CHALLENGING POWER THROUGH MEL

What can Australian and international development evaluators learn from each other?

AES26 International Evaluation Conference



Different traditions and orientations



Different intellectual, cultural and practice traditions offer different ways of thinking about power in evaluation.

Participatory approaches
Participants are active contributors and co-producers of knowledge.

Empowerment evaluation
Supports people's capacity, self-determination and ownership in evaluating their own work.

Feminist perspectives
Makes power, inequality, positionality and the politics of knowledge explicit.

Culturally responsive evaluation
Culture, context and evaluator positionality shape how evaluation is designed and interpreted.

Place-based approaches
Start from place, relationships, local priorities and knowledge rooted in context.

Indigenous evaluation
Grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems, relationships, cultural protocols and Indigenous authority.

Democratic evaluation
Asks whose perspectives and interests shape judgement, accountability and decisions.

Decolonising evaluation
Questions and disrupts colonial assumptions about knowledge, authority and how evaluation is done.

What do these approaches have in common?

Across these different traditions, some recurring themes emerge in how power is understood and addressed.



- Centre marginalised voices and interests
- Shift who produces knowledge
- Value different ways of knowing
- Prioritise relationships
- Reflect on positionality and assumptions
- Make power and inequality explicit

Where does power sit in MEL?

Power is exercised throughout the evaluation process.



What is measured?

How is it measured?

Who measures it?

Who makes sense of it?

Who uses it — and for what purposes?

Who makes decisions?

Across all six: who has influence and authority over what happens?

Australia-Indonesia Partnership towards and Inclusive Society - INKLUSI

A large donor-funded program working with diverse marginalised groups across Indonesia.

The evaluation question	**What does empowerment mean to marginalised people themselves — and how is it changing?**
What is measured?	Participants' meanings of empowerment helped shape what counted as impact.
How is it measured?	Stories of change alongside participants' own ratings of change across different areas of their lives.
Who measures it?	Indonesian researchers and evaluators led data collection across different contexts, bringing local knowledge, language and contextual expertise.



Australia-Indonesia Partnership towards and Inclusive Society - INKLUSI

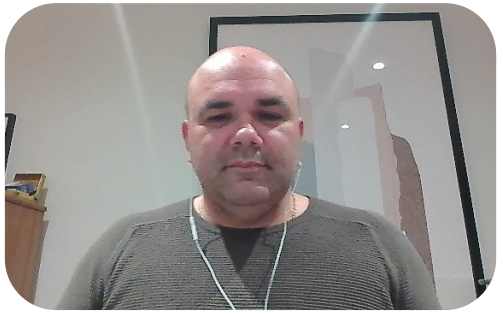
Who makes sense of it?	Participants explain what change means in their own lives, alongside interpretation by Indonesian researchers, partners and the wider evaluation team.
Who uses it — and for what purposes?	Findings need to support program learning and decision-making, as well as accountability to the donor.
Who makes decisions?	Participants have influence over how impact is understood, but commissioning, resources and many decisions about the evaluation remain elsewhere.

There were limits to what we could shift, including donor expectations, power within the research partnership, and the time and resources available.



Warlpriri Education and Training Trust - WETT

Yitaki-maninjaku, warrirninjaku, payirninjaku manu pina-jarrinjaku -YWPP



A Warlpiri-led trust using mining royalty income to fund education and training programs across Warlpiri communities in Central Australia.

Tracking and learning question	**What information helps Yapa know how WETT programs are going?**
What is measured?	What matters to Yapa: quality education and training, strong Yapa decision-making and respectful relationships.
How is it measured?	Through stories collected in Warlpiri, guided by cultural protocols and safe ways of working.
Who measures it?	Yapa researchers work alongside Kartiya researchers, with senior researchers supporting younger Yapa to develop their skills.



Warlpriri Education and Training Trust - WETT



Who makes sense of it?

Stories are shared back with community first for feedback, with Yapa researchers central to interpreting what has been heard.

Who uses it — and for what purposes?

Yapa researchers bring the learning to the WETT Advisory Committee to support planning, decision-making and advocacy.

Who makes decisions?

The WETT Advisory Committee uses the evidence to make decisions about the programs WETT funds.



Yapa ownership of the data is fundamental to who controls the evidence and the narrative.

What do we notice when we look across the two cases?

	Australia-Indonesia Partnership towards an Inclusive Society