local community. This was expressed and discussed in a number of ways. For example, participants emphasised that “working with community” was fundamental to services working well. Many also discussed engaging with local people as a key responsibility or obligation associated with their own employment position. It was also common across the focus groups for a motivation, passion, and interest in “working for” the benefit of their community to be shared with the research team. Yet, alongside the unquestioned value and necessity placed on working with their local community were also discussions on the reality of being part of a particular local social, cultural, and political structure, and the complexities of enacting and maintaining “everybody’s” engagement.

Consultation, Engagement, and the Importance of Local Representation on Boards

Initial consultation with the community was perceived as essential in service planning by many participants. For example, as one participant stated:

Before deciding on funding [there is a] need to consult with the community . . . to find out what the community wants.

If they threw money down on the table and said, “decide” then we would have to sit down and think wisely and talk to people.

Ongoing engagement between a service and the community was also highlighted as a significant priority:

Consultation is more than getting feedback, its ongoing engagement, it’s an ongoing thing. It’s more than just getting the information.

As another participant suggested:

It’s not fair to employ a CEO to do this on their own in isolation—we need to make sure community does know which takes time.

The significance of respecting the time needed to consult and engage effectively, and build relationships was acknowledged by many in the focus groups.

The value of local representation on service provider boards was commonly emphasised as a positive way to ensure ongoing processes of community consultation and ongoing community engagement in decision making. These boards were viewed as supporting service delivery through facilitating local governance, and through input into program focus and design. It was also mentioned by one group of employees that local representation on boards could operate as a mechanism for information sharing across community organisations or service sectors. For example, one participant said:

There is an overlap of board members from <service> with board members from <service>—that is okay because there is a linking up, stories from everywhere come together.

However, the issue of recognising and reflecting on who could legitimately occupy these governance positions from a broad community perspective was also highlighted as a key factor in the success of this form of engagement.

Community-driven agendas. Beyond the importance of service providers initially consulting and committing to ongoing engagement with the community, many of the participants emphasised that what made a service or program work well was when it was instigated by, rather than imposed on, a community. When the idea of the program “came from the community,” participants believed that this contributed to success. There was significant agreement across the participant groups that this kind of development, when followed by ongoing community control over decision-making processes, was the ideal way for a service to work. As one community member explained:

You need to be responsible for your services, responsible to deliver to your people services, less interventionist and more empowerment.

Local employment opportunities. Alongside community-initiated services with local governance structures, many participants identified local employment positions and opportunities as another important ingredient for services to work well. The extent a workplace was able to acknowledge employees, local perspectives and knowledge, and appreciate their abilities to act in culturally appropriate ways correlated with the level to which a service or program was viewed as working well for its target group. Such workplaces were associated by a number of participants as being “employers of choice.” This was further articulated by one Aboriginal program manager, who stated:

[It is about] unlocking the potential in local people instead of trying to import a way of doing things or the skills you need to have. It’s recognising the skills people already have and what interests and building on these.

Many local community members employed in services spoke about how their role enabled them to identify community needs and to negotiate culturally appropriate delivery. For example, one community member explained:

If we see gaps we can liaise with community and <our service> to get a service to fill the gap—rather than the other way around . . . we go around to our people, talk to them put in their ideas.

A sense of responsibility and obligation to their local community was a sentiment in many participants’ responses. For example, one focus group spoke about “just getting on and doing things.” They expressed frustration at bureaucratic processes associated with community engagement and stated, “if there’s matters to be dealt with straight away, we do that straight away.” It was from this position of responsibility and obligation that participants primarily talked about and negotiated their own work roles. For example, one local entrepreneur explained that what made his small business work well was:

[It] has always been based on cultural decision-making processes—flow on benefits to community and cultural benefits.

Related to this emphasis was a strong sentiment across all focus groups and interviews that participants held motivations, passions, and commitments to “working for” the benefit of those around them, “working with others” to improve social and other outcomes for their families, young people, and local communities. For example, a number of participants spoke about the value of services involving young people and the broader community through school or recreational activities, career days, and social/cultural events as strategies for facilitating and supporting the engagement of others.

The importance of local community engagement was not questioned by any of the participants and was fundamental to their responses regarding what makes services work well. Yet, the challenges of establishing and maintaining ongoing engagement between services and local people were also raised. The complexity of creating an environment where everyone felt equally included and informed and where the ideals of “everybody working together” could be realised was captured in the comments of one participant who explained that the biggest challenge to services working well was “getting mob on board.” Another participant also highlighted that there are:

A lot of personal disputes that get in the way. If one person has an argument with one other person—they will stop talking to each other and also the families stop talking to each other.

