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The VACCHO Submission to the Productivity Commission:

The Indigenous Evaluation Strategy

August 2019

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Acknowledgement

The Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO) would like to acknowledge that this document was developed on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. VACCHO pays respect to all Elders past, present and emerging, and all Aboriginal people who have contributed to the following submission.

About VACCHO

VACCHO is the peak body for Aboriginal health and wellbeing in Victoria, with Membership consisting of 30 Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) that provide support to approximately 25,000 Aboriginal people. VACCHO champions Community Control and health equality, working towards building vibrant, healthy and self-determining Aboriginal Communities. Our Members have a proud history as sustainable, grassroots organisations that assist in building Community capacity for self-determination. VACCHO believes that each Aboriginal Community needs its own locally-owned, culturally appropriate, and adequately resourced primary health care facility.

Terminology

The term ‘Aboriginal’ in VACCHO documents is inclusive of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The terms ‘Communities’ and ‘Community’ in this document refer to all Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Communities across Australia, representing a wide diversity of cultures, traditions and experiences.

Executive Summary

The Indigenous Evaluation Strategy (IES) is an opportunity to create a paradigm shift in the relationship between program and policy evaluation and execution. VACCHO endorses the development of a whole-of-government evaluation strategy, which is built on the foundation of self-determination and Community Control for Aboriginal people and Communities. We aim to set new standards whereby evaluation is integrated into the entire policy-cycle rather than as an addition or afterthought. In order to achieve this we must place Aboriginal people at the centre of an IES, and seek genuine collaboration with Aboriginal Communities in order to turn evaluation into positive policy and program outcomes.

The Productivity Commission seeks feedback on the principles, processes and priorities of an IES design. VACCHO's submission argues that in order to achieve effective policy outcomes, we must first secure the principles and processes of an IES. VACCHO believes it is ineffective to set priorities before structures for evaluation have been designed, and recognises that past evaluations have been conducted with little to no adoption of evaluation findings into policy outcomes. From this position, VACCHO presents principles, processes and structural priorities that should be considered in the development of an IES.

The principles put forward by VACCHO include recognition, self-determination, community building, ethics, accountability, transparency, effectiveness and cultural continuity. These should not be solely understood as theoretical ideas. They are designed as markers of success or failure, and exist as KPIs that must be mandated against in order to reach a successful evaluation, and create positive, long-lasting outcomes.

The processes of evaluation include minimum standards, and on-the-ground processes to be followed throughout the entirety of the evaluation. These include the necessity of Aboriginal leadership, ethics, Aboriginal research methods, data governance frameworks, and basic architecture for evaluation throughout an IES process, and embedded through the entire policy cycle. This section will also consider the implementation of the IAS Evaluation Strategy as an example of a substandard evaluation process.

Finally, evaluation priorities will be articulated as structural issues, rather than on a basis of program or policy failings. This section provides a high level consideration of mainstream funding and ineffective service delivery, and the burden of reporting and compliance on ACCOs. The section unpacks the disproportionate attention given to ACCOs in both evaluation and de-funding in comparison to mainstream organisations. VACCHO believes structural issues need to be given attention in order to allow for an effective evaluation process.

The Aboriginal sector is frequently asked to provide advice on the development of Federal Government (Government) policy; however, the views of Aboriginal people and Communities are rarely incorporated into policy outcomes. As a peak body for ACCOs in Victoria, VACCHO is perfectly placed to not only advocate for the health needs of Aboriginal people, but to understand social, emotional and cultural determinants that contribute to improved health outcomes. Through the outlined principles, policies and priorities, VACCHO argues that the development of an IES must be embedded within the entire policy cycle, rather than next to it, and that it must be guided by the principles of self-determination and Community Control.

Table of Recommendations

Topic	Recommendation
Evaluation Principles	**Recommendation 1:** That the Commission endorse the eight principles in full and ensure they are incorporated into all evaluations of Government programs and policies. The principles should be used as measures of success and as tangible accountability mechanisms to exist throughout the entirety of the evaluation process.
Evaluation Processes: Minimum Standards	**Recommendation 2:** That the department responsible for the policy or program undergoing evaluation is mandated to specify the nature of the ongoing involvement of Aboriginal people and Community in the evaluation. **Recommendation 3:** That the Commission and department responsible for the policy or program undergoing evaluation seek ongoing collaboration with Aboriginal people through their capacity as leaders and representatives, and as research bodies and researchers. **Recommendation 4:** That the Commission establish an Independent Indigenous Evaluation Committee that has a 75 per cent Aboriginal leadership, with preference to Aboriginal people with a background and/or experience in research methods. **Recommendation 5:** That the Commission or department responsible for the policy or program undergoing evaluation resource local cultural committees to oversee evaluation processes, if Communities choose to do so. **Recommendation 6:** That the Commission creates a framework, based on AIATSIS guidelines, to systematically incorporate basic ethical practices into program evaluation design and processes. **Recommendation 7:** That the Commission undertake a full and robust assessment of current evaluation and research methods to identify opportunities to substitute western research methods with Aboriginal research methods. **Recommendation 8:** That the Commission and research body conducting the evaluation incorporate data management and quality frameworks, such as the NSW information management framework, into an IES. **Recommendation 9:** That the Commission and research body conducting the evaluation adapt existing high quality data governance frameworks to incorporate Aboriginal sovereignty, and ensure ACCOs are appropriately resourced to utilise these frameworks to their full potential. **Recommendation 10:** That the Commission and research body conducting the evaluation ensure that there is a prioritisation of robust methods for collecting evidence, and that evidence is collected from a variety of sources. Throughout this process, Aboriginal research methods should be prioritised.
Evaluation Processes: Implementation	**Recommendation 11:** That the Commission provides a detailed scoping of existing data and evaluation reports regarding Aboriginal policies and programs in order to justify any commencement of evaluation. **Recommendation 12:** That the Commission and department responsible for the policy or program undergoing evaluation ensure that ACCOs and individuals are appropriately reimbursed financially to accommodate for lost time and impediments to service delivery.

	Recommendation 13: That the Commission and department responsible for the policy or program undergoing evaluation ensure that tendering processes are made public, including engagement of Aboriginal research bodies and the selection criteria for researchers and research bodies. **Recommendation 14:** That the Commission ensures that Aboriginal research bodies are encouraged to apply for evaluation tender, and preferenced where capacity is available. **Recommendation 15**: That the Commission ensures that Aboriginal researchers are preferenced in the evaluation process, where possible and/or appropriate, and independent researchers who have demonstrated experience working in Aboriginal Communities are used. **Recommendation 16** That the Independent Indigenous Evaluation Committee, and relevant cultural committees, ensure that culturally appropriate protocols are sought and followed at all times by Aboriginal researchers, Independent researchers and research bodies. **Recommendation 17:** That the Commission and research body conducting the evaluation ensure that research and data collection is managed in a flexible and responsive way. **Recommendation 18:** That the Commission ensures that Aboriginal Communities and people are provided with appropriate resources so they are able to debrief and receive counselling or psychological support if necessary. **Recommendation 19:** That the Commission ensures that evaluation reports and findings are published and written in plain English so they are accessible to all Community members.
Evaluation Compliance	**Recommendation 20**: That the Commission and department responsible for the policy or program undergoing evaluation ensure that all evaluations are budgeted and costed, in addition to current funding. **Recommendation 21:** That the Commission and Independent Indigenous Evaluation Committee ensure that all evaluation recommendations are mandated as KPIs for Ministers and Secretaries of the relevant department, program or policy. In the case that recommendations cannot be met, sufficient evidence must be provided to demonstrate why this has not occurred and what action plan is in place to rectify the issue. **Recommendation 22:** That the Commission ensures that cultural safety training provided by Aboriginal practitioners is imbedded as a continual practice within all Government departments. **Recommendation 23:** That each relevant department take steps to address the limited workforce of Aboriginal people within the public sector. **Recommendation 24:** That the Commission takes steps to ensure that community consultation processes by Government are evaluated, and future consultations are undertaken in a genuine and culturally safe manner.
Evaluation Priorities	**Recommendation 25:** That the Commission ensures that evaluation efforts are systematically focused on mainstream organisations and their ability to provide services and outcomes, proportionate with funding allocation.

