

Engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People in Evaluation

When undertaking evaluation that involves Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities, it is important to approach the process with care, respect and humility. This short guidance is not intended to make anyone an expert. Rather it highlights key considerations and points you to trusted resources developed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and researchers.



Where possible, seek guidance from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, organisations and community leaders. Strong relationships and genuine collaboration are central to meaningful and culturally safe evaluation.

Start with relationships

Before beginning any evaluation activities, focus on building genuine relationships with the community.

- Take time to listen and understand the local context.
- Recognise the deep connection between land, culture, family and community.
- Avoid assumptions and ask respectfully what works best for the community you are engaging with.
- Follow cultural protocols and seek guidance when unsure.



Trust and relationships are the foundation for effective evaluation

Work in partnership with community

Evaluation should not be something that is done to communities, but something that is done with communities. Where possible:

- Involve community members in co-designing the evaluation.
- Share decision making throughout the process.
- Ensure the evaluation reflects community priorities, not only organisational or funding requirements.
- Provide opportunities to contribute to interpreting and sharing the findings.



Community leadership and ownership strengthen both the process and the outcomes.

Use Culturally Appropriate Approaches

Evaluation methods may look different when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Always seek guidance from community members on the most appropriate methods.



Some approaches that are commonly used include:



Yarning

A conversational and relational approach to gathering insights. Yarning allows people to share stories and experiences in a culturally comfortable way.



Storytelling and visual methods

Many communities prefer approaches that allow people to share knowledge through stories, images or creative expression.



Collective and relational approaches

Evaluation may focus on the impact on community, relationships and culture, not only individual outcomes.

Respect Ethics, Data Sovereignty and Decolonising Data

Ethical practice is essential when engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in evaluation.



Key considerations include:

It is important to reflect on your own role and potential bias when undertaking evaluation.

- Clearly explain the **purpose of the evaluation** using plain language.
- Ensure **informed consent** is obtained from participants.
- Be transparent about how information will be **collected, stored, used and shared**.
- Recognise that communities have the right to **control their own data** (often referred to as Data Sovereignty).
- Involve community members in interpreting findings to ensure accuracy.
- Share the results back to the community.

An important concept in this space is decolonising data. Historically, research and evaluation involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has often been conducted without community leadership or control. Decolonising data refers to shifting these practices so that communities have ownership, authority and agency over how their knowledge, stories and data are gathered, interpreted and used.



This means prioritising community voice, respecting cultural knowledge systems and ensuring evaluation processes benefit the community involved.

Build Capacity Where Possible

Where appropriate, consider opportunities to involve and train community members in the evaluation process. This might include:

Supporting local people to assist with data collection or community engagement

Providing opportunities to build evaluation skills within community.

Creating space for communities to share their own stories and knowledge.



This approach strengthens community ownership and supports longer-term capability.

Helpful Frameworks and Resources

There are many excellent resources developed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCO) and experts that provide deeper guidance. The following are useful starting points:



Wungening Aboriginal Corporation

Provide community-led perspectives and practice examples from Aboriginal organisations. Support and offer learning and training in evaluation and decolonising data.



The Kowa Collection

Resources that support community-led knowledge sharing and culturally grounded evaluation approaches.

Produced and follow the OCCAAARS framework - an Aboriginal evaluation framework focused on community outcomes, relationships and accountability.



Australian Institute of Family Studies - Evaluation Resources

Resources that support community-led knowledge sharing and culturally grounded evaluation approaches.

Produced and follow the OCCAAARS framework - an Aboriginal evaluation framework focused on community outcomes, relationships and accountability.



Australian Centre for Evaluation - Indigenous Evaluation

Provides information on approaches to Indigenous evaluation within government and policy contexts, with a focus on collaboration with First Nations communities and strengthening culturally informed evaluation practice.

Helpful Frameworks and Resources cont.



BADDR Framework

Developed by Maggie Walter, this framework highlights the importance of Indigenous data sovereignty and the need for data systems and research practices that reflect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, priorities and lived experiences.



Australian Evaluation Society – First Nations Cultural Safety Framework

A practical framework that outlines the principles of culturally safe evaluation and provides guidance on the responsibilities of evaluators and organisations when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.



AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research

A nationally recognised ethical framework that outlines principles for conducting research and evaluation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, emphasising respect, responsibility, reciprocity and community benefit.



Commissioner for Children and Young People WA – Engaging with Aboriginal Children and Young People

A practical toolkit designed to support organisations to respectfully engage with Aboriginal children and young people, including culturally appropriate communication and participation approaches.

Community, culture and relationship are central to evaluation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

If you are unsure about the best approach:

Ask respectfully, listen carefully and be guided by the community.

Taking the time to build relationships and work collaboratively will result in more meaningful, respectful and effective evaluation.