Beyond personal disputes, it was also mentioned that certain shifts in terms of which clan or family was benefiting or seen to be benefiting from particular services or resource access also played a role in the complexity of community engagement ideals. Participants highlighted the challenges they experienced in their engagement endeavours, where there might be limited transparency or inequality in terms of community representation, where young people may not be interested, or where other activities not associated with their service or program agendas may be prioritised.

Discussion

By telling stories through numbers, the Interplay quantitative findings highlight that fostering individual empowerment can create broad reaching benefits in terms of satisfaction with community functioning and have subsequent positive implications for service delivery. The qualitative data presented also validates much of the literature on what makes a service work well and why in the context of remote Aboriginal communities. It also provides deeper insight into the quantified interrelationship identified through the Interplay survey. This data suggests a causal relationship, where high levels of empowerment—through a strong sense of identity, self-efficacy, and resilience—impacts how safe individuals think their community is and how well they think people and programs work together with trust and respect. The qualitative data confirmed that participants valued the notion of community-initiated ideas or grassroots development and having ongoing local influence over decision-making processes through local employment. It was also clear that the motivation behind undertaking their employment or voluntary roles was a desire to support the wellbeing of those living with and around them in their community. The relationship between this motivation of “working for” the benefit of community (or more broadly for Aboriginal peoples) and employment outcomes and experiences has also been identified in other CRC-REP projects (McRae-Williams, 2014; McRae-Williams et al., 2016; Parkes, McRae-Williams, & Tedmanson, 2014).

As identified in the literature, the notion of community is a complex one, and who and for what purpose it is being defined can influence what “working with community” may mean and involve. While in reality many of the services discussed by participants sat closer to the “informing and initial consultation” level on the Milton et al. (2012) hierarchy of engagement, participants strongly expressed their desire for services to move towards engagement that reflected community decision making and full control. This is not a new assertion, with an existing evidence base demonstrating that this level of engagement is necessary for services to achieve their desired broadly scoped wellbeing outcomes.

Yet, it is also important to acknowledge that participants emphasised complexities associated with engaging with their own community where a desire to get “everyone involved” was often difficult to enact. When their challenge to engage is then positioned within a context of different policy and program expectations around community consultation and engagement processes, things become even more complex. As Eversole (2011) has highlighted, contradictions inevitably emerge in the intersection between public policy aspirations for engagement and the agency of particular communities. Competing demands to get things done quickly and efficiently, and for meaningful engagement processes involving

time and patience, can see governments and service providers from different perspectives: as either failing to act or failing to adequately engage.

Yet, it is clear that “working well” mostly occurs where strong local governance structures are in place, where local influence over decisions has been enacted, and where local employment is a key component of service delivery. A logical conclusion from this evidence base would be for there to be more investment in service delivery models that prioritise local ownership and control. However, participants in this study also discussed the challenges of engaging meaningfully with their own communities, and emphasised the value they placed on doing this well. This suggests the need to acknowledge, recognise, resource, and support the development of local governance capacities and local peoples’ own strengths and capabilities for engaging effectively with their own communities.

Despite the evidence cited above, it would seem that a top-down approach to planning, doing, and recording community engagement objectives and activities in remote Aboriginal Australia remains. If the primary focus was to shift from identifying process and best practice for how governments (or outsiders) must, can, and should engage with communities towards supporting local people in choosing and shaping how they wish to engage, it is likely that significant improvements in desired outcomes could be achieved.

It is important to note here, however, that both the quantitative and qualitative data discussed in this article may not necessarily relate to all service sectors. While it is clear that meaningful engagement in all areas represented by the Interplay Wellbeing Framework including land use, health and wellbeing, education, and economic participation were of priority, it is possible that effective engagement may differ in other service delivery sectors. Yet, it is beyond question that “working together” or community engagement practices need to be grounded in local priorities. Guenther and McRae-Williams (2014) found that many Aboriginal people in remote Aboriginal communities choose to work in four key industries of employment (public administration and safety; education and training; health care and social assistance; and arts and recreation services), highlighting good places to start in terms of adequately resourcing and supporting processes of local ownership and control.

Conclusion

There are recognised tensions in spaces of engagement between governments, service providers, and within communities. There is also a strong evidence of the importance of local community control and ownership in social delivery sectors such as health and wellbeing, land management, education, and employment. Yet, as Yu (2016) has emphasised, “we need new, innovative and creative Indigenous engagement and consultation strategies” (n.p.), in order to strengthen and build meaningful relationships which benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In this article, it has been argued that these new strategies must be framed by local priorities and will need to recognise, resource, and support the strengthening of local capabilities and capacities for effective engagement.

These findings will also be used to further inform the key concepts of empowerment and community that are represented holistically in the Interplay Wellbeing Framework. The Interplay Wellbeing Framework and survey may have applicability in measuring outcomes of programs and services where local priorities and ownership are central, and where the goal is to improve community wellbeing.

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