Evaluation Principles

An IES must be underpinned by principles that act as tools to guide the process of evaluation, and measure the evaluation's success. In the evaluation process there must be total transparency and commitment by Government, stakeholders and ACCOs, including mainstream organisations funded to provide services to Aboriginal people. Principles should not be understood solely as conceptual or theoretical. They should be a marker of success or failure and exist as KPIs that are mandated against in order to reach both a successful evaluation, and improved outcomes for Aboriginal Communities.

The Productivity Commission must not develop a one-size-fits-all framework that is a burden for organisations or departments to implement, or challenging to make relevant to different policy settings. However, mainstream organisations that are funded to deliver services for Aboriginal people must be part of the evaluation process and answerable to the principles and processes of an IES. VACCHO views the mission to Close the Gap in Aboriginal health outcomes as everyone's responsibility, and not a task for Aboriginal people or organisations alone.

It is important that the Productivity Commission recognise that current principles of evaluation, common across standard evaluation practice, do not provide enough information to work with Aboriginal people in a culturally appropriate way. A creative and open approach to IES principles is required, and presents genuine opportunities for collaboration and new perspectives from Aboriginal people and Communities.

Principles of Aboriginal policy evaluation

The key principles of evaluation that VACCHO endorses place emphasis on the ongoing relationship between the Government, ACCOs and mainstream organisations in improving Aboriginal health and wellbeing. The Government has an unacknowledged and often paternalistic relationship with Aboriginal people and Communities, reflected in reporting requirements, short term allocation of funding, and a sector that is under constant change, reform and scrutiny. In contrast, non-Aboriginal organisations (or mainstream organisations providing services to Aboriginal people) are chiefly preferred in funding allocations, and often are not held to account for providing measureable outcomes.

VACCHO's principles aims to reveal this relationship and create an opportunity for change. The eight principles that VACCHO propose can only be realised through commitment and adherence to the evaluation process by all parties. This will require creative approaches, openness, and placing trust in Aboriginal Communities who experience policies and programs on-the-ground, and can provide invaluable insight into improving services in both Aboriginal and mainstream organisations.

Principle 1: Recognition

Recognition is the ongoing acknowledgment of entrenched systemic inequalities, colonising research processes and culturally unsafe evaluations that have been historically adopted by Government and mainstream organisations.

Recognition involves acknowledgement of the often damaging relationships between Government, mainstream services, ACCOs and Aboriginal people. It exists as a continuous process where Government and mainstream organisations involved in the evaluation process critically reflect on

their role and responsibility in creating better outcomes for Aboriginal Communities, and engage in Aboriginal-led cultural-safety training in order to better work with Community.

Recognition must encompass the structurally unequal relationship between these parties. This includes past failures by Government to properly collaborate and seek a genuine and diverse range of experiences from Aboriginal people in policy and program design. Programs and policies directly impacting Aboriginal people often do more harm than good, and can perpetuate damaging experiences, including the relationship between research bodies and Aboriginal people. This relationship needs to be recognised by Government and mainstream service providers in order to engender a culture that honours self-determination and Community Control as essential tenants of good policy.

In addition, the systemic racism, discrimination and intergenerational trauma experienced by Aboriginal people and Communities must be recognised. This must encompass an understanding of the colonisation of Australia, and the ongoing dispossession of Aboriginal people through current and historic Government-designed and enforced policies and research bodies. The Government has taken steps to acknowledge this; however, racism, discrimination and trauma live on in Aboriginal Communities, causing real impacts on health and wellbeing. There must be an ongoing acknowledgement by the Government at all levels in order to foster genuine evaluations of the policies and programs affecting Aboriginal people and Communities.

Finally, the often tenuous relationship between the Government and International human rights mandates must be recognised. The failure of Government to both uphold and imbed human rights into their policies demonstrates a lack of commitment to fundamental rights, including self-determination, access to universal health care and freedom from all forms of discrimination. VACCHO's principles are underpinned by human rights frameworks that uphold the rights of all Aboriginal people. The failure of the Government to embed human rights into legislation and as core principles within policies and programs is a significant limitation to the advancement of Aboriginal health and wellbeing outcomes.

Principle 2: Self-determination

Self-determination as a principle that constitutes minimum standards for the survival, dignity, security and wellbeing of Indigenous people.

A future IES must uphold the principle of self-determination, ultimately recognising two key ideas. First, Aboriginal people are best positioned to make decisions regarding their own health, wellbeing and Community, which leads to better outcomes. Second, it recognises that the self-determination of Aboriginal people has been systemically denied to Communities since the colonisation of Australia.

Self-determination encompasses three categories: by moral right, by legal methods, and in practice.[1] VACCHO recognises that each category is intertwined; however, in the case of an IES, self-determination in practice is key to placing action in the hands of Community, and should be prioritised.[2] VACCHO believes that self-determination must be tangible and viewed as legitimate by all parties in the evaluation process in order to become a reality. Working as a peak body

[1] Kalt J and Singer J, 2004, *Myths And Realities of Tribal Sovereignty: The Law And Economics of Indian Self-Rule,* Faculty Research Working Papers Series, Harvard University John F Kennedy School of Government.
[2] Ibid.

representing ACCOs, self-determination is at the heart of what our Members do, in both Community leadership and the delivery of services. The ACCO model is a tangible example of self-determination operating in practice, providing a holistic service and culturally safe setting for Aboriginal health and wellbeing which is led and owned by Community.

Research has proven that the way towards legitimate and long-term outcomes for Community is through the act of claiming and practicing self-determination.[3] Self-determination is not a short-cut in the policy design process, or a method of co-design or consultation. It is the right of an Aboriginal Community to say yes to an evaluation, and it is also their right to determine when evaluation is not appropriate or necessary. Self-determination must be accepted in its entirety as a legitimate form of ownership over Community outcomes, and as a central human right.

This approach can be realised in various ways, including ensuring that Community has the right to choose whether they participate in evaluation, providing Community with data sovereignty, and using Aboriginal evaluation methods that are suitable to the Community it affects. Self-determination within an IES will require open thinking, respect and an honest conversation with Government and other key stakeholders regarding the trust and leadership that must be placed in Aboriginal people and Communities.

Principle 3: Community Building: do-no-harm and strength-based approaches

The Community Building principle requires that an IES support the capacity and growth of Aboriginal people and organisations. This principle has two elements: do-no-harm and strength-based approaches.

Do-no-harm encompasses the entire evaluation process and policy cycle, and impacts all parties involved. There is a distinct responsibility of Government, research bodies and mainstream organisations to ensure that Aboriginal people and organisations are not worse off during or after an IES is implemented. This is inclusive of any risk of harm, discomfort or inconvenience experienced during the research and evaluation process.[4] The do-no-harm principle also relates to the de-funding or reduction in funding of ACCOs as a result of an IES. VACCHO recognises that ACCOs must be economically resourceful in their allocation of funding received, and corruption and/or misuse of funds should be dealt with through the appropriate processes. However, an IES should never be used to strip funding, or result in programs or organisations which cannot operate sustainably or cease to be effective in providing services. The purpose of an IES is to evaluate Government programs and, therefore, the Government must be the primary subject of evaluation. Under no circumstances should the evaluation strategy be used to justify funding cuts that will negatively impact Community.

Strength-based approaches are inclusive of research priorities and methods, capacity building in Communities and the prioritisation of Aboriginal leadership in regard to policy development and improving outcomes. A future IES must be creative and adaptive, recognising Aboriginal people provide a deep insight into the experiences of Community and can be more effective in communicating these experiences than Government or mainstream organisations. The use of Aboriginal research methods can be helpful in developing trust and building capacity in Aboriginal

[3] Cornell S, 2006, *Indigenous peoples, poverty and self-determination in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States,* Joint Occasional Papers on Native Affairs, Tucson, Arizona: Native Nations Institute for Leadership, Management, and Policy.
[4] National Health and Medical Research Council, 2018, *Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities: Guidelines for researchers and stakeholders*, Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra.

Communities. Upskilling and training Aboriginal researchers and evaluators brings new skills into Community, increases the possibility for trust and cultural understanding between Aboriginal Communities and research bodies, and ensures that Aboriginal voices are prioritised across the entire IES. A strength-based approach should encompass the value and necessity of Aboriginal leadership at all stages of the evaluation process. This must include Aboriginal active consent and participation at a Community level, which may be driven by Aboriginal cultural committees or leadership groups that oversee evaluation processes. This approach must also include genuine Aboriginal leadership to oversee the strategy's implementation and to ensure that the principles and processes are actively engaged in and measured against.

Principle 4: Ethics

Ethical evaluation encompasses a range of issues that may be encountered during an evaluation and ensures that processes are held to a minimum standard to provide protection for Aboriginal people and Communities.

The principle of ethical evaluation is a vital component of program and policy planning and execution. An ethically sound evaluation upholds the rights of Aboriginal people, respects the diverse value systems of different Communities and is fundamentally oriented to benefit these Communities. The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) guidelines are founded on the principles of self-determination, and provide an ethical benchmark for an IES.[5] These ethical principles include areas of negotiation, collaboration, benefits, managing research and reporting and compliance, providing a strong basis for a future IES. Additionally, it is key that ethical practice is woven throughout the entire IES process rather than simply within the relationship between researcher and Community, providing a safety net for Aboriginal people and Communities.

Principle 5: Accountability

Accountability in evaluation applies to Government, researchers, participant organisations, Aboriginal people and ACCOs. It refers to the commitment by all parties involved in the evaluation to adhere to a high standard and claim responsibility for an IES at every stage.

A lack of accountability can result in a failure to meet standards or agreed outcomes, and the shifting of responsibility when these are not met. Government, researchers and mainstream organisations must be accountable to ACCOs and Aboriginal people, and must recognise that accountability has been significantly lacking in past evaluations. Collective ownership of an IES must be taken in order to ensure the effective, transparent functioning of current and future policy.

In doing so, an IES must engender a culture of change within relevant Government departments. This refers to constructive and adaptable attitudes around evaluation and organisational change by mainstream organisations, Government and research bodies. Seeking authentic input from Aboriginal voices and ensuring accountability will require a key stakeholders to embrace improvement rather than viewing it as a hindrance to processes and the maintenance of the status quo. Accountability to this change will be required at all levels of Government, mainstream

[5] Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2012, *Guidelines For Ethical Research In Australian Indigenous Studies, Eds.*

organisations and research bodies, to ensure that Aboriginal-led evaluation allows for the best possible outcome for Community.

Principle 6: Transparency

Transparency is required before, during and after the evaluation process in order to ensure that stakeholders—especially Aboriginal people and organisations—are fully informed of all processes, procedures and their role within an IES.

Transparency includes the full release of Aboriginal data back to relevant ACCOs, and publication of past reports and evaluation. Findings from the Lowitja Institute indicate that reports and data from past evaluations have consistently failed to be released, demonstrating a significant lack in transparency throughout.[6] It is critical that research and evaluation reports are publically released to ensure Aboriginal people and Communities feel their participation has not been exploited, and that their contribution will be worthwhile to their Community in the long-term. Additionally, the processes of Government and the Productivity Commission must be made public, including delays, changes and/or failures, in order to ensure an equitable, transparent evaluation can take place.

Principle 7: Effectiveness

Effectiveness ensures that the evaluation must result in positive outcomes for Aboriginal people and Communities, and the ongoing improvement of Governmental policies and programs.

Evaluation for the sake of evaluation should be discouraged at all levels of Government, especially considering the unpublished and unimplemented findings of past evaluations. Evaluation should be embedded across in the entire policy cycle, and adopted as an ongoing measure to continually improve outcomes for Community. Placing evaluation as a stand-alone project creates a gap between policy development and the ongoing improvement of outcomes. Without evaluation there is minimal opportunity for reflection and understanding from all stakeholders, and no tangible way to ensure that Aboriginal people's lives continue to improve. In order to be effective, the evaluation strategy must honour and adopt Aboriginal perspectives and approaches to health, wellbeing and policy development. Research indicates that Aboriginal Communities are well positioned to inform policy changes as they are at the forefront of issues in their Communities.[7] In order to achieve effective evaluation and long term outcomes, we must place Aboriginal people and leadership at the centre of an IES.

[6] Kelaher M, Luke J. Ferdinand A, Chamravi D, Ewen S, & Paradies Y, 2018, *An Evaluation Framework to Improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health*, The Lowitja Institute, Melbourne.
[7] Harfield SG, Davy C, McArthur A, Munn Z, Brown A, and Brown N, 2018, *Characteristics Of Indigenous Primary Health Care Service Delivery Models: A Systematic Scoping Review*, NCBI.

Principle 8: Cultural Continuity

Cultural continuity refers to the upholding and strengthening of Aboriginal culture through the evaluation process.

The principle of cultural continuity refers to the importance of the shared identity between Aboriginal people and Communities, including connection to lands, waters, animals, Country and culture.[8] Cultural continuity is important in considering the possibility of non-Aboriginal people conducting evaluation on Country, and the respect and understanding that must be upheld in these settings. It also recognises that culture within Community, and/or for Aboriginal participants, takes precedent over evaluation timelines or plans. Appropriate guidance must be sought from the specific Community in order to ensure these processes are abided by. Cultural continuity must be embedded at every stage of an IES process, rather than exclusively during the research stage.

Recommendation 1: That the Commission endorse the eight principles in full and ensure they are incorporated into all evaluations of Government programs and policies. The principles should be used as measures of success and as tangible accountability mechanisms to exist throughout the entirety of the evaluation process.

[8] National Health and Medical Research Council, 2018, *Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities: Guidelines for researchers and stakeholders*, Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra.

Evaluation Processes

The following section will outline the minimum standards and on-the-ground processes required for the evaluation of Aboriginal programs and policies, which will help give weight to the above eight principles. It will also include an outline of the IAS Evaluation Strategy as an example of a poor quality evaluation process.

Minimum standards for Aboriginal policy evaluation

The development of an IES is an opportunity to stipulate a set of minimum standards that are specific to the evaluation of Aboriginal policies and programs. These minimum standards must address a lack of research that interrogates systemic inequalities, culturally-unsafe evaluations, colonising research processes and evaluation findings that fail to be adopted by Government. Minimum standards function as a guide on how to conduct evaluation processes ethically and effectively, irrespective of which policy or program being considered. They constitute the foundation of sound evaluation and are consistent with the eight outlined principles. VACCHO proposes the following minimum evaluation standards to guide evaluation processes:

1. Aboriginal leadership, voices and perspectives
2. Ethical practices
3. Aboriginal research methods
4. Data governance frameworks and data sovereignty
5. Data collection

Aboriginal Leadership, Voices and Perspectives

Placing Aboriginal people and Communities at the centre of evaluation planning, execution and reporting is a basic tenant of self-determination and ensures that ethical standards are being met in Aboriginal Communities throughout the evaluation process. It also ensures that Government is held to account regarding decisions that impact Aboriginal people, and that Community determines best research methods and evaluation processes for creating positive long-term impacts.

The first criteria of evaluation involves assessing the role of Aboriginal people in all stages of a policy or program's life-cycle. This would involve asking critical questions such as: 'were Aboriginal people involved in the program design?,' 'were Aboriginal people placed in appropriate leadership roles?,' 'what did the collaboration process look like?'.

The second criteria is that evaluated polices or programs should address gaps in Aboriginal participation, and establish strategies to meet the requirements by recruitment, training or collaboration.

The final criteria mandates that Aboriginal people are involved in the evaluation process, and are direct and active participants in evaluation. This includes the requirement that Aboriginal people are placed in leadership roles. Implementation consists of identifying Community members for participation in an IES—as determined by Community—and providing training if necessary. Ensuring that the right people with the appropriate knowledge and skills are central to program implementation is essential to gathering high quality evidence. Training Aboriginal researchers is

particularly important to ensure that Aboriginal voices are central to an IES and the capacity of Communities continues to be built.

In regard to IES leadership structures, VACCHO recommends that an independent Indigenous Evaluation Committee is established to oversee IES implementation and related evaluation activities. 75 per cent of the Committee should consist of Aboriginal leaders and Aboriginal people with experience in research and/or evaluation. Appropriate leadership and representative bodies play a critical role in the momentum and succuss of future IES work. Further, local Communities partaking in evaluation must be resourced to set up cultural committees to oversee evaluation projects, if they choose to do so. This will ensure that research meets the required standards of cultural safety, and prioritises Aboriginal voices.

Ethical Practices

An ethically sound evaluation upholds the rights of Aboriginal people, respects their diverse value systems and is fundamentally oriented to benefit Aboriginal Communities.[9] The Australian National Audit Office's (ANAO) *Evaluating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Programs* report highlights that a quarter of programs deemed in need of ethics committee review did not seek ethics approval. [10] Further, 45 per cent of programs did not take into account the newly defined practice of 'respect' that "respect[s] … the values and aspirations of, and collaboration with, Aboriginal… people."[11] Respectful evaluation consists of behaviours such as using culturally appropriate data collection methods and recruiting Aboriginal people as researchers. This means half the evaluations surveyed in the ANAO report likely did not meet an acceptable ethical standard of evaluation conduct. Therefore, there is considerable scope for improving the ethical standards of future evaluations.

The AIATSIS *Guidelines for Ethical Research in Indigenous Studies* is a suitable framework for ethically informed evaluation practice. VACCHO believes the AIATSIS guidelines should be used as the standard that all evaluations must adhere to and set the ethical benchmark for an IES.[12] An ethics committee can ensure that the AISTSIS guidelines are followed, and instil checks and balances to prevent potentially damaging evaluations from taking place in Aboriginal Communities. Additionally, it is key that ethical practice is woven throughout the entire IES process rather than simply within the relationship between researcher and Community, providing a safety net for Aboriginal people and Community.

Aboriginal Research Methods

Evaluations have historically been premised on western empirical research methods.[13] The use of Aboriginal research methods supports the principle of self-determination and engages Aboriginal people's perspectives as an ethical obligation and necessity.

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[9] National Health and Medical Research Council, 2018, *Keeping research on track II: A companion* document to *Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities: Guidelines for researchers and stakeholders*. Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra.
[10] Australian National Audit Office, 2019, *Auditor-General Report No.47 2018–19: Evaluating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Programs*. Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra
[11] Ibid.
[12] Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies,2012, *Guidelines For Ethical Research In Australian Indigenous Studies,* Eds.
[13] Katz I, Newton B. J. Bates S, and Raven M, 2016, *Evaluation Theories and Approaches; Relevance for Aboriginal Contexts*, Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW Sydney, Australia

The IES should prioritise the employment of Aboriginal research methods and, where appropriate, use both western and Aboriginal research methods. If it is determined by Community that Aboriginal research methods are not suitable for the research project, then appropriate western research methods can be adopted—after deemed appropriate by Community. Further, researchers should regularly convene with Community to seek guidance on the use of Aboriginal research methods in the evaluation.

An example of an Aboriginal research method is Yarning. Yarning, often referred to as storytelling, is a qualitative research method. Yarning stories are "a method and means for understanding the consequences of lived experience."[14] There are different types of yarning, such as 'social yarning' (which builds trust and engagement), 'research topic yarning' (a relaxed interview that focuses on information gathering), 'collaborative yarning' (sharing ideas or brainstorming about the research topic), and 'therapeutic yarning' (participant disclosure of emotional or traumatic experiences). The diversity of types of yarning allows it to be applied to various elements within the process of evaluation. Yarning may act as a substitute for qualitative, one on one and/or group interviews.

Another example is Dadirri, a form of directed contemplation to describe 'inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness'.[15] It is a practice to, among other things, instil sound ethical practices in researchers by making them "continually … reflexive of their relationships with others, the reciprocal role that the researcher and participants/community have in the research, and in sharing stories with each other."[16] The use of Dadirri can deepen researchers' perspectives on the wants and needs of the Community.

Data Governance Frameworks and Sovereignty

Aboriginal people have a sovereign right over their data, which is contingent on the validity and soundness of the data governance framework underpinning all data-related activities. A good data governance framework contributes to efficiency, informed decision-making, Government accountability, mitigation of risks, and the protection of rights. A data governance framework outlines:

- how to collect data
- how and where to store data
- how to use data
- who can access data
- who is responsible for data
- the rights and responsibilities of data owners (custodians) and referents.[17]

An example of a robust data governance framework is the National Archives of Australia Information Management Standard – Australian Government.[18] Frameworks like this must be modified to be suitable for data governance in the context of Aboriginal programs and policies. This is because evaluation of policies for and about Aboriginal people requires the collection, use and storage of

[14] Ibid.
[15] Ungunmerr-Baumann MR, 2002, *Dadirri: inner deep listening and quiet still awareness*, pg 1
[16] Katz I, Newton B. J. Bates S, and Raven M, 2016, *Evaluation Theories and Approaches; Relevance for Aboriginal Contexts*, Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW Sydney, Australia
[17] Department of Finance and Services, Strategic Policy, *Information Management: A common approach*
[18] "Information Management Standard – Australian Government," National Archives of Australia, accessed 31 July 2019, http://www.naa.gov.au/Images/Information%20Management%20Standard_17%20April%202017_tcm16-99205.pdf

Aboriginal data. Aboriginal data refers to knowledge, in any format, about Aboriginal people,[19] including information about Aboriginal resources and environments, such as land history or utilisation of natural resources; demographic data;[20] or cultural data, such as ancestral knowledge and stories.[21]

Aboriginal people have a self-determining right over their data, as the Government is mandated to honour as a signatory to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Data sovereignty is the governance of data in a manner consistent with the will and rights of Aboriginal people. These rights include governing the creation, collection, dissemination, use and reuse of data pertaining to Aboriginal people and in line with their laws and customs.[22]

The Queensland Aboriginal and Islander Health Council's (QAIHC) 2014 Data Governance Protocol is an example of a data governance framework that has been adapted to address aspects of Aboriginal data sovereignty. The extract below shows examples of data governance principles that have been adjusted to reflect Aboriginal data sovereignty.

> *Principle 2: Information about the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the services they receive must be used to support improved health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and better planning and delivery of health services.*
>
> *Principle 3: The analysis, interpretation and reporting of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and health-related information should occur collaboratively between the parties to the QAIHC Data Governance Protocols.*[23]

In practice, incorporating Aboriginal data sovereignty into data governance activities requires that data custodians recognise the cultural significance of some data and modify governance of that data accordingly.[24] Evaluation researchers must acquire free, prior and informed consent for all data related activities. This means that Aboriginal people should provide consent:

- before any data are collected
- without duress or pressure
- knowing the purpose for collecting data
- understanding how the data will be used
- awareness of any risks associated with providing data.

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[19] Janke T,Sentina M, 2018, *Indigenous Knowledge: Issues for Protection and Management*, Sydney: Australia, accessed 31 July 2019, https://www.ipaustralia.gov.au/sites/g/files/net856/f/ipaust_ikdiscussionpaper_28march2018.pdf

[20] Janke T, 2009, *Writing up Indigenous research: Authorship, copyright and Indigenous knowledge systems*, Rosebery, NSW: Terri Janke and Company.

[21] Australian Indigenous Governance Institute, 2018, *Indigenous Data Sovereignty Summit Communique*, accessed 8 January 2019, http://www.aigi.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Communique-Indigenous-Data-Sovereignty-Summit.pdf

[22] Taylor J and Kukutai T, 2016, *Indigenous Data Sovereignty: Toward an Agenda*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 139-253.

[23] Queensland Aboriginal and Islander Health Council, 2014, *Data Governance Protocols*. Queensland

[24] Snipp M, 2016, *What does data sovereignty imply: what does it look like? In Indigenous Data Sovereignty: Toward an Agenda,* eds. Kukutai T, Taylor J, Australian National University Press, Canberra.

Free, prior and informed consent requires negotiation and consultation with Community leaders. It may also require that documents be written in plain English or in Aboriginal Languages to make rights, obligations and objectives clear to participants. Two examples demonstrate how free, prior and informed consent and Aboriginal leadership illuminate the cultural significance of data and how this in turn affects data governance.

First, cultural knowledge governance is characterised by subsidiarity, meaning decision-makers in the evaluation process should be the Communities most affected by the policies and programs in question.[25] Rights, responsibilities and ownership of knowledge are dispersed across cultural hierarchies and Community networks. Consequently, not all information is freely available to all individuals within a Community, let alone outside of it. There can be a cultural hierarchy of value associated with knowledge, where it is fundamental to collective cultural identity. Aboriginal people and Communities are not homogenous, but comprises diverse nations, each with their own customs, laws and languages, which must be understood in the context of data governance frameworks.

Second, because Aboriginal cultural knowledge is often orally and/or performatively based, data storage practices may require adaptation.[26] When data are recorded, this may transform oral or performative data into a new material form with significant consequences with respect to storage, use, reuse, privacy, confidentiality, and intellectual property. Copyright does not directly protect oral or performative information common in Aboriginal culture and storytelling. Transformation of data from an oral and performative form to a material form may have implications for the ongoing accessibility of that data to cultural owners who may or may not have the resources to manage the data in its new form through the process of evaluation.[27] Accessibility depends on how and where data are stored, as well as the format of data.

Data Collection

The collection of evidence or data is a crucial component of evaluation. There is an opportunity for an IES to stipulate what constitutes high quality and valuable evidence and to mandate that future evaluations implement a set of basic data related practices, inclusive of Aboriginal perspectives and methods. This is pertinent because not all evaluations have been based on high quality evidence. High quality collection of data includes the following elements:

1. Articulating objectives clearly from the outset while building in flexibility to modify an evaluation's scope as evidence is produced
2. Prioritise the use of robust methods
3. Collect a diversity of different types of quantitative and qualitative evidence from different sources
4. Collect a sufficient quantity of evidence

[25] Smith D, 2016, *Indigenous Data Governance*, Submission by the AIGI to the Australian Productivity Commission.
[26] Janke T, Sentina M, 2018, *Indigenous Knowledge: Issues for Protection and Management,* the Australian Government IP Management.
[27] Gardiner G, Thorpe K, 2014, *The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Data Archive: Connecting communities and research data*, In Language Documentation and Description, vol. 12: Special Issue on Language Documentation and Archiving, eds. Nathan D, Austin P, School of Oriental and African Studies, London p. 103-119.

The NSW information management framework is an example of a framework which richly characterises what data quality is, and important considerations around its collection.[28] We recommend that the Productivity Commission take this framework into consideration in addition to the guidance provided above.

Recommendation 2: That the department responsible for the policy or program undergoing evaluation is mandated to specify the nature of the ongoing involvement of Aboriginal people and Community in the evaluation.

Recommendation 3: That the Commission and department responsible for the policy or program undergoing evaluation seek ongoing collaboration with Aboriginal people through their capacity as leaders and representatives, and as research bodies and researchers.

Recommendation 4: That the Commission establish an Independent Indigenous Evaluation Committee that has a 75 per cent Aboriginal leadership, with preference to Aboriginal people with a background and/or experience in research methods.

Recommendation 5: That the Commission or department responsible for the policy or program undergoing evaluation resource local cultural committees to oversee evaluation processes, if Communities choose to do so.

Recommendation 6: That the Commission creates a framework, based on AIATSIS guidelines, to systematically incorporate basic ethical practices into program evaluation design and processes.

Recommendation 7: That the Commission undertake a full and robust assessment of current evaluation and research methods to identify opportunities to substitute western research methods with Aboriginal research methods.

Recommendation 8: That the Commission and research body conducting the evaluation incorporate data management and quality frameworks, such as the NSW information management framework, into an IES.

Recommendation 9: That the Commission and research body conducting the evaluation adapt existing high quality data governance frameworks to incorporate Aboriginal sovereignty, and ensure ACCOs are appropriately resourced to utilise these frameworks to their full potential.

Recommendation 10: That the Commission and research body conducting the evaluation ensure that there is a prioritisation of robust methods for collecting evidence, and that evidence is collected from a variety of sources. Throughout this process, Aboriginal research methods should be prioritised.

[28] NSW Department of Finance, 2015, Services & Innovation, *NSW Government Standard for Data Quality Reporting*, NSW Department of Finance, Services & Innovation, Sydney.

Implementation of the Evaluation Process

After setting out the minimum standards for evaluation, there are numerous on-the-ground considerations that must be adopted when operationalising an evaluation. The following sections provide recommendations regarding the start, middle and end of an IES process, and how VACCHO's principles and processes should be incorporated on a practical level.

Before the Evaluation

Scoping:

Prior to setting evaluation priorities there must be detailed scoping of what already exists in regard to data and evaluation reports. ACCOs and Aboriginal people have participated in a disproportionate number of studies and evaluations. While VACCHO acknowledges that data is needed to better understand health and wellbeing issues, there is not a shortage of data in Aboriginal affairs. As indicated by the Productivity Commission and the Lowitja Institute, there are numerous reports and evaluations that have been conducted regarding Aboriginal affairs that have not been utilised or published.[29] It is vitally important that there is a thorough understanding of what already exists in terms of data and reporting before an evaluation is considered or further research can be justified.

Resourcing:

Evaluation is a timely and costly activity for ACCOs to undertake. If there is an expectation that Aboriginal people and Communities are to provide their knowledge and expertise in evaluating policies and programs, they must be appropriately reimbursed financially to accommodate for lost time for individuals or organisations providing service delivery. It must be noted that that large mainstream organisations that are chiefly funded to provide services to Aboriginal people are more likely to have the financial capacity, resourcing and time to complete an evaluation. Through proportionality, the financial and resource burdens of evaluation should be borne by those organisations with the greatest capacity to do so.

Research:

Tendering processes by Government departments must be transparent in their engagement of Aboriginal research bodies and the criteria used to select researchers, and must build capacity of Aboriginal research methods in Community. This includes the prioritisation of Aboriginal research methods, and development of Aboriginal researchers and independent researchers learning to work with Community in a culturally safe way. Additionally, working with or seeking input from Aboriginal research bodies should be prioritised. Aboriginal research bodies that have capacity to apply should be prioritised in the selection of evaluation tenders.

Under an IES there should be a deliberate preferencing of Aboriginal researchers. This should include the ongoing development of Aboriginal people in the research and evaluation field across the entire strategy— where possible or appropriate. VACCHO recognises that in some cases the placement of an Aboriginal evaluator is not appropriate where there is the possibility of risk, harm and/or conflict of interest in a particular setting.

When an Aboriginal researcher is not available an independent researcher should be used. Independent researchers must demonstrate experience working in Aboriginal Communities,

[29] Kelaher M, Luke J. Ferdinand A, Chamravi D, Ewen S, & Paradies Y, 2018, *An Evaluation Framework to Improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health*, The Lowitja Institute, Melbourne.

specifically the ability to work in culturally safe ways that abide by both the outlined eight principles and the specific cultural context of each Community. A positive tender example under the NSW Ministry for Health 'Evaluation of Aboriginal maternal & infant health service' requested that evaluators' applications must 'include the names of three Aboriginal referees [to show] experience working with Aboriginal people and Communities.'[30] However, as argued by the Lowitja institute, it is more appropriate to seek referees from ACCOs rather than individuals in the context of policy and program evaluation. [31]

Under no circumstances should a Government department or public servant conduct an evaluation or produce an evaluation report. While it is important that the evaluator has a general understanding of the operation of the specific Government department, agency, policy or program, the evaluator must remain at arms-length to ensure consistency of research and that an ethical and unbiased approach is taken.

As mentioned in the previous section, Communities involved in evaluation may elect to complement processes by organising a cultural committee or a group of leaders to oversee the research project while it is placed in their Community. Doing so can ensure that the research is effectively and ethically managed and the Community maintains self-determining ownership over the research project while data are being collected. This can help develop a positive and trusting relationship between the researchers and Community members, and foster accountability and transparency on-the-ground. However, this process may only be possible where there is capacity, or the Community deems it necessary.

During the Evaluation

Cultural protocols must be followed at all times by Aboriginal researchers, independent researchers and research bodies. Researchers should first seek permission to go onto Country from the relevant Community leadership (such as a Traditional Owners Group or Land Council), and then arrange an initial meeting with relevant Elders or Community leaders to introduce themselves as individuals outside the research project, policy or program under evaluation. Once welcomed onto Country, other cultural activities or protocols may follow, including a formal Welcome of the researchers with a smoking ceremony or a yarning circle to inform Community about the project. Other cultural protocols may include abiding by men's business and women's business, which includes topics and areas that are exclusive to men or women in the Community. It can also mean pausing or stopping research when sorry business occurs, after there is a death in the Community. In this setting, methods of data collection must be adaptive, and embrace the strengths of the Aboriginal Community involved in the evaluation. The scope of research and evaluation must be flexible and responsive to its setting, ensuring that key data are not missed due to the limited scope of the research outline.

[30] Kelaher M, Luke J. Ferdinand A, Chamravi D, Ewen S, & Paradies Y, 2018, *An Evaluation Framework to Improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health*, The Lowitja Institute, Melbourne.
[31] Ibid.

After the Evaluation

Debriefing, counselling, and feedback:

It is critical that participants, workers and leaders from within Aboriginal Communities are provided with appropriate supports so they are able to both debrief after the evaluation process and receive counselling or psychological support if necessary. It is important to also embed mechanisms which allow for Communities to give feedback to ensure improvements are included in future evaluation processes.

Reporting:

The report that is produced must be published and shared with all evaluation participants and relevant Communities that fall under similar policies or programs that were evaluated. Research tendering processes must also be published and shared with the evaluation participants and the wider Community. Reporting must be written in plain English to ensure it is accessible to all Community members. De-identified data results must be shared with relevant Community participants, and must comply with the data sovereignty structures, as outlined in the previous section. It is vital that all information is transparent in order to ensure that Community gains full benefits from participation in the evaluation.

Recommendation 11: That the Commission provides a detailed scoping of existing data and evaluation reports regarding Aboriginal policies and programs in order to justify any commencement of evaluation.

Recommendation 12: That the Commission and the department responsible for the policy or program undergoing evaluation ensure that ACCOs and individuals are appropriately reimbursed financially to accommodate for lost time and impediments to service delivery.

Recommendation 13: That the Commission and department responsible for the policy or program undergoing evaluation ensure that tendering processes are made public, including engagement of Aboriginal research bodies and the selection criteria for researchers and research bodies.

Recommendation 14: That the Commission ensures that Aboriginal research bodies are encouraged to apply for evaluation tender, and preferenced where capacity is available.

Recommendation 15: That the Commission ensures that Aboriginal researchers are preferenced in the evaluation process, where possible and/or appropriate, and independent researchers who have demonstrated experience working in Aboriginal Communities are used.

Recommendation 16: That the Independent Indigenous Evaluation Committee, and relevant cultural committees, ensure that culturally appropriate protocols are sought and followed at all times by Aboriginal researchers, Independent researchers and research bodies.

Recommendation 17: That the Commission and research body conducting the evaluation ensure that research and data collection is managed in a flexible and responsive way.

Recommendation 18: That the Commission ensures that Aboriginal Communities and people are provided with appropriate resources so they are able to debrief and receive counselling or psychological support if necessary.

Recommendation 19: That the Commission ensures that evaluation reports and findings are published and written in plain English so they are accessible to all Community members.

Evaluation Compliance

Research by the Lowitja Institute shows that evaluation fails to be effectively integrated into the policy cycle and instead becomes a stand-alone activity that does not achieve its intended outcomes.[32] There is a notable gap between the understanding and knowledge created between research bodies and participants, and how this is translated into policy.

VACCHO notes there have been numerous reports and evaluations conducted on Aboriginal health and wellbeing, programs and policies that point to two key issues. First, evaluations that seek to better understand Community experiences of programs have consistently failed to be publically released, in both final report format and data content. Second, the large number of evaluations or reports conducted in these areas are not acted on or used to generate positive outcomes. Communities are consistently researched but are not able to interact with or benefit from the results of evaluation. According to the Department of Finance, the performance and financial reporting arrangements under the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013* (PGPA Act) agencies are not required to undertake or report on evaluation. Measures such as these, as well as Senate Estimates, ANAO reports and other evaluation frameworks, do not mandate the monitoring, compliance and outcomes of policies, leaving a gap in the policy cycle.[33] Without a commitment to effective outcomes and purposeful evaluation, exploitation of Aboriginal people may continue and few results will be produced that will benefit Community.

Considering the issues with current evaluation processes, VACCHO puts forward several recommendations to ensure that results of evaluations lead to positive and long-term policy change.

Budgeting

Funding for an IES should provide a budget allocation that is separate from the policy or program's continuous funding. The inclusion of continuous evaluation program budgets in addition to existing program budgets should occur within all departments and relate to all policies and programs. This will ensure that evaluation is embedded in the policy process and that programs undertake initial evaluation—and then ongoing evaluation—to ensure continual improvement. VACCHO rejects the notion that not all policies can be evaluated. The ongoing evaluation of all policies and programs promotes continuous improvement and a potential for more cost effective and informed policies and programs. This ensures that Government departments and agencies are financially accountable to policy and program outcomes, and maintain the long-term effectiveness and sustainability of programs to meet the needs of the Community.

KPIs for Ministers and Secretaries

All evaluation recommendations should be mandated as KPIs for Ministers and Secretaries of the relevant department, program or policy. We must ensure that leaders within the public service are accountable for evaluation results and enactment of evaluation recommendations, and continue along the policy cycle into policy and program improvement. VACCHO makes the distinction between Ministers and Secretaries of departments or agencies, as Secretaries currently lack accountability measures to ensure outcomes are met. It is VACCHO's view that Secretaries play a

[32] Kelaher M, Luke J. Ferdinand A, Chamravi D, Ewen S, & Paradies Y, 2018, *An Evaluation Framework to Improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health*, The Lowitja Institute, Melbourne.
[33] Australian National Audit Office, 2019, *Auditor-General Report No.47 2018–19: Evaluating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Programs*. Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra

vital role in ensuring that policy reform leads to on-the-ground change and therefore must be accountable in their role. Additionally, time-frames should be attached to all recommendations so Ministers and relevant Secretaries of department are required to provide responses and management plans to work towards each recommendation. If the recommendation cannot be met, sufficient evidence must be provided to demonstrate why this has not occurred and what action plan is in place to rectify the issue. Leaders within departments and agencies must also be responsible for building a culture of organisational change. This means that all members of the public sector and mainstream organisations are open to the prioritisation of Aboriginal voices and collaboration with Community.

Aboriginal Voices

Finally, VACCHO asserts that the public sector is resourced to better understand Aboriginal Communities and Aboriginal health and wellbeing. First, VACCHO recommends that cultural safety training provided by Aboriginal practitioners must be embedded as a continual practice within all departments that undergo policy and program evaluation. This is inclusive of Ministers, Secretaries and general public service staff. Second, the lack of Aboriginal people employed within the public sector must be rectified in order to ensure that Aboriginal voices inform all aspects of the policy and decision making process. Finally, Community consultation processes at a Federal level must be rectified to ensure that future consultations are undertaken in a genuine and culturally safe manner. Consultation is currently used as a tick-the-box measure that does not account for the time and resources required of ACCOs to provide valuable insight into policy reform. This is not to imply that all evaluation should be focused on the operation of ACCOs. Mainstream organisations receive disproportionate amounts of funding to provide services to Aboriginal people. The focus of IES evaluation must be based on the outcomes produced by those services which receive the greatest proportion of funding.

VACCHO sees value in the example provided within the IES Issues Paper regarding the evaluation and implementation practices of the Office of Development Effectiveness (ODE) at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). The structure for implementing evaluation processes and outcomes, through managed evaluation responses and a commitment to outlining how and when recommendations will be implemented, provides a solid foundation for ensuring evaluation is inbuilt within the policy cycle. VACCHO supports the managed implementation of evaluation recommendations through planning and embedded deadlines in order to ensure the department or agency is accountable to outcomes.[34] While this practice may vary across departments, VACCHO advocates that all policies and programs should be held to a minimum standard regarding monitoring and compliance.

[34] Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2017, *DFAT Aid Evaluation Policy*, 2019 Annual Aid Evaluation Plan, Canberra.

Recommendation 20: That the Commission and the department responsible for the policy or program undergoing evaluation ensure that all evaluations are budgeted and costed, in addition to current funding.

Recommendation 21: That the Commission and Independent Indigenous Evaluation Committee ensure that all evaluation recommendations are mandated as KPIs for Ministers and Secretaries of the relevant department, program or policy. In the case that recommendations cannot be met, sufficient evidence must be provided to demonstrate why this has not occurred and what action plan is in place to rectify the issue.

Recommendation 22: That the Commission ensures that cultural safety training provided by Aboriginal practitioners is imbedded as a continual practice within all Government departments.

Recommendation 23: That each relevant department take steps to address the limited workforce of Aboriginal people within the public sector.

Recommendation 24: That the Commission takes steps to ensure that community consultation processes by Government are evaluated, and future consultations are undertaken in a genuine and culturally safe manner.

Limitations with Existing Evaluation: The IAS Evaluation Framework

The IAS Evaluation Framework (the Framework) provides a substantive example of how evaluation practices by Government can fail to meet principles and processes required to create positive outcomes for the Aboriginal affairs sector. The ANAO report titled *Evaluating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Programs* provides an overview of the IAS Evaluation Framework's implementation, and suggests that there are many improvements required in order to meet effective evaluation.[35] VACCHO believes that there are several key issues with this framework which subsequently limit its ability to enact positive policy change.

First, VACCHO has concerns regarding the lack of Community representation and cultural safety for Aboriginal participants in the evaluation process. Aside from an intention to "design and deliver… in collaboration with Indigenous Australians..." the framework lacks explanation as to how Aboriginal voices will be represented through this process. The Framework refers to the 'core values' of respect for Aboriginal people but again provides no indication of what this will look like in practice. VACCHO is concerned that the Framework refers to respect without links to cultural understanding, self-determination and Aboriginal leadership, risking a dysfunctional partnership between Community and Government in the evaluation process.

Second, the Framework provides no explanation of accountability processes. The Framework is overseen by the Indigenous Evaluation Committee who will "ensure the conduct and prioritisation of evaluations is independent and impartial and support transparency and openness in the implementation of the Framework." However, as indicated by the ANAO report, the Minister for Indigenous Affairs selected the membership of the Indigenous Evaluation Committee highlighting a lack of transparency regarding the accountably of this Framework and its Committee. [36] There is no indication as to how Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC), or external stakeholders, will be accountable before, during or after evaluation processes.

Finally, VACCHO holds serious concerns regarding the emphasis on efficiency and performance monitoring within the Framework. In the health and wellbeing sector, outcomes cannot be measured by efficiency, and should be viewed as holistic in their measures of success. While Government, stakeholders and ACCOs should always be resourceful in their use of funding, a holistic approach to measuring outcomes must be adopted when measuring success of programs. The DPMC failed to indicate who will be evaluated under this Framework. VACCHO strongly advocates that Government should be the focus of evaluation when the success or failures of policies or programs is being considered.

The Strategy is also lacking significant detail regarding how the Framework and a future IES are linked. There is a stated intention for the Framework to "align with the wider role of the Productivity Commission in its development…" of the IES.[37] VACCHO asserts there must be clarity on this issue, and more specifically articulation of how these two frameworks will relate to each other, given the significant role the IAS plays in funding the Aboriginal affairs sector.

[35] Australian National Audit Office, 2019, *Auditor-General Report No.47 2018–19: Evaluating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Programs*. Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra
[36] Ibid.
[37] Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2018, *Indigenous Advancement Strategy Evaluation Framework,* Canberra.

Evaluation Priorities

While the design of an IES that leads to better outcomes for Aboriginal people is an essential component to effective Government functioning, there is already significant evidence pointing to immediate issues that generate poor outcomes for Aboriginal Communities and services. A continuous, robust, community-led evaluation process should focus on the following structural issues in order to improve effectiveness of and accountability in Government programs that impact Aboriginal Communities. These include funding to mainstream services that often prove to be ineffective in bettering outcomes for Aboriginal people, mainstream compliance and the burden of reporting in ACCOs. Aboriginal Communities have expressed that these are the structural issues that most impact Community and that should be prioritised as the focus of an IES evaluation over specification of policies and programs. Numerous evaluation reports regarding Aboriginal people have been generated that have not been acted on and/or released to the public—and which are overwhelmingly undergirded by these themes. Therefore, these structural issues will be further explored and examples will be provided that outline why they should be the focus of an IES evaluation.

Additionally, VACCHO acknowledges that there is a need for proportionality in the evaluation process, considering the stringent reporting requirements and funding constraints that ACCOs experience in comparison to their mainstream counterparts. Mainstream services often fail to be held to account for delivering better outcomes for Aboriginal Communities, while ACCOs experience continuous cuts to staffing, programs and budgets—impacting service deliver for individuals and Communities. Mainstream services must be held to account in the same ways that ACCOs are, considering that mainstream organisations provide services to Aboriginal people and often perpetuate systemic inequalities through culturally-unsafe, under-scrutinised service provision. Therefore, proportionality should be applied to ensure that an IES focuses more closely on programs which receive the greatest share of funding, rather than programs in ACCOs that receive approximately 20% of funding to service Aboriginal people.

Funding and Ineffective Service-delivery

Although there is significant evidence pointing to the effectiveness of ACCOs in bettering the health and wellbeing outcomes of Aboriginal people, mainstream services receive a disproportionately higher amount of funding and often do not produce positive outcomes for individuals and Communities. Four in every five dollars spent by the Government for Aboriginal people goes to mainstream services which, historically and currently, have proven to be unable to meet the needs of Aboriginal clients.[38] VACCHO acknowledges that Aboriginal people may sometimes prefer using mainstream services over ACCOs for a range of reasons. However, when Community members engage with a mainstream service, it is essential that the service provided is culturally safe and leads to better outcomes for the client, especially considering the high funding that mainstream services receive when compared to ACCOs.

ACCOs are more likely to produce better health outcomes for Aboriginal people, and are able to holistically respond to the physical, emotional and cultural needs of clients.[39] According to the

[38] Steering Committee for the Review of government Service Provision, 2016, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2017*, Productivity Commission, Canberra.

[39] Harfield SG, Davy C, McArthur A, Munn Z, Brown A, and Brown N, 2018, *Characteristics Of Indigenous Primary Health Care Service Delivery Models: A Systematic Scoping Review*, NCBI.

AIHW, in 2017-2018 “around 3.6 million episodes of care were provided, nearly 3.1 million of these (85%) by Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services.”[40] Despite the better health and wellbeing outcomes that ACCOs produce in comparison to their mainstream counterparts, proportionately greater funding has continuously been provided to mainstream services—which subsequently moves the Closing the Gap campaign even farther from meeting its targets.

The Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS) is a stark example of the harmful effect that the Government de-funding of ACCOs has on the provision of effective, culturally-safe and community-led services. While the IAS aimed to consolidate programs delivered to Aboriginal people, it resulted in a complete de-funding of many ACCO programs, $534 million funding cuts from the Indigenous Affairs portfolio, and the creation of a competitive grant process that depleted both small and large ACCOs.[41] Despite calls from the Finance and Public Administration Reference Committee in 2016 for IAS to prioritise capacity building and funding for smaller ACCOs, to provide longer contracts to ACCOs, and to better reflect Community need and consultation, the IAS continues to strip ACCOs of necessary funding and resources. Effective programs based on the tenets of self-determination and Community Control continue to lose funding, while mainstream services that often deliver culturally-unsafe programs receive a prioritisation of funding—pointing to the need for mainstream funding to be a focus of future evaluations.

Burden of Compliance

Mainstream compliance

While mainstream services receive the majority of funding allocated to Aboriginal people, there is little accountability and transparency in how the funds are spent and what outcomes are produced—as is evidenced in failure to Close the Gap. The Federal Government—through the National Partnership Payments (NPP)—provide the State Governments funding for health services, with little to no requirements for State Hospitals to deliver on health outcomes for Aboriginal people. In Victoria, hospitals receive funding every time an Aboriginal client is admitted through Weighted Inlier Equivalent Separation (WIES) co-payments; however, hospitals do not have to adequately account for how the funds are spent and if they are used to enhance the quality of care that Aboriginal patients receive. Although some health services in Victoria are endeavouring to improve cultural safety by consulting with Aboriginal-organisations, data from 2017 shows that Aboriginal patients are 5.9 times more likely to discharge against medical advice (DAMA) in some Victorian hospitals—a trend that still persists.[42]

Burden of reporting and compliance in ACCOs

ACCOs experience more scrutiny and reporting burden than mainstream services, and must adhere to demanding requirements to receive funding. A clear example of this trend is evident in the

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[40] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2019, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health organisations: Online Services Report — key results 2017–18, Indigenous primary health services - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare*. [online] Available at: https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/indigenous-australians/atsi-health-organisation-osr-key-results-2017-18/contents/indigenous-primary-health-services

[41] Reconciliation Australia, 2015*, Submission To The Senate Standing Committees On Finance And Public Administration: Commonwealth Indigenous Advancement Strategy Tendering,* Available at: https://www.reconciliation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/IAS-Senate-Inquiry_RA_Submission.pdf.

[42] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *2017, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework 2017 Report: Victoria,* Canberra: AIHW.

amount of reporting required under funding contracts between Primary Health Networks (PHNs) and ACCOs. Reporting has created a serious strain on ACCO staff, time, resources and service delivery. In some instances, VACCHO Members have been required to submit five different reports for a single stream of funding. The type of reporting required by PHNs demands outputs and not outcomes, producing "specific, quantifiable outputs that fail to capture some of the essential, social and relational dimensions of peoples' wellbeing."[43] The disproportionately high burden of reporting that ACCOs experience impedes on their ability to provide culturally-safe, meaningful services to Aboriginal people which would lead to better outcomes for individuals and Communities.

The IAS requirement that there be "mandatory incorporation under the Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act 2006 on Indigenous organisations receiving grants of $500,000 or more per annum" evidences the stringent requirements that ACCOs must meet in order to receive funding and the subsequent reporting expectations they endure after receiving funding.[44] Organisations are exempt from IAS requirements if they do not provide services to Aboriginal people, whereas ACCOs are only exempt if they can demonstrate that they are well-governed and high performing. This contrast in IAS mandates demonstrates a clear distinction between the treatment of mainstream organisations and ACCOs which creates a substantial burden on ACCO service provision. The IAS provides a clear example of the overburden of reporting ACCOs experience and the strict requirements that they must adhere to in order to receive funding, or to avoid defunding of programs. Under this system we additionally see small Community ACCOs competing for funding against large mainstream organisations, such as sporting clubs and corporate businesses—yet evaluations of the effectiveness of large mainstream organisations in bettering outcomes for Aboriginal Communities seemingly does not occur. ACCOs are at an automatic disadvantage in their funding application and reporting compliance, unable to afford staffing to keep up with the burden of reporting against the short term funding they receive to provide services.

Prioritising the focus of evaluation on key structural issues—funding to mainstream services that often prove to be ineffective in producing better outcomes for Aboriginal people and Communities, mainstream compliance and burden of reporting in ACCOs—would help to hold Government programs that impact Aboriginal people to account and ensure that transparency and effectiveness are at the forefront of service provision. When equitable evaluation processes are embedded in the policy cycle, ACCOs and mainstream organisations will be equally valued and supported to provide culturally-safe, self-determining programs that enhance the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people.

Recommendation 25: That the Commission ensures that evaluation efforts are systematically focused on mainstream organisations and their ability to provide services and outcomes, proportionate with funding allocation.

[43] Baum F, Freeman F, Sanders D, Labonte R, Lawless A, Javanparast S, 2016, *Comprehensive Primary Health Care Under Neo-Liberalism In Australia*, Social Science And Medicine 168

[44] Commonwealth of Australia, 2016, *Commonwealth Indigenous Advancement Strategy tendering processes: Chapter 1 – Parliament Of Australia, Aph.Gov.Au*. Available at: https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Finance_and_Public_Administration/Commonwealth_Indigenous/Report/c01

Conclusion

The creation of an IES provides an opportunity for Government to ensure that programs and policies that impact Aboriginal people are guided by principles of self-determination and lead to lasting, equitable outcomes. It can ensure that Government remains accountable, transparent and effective while enabling Aboriginal voices to be at the forefront of policy change and service delivery.

VACCHO endorses an IES that places principles and processes of evaluation before the establishment of priorities, recognising that the creation of a self-determining and Community Controlled evaluation framework will consequently determine the programs and policies that are most in need of evaluation. The eight principles that VACCHO puts forward recognise that Aboriginal leadership in the evaluation process is essential, and Government and mainstream services that are the focus of evaluation must have a deep and ongoing understanding of this often problematic relationship. The eight principles are grounded in the articulation of processes of evaluation which consider minimum standards that should exist in the delivery of an Aboriginal-led, holistic IES. Finally, structural issues that impact on service delivery by ACCOs and that create poor outcomes for Aboriginal Communities are explained as essential key priorities of an IES. Instead of prioritising programs and policies as the focus of an IES, VACCHO acknowledges that structural issues must be addressed as a priority of evaluation and consequently mitigated for an evaluation to produce lasting, positive outcomes.

VACCHO acknowledges that Aboriginal people have historically been subject to evaluation processes that lack cultural safety and do not produce equitable, lasting outcome for Community. Therefore, an IES must ensure that evaluation is embedded throughout the entirety of the policy cycle and exist as an ongoing mechanism of good governance and policy creation. It must support a culture of change within Government that aspires to better outcomes for Communities and honours the voices of Aboriginal people who have previously been marginalised through evaluation processes. An IES presents an opportunity for Government, mainstream services, ACCOs and Aboriginal Communities to work together to create impactful policies and meaningful evaluation processes.

Appendix A: Existing Australian Indigenous Evaluation Frameworks to Consider

1. *Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies 2012 eds.*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2002
2. *Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities: Guidelines for researchers and stakeholders,* National Health and Medical Research Council, August 2018.
3. *An Evaluation Framework to Improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health*, The Lowitja Institute, February 2018
4. *Data Governance Protocols*, 2014, Queensland Aboriginal and Islander Health Council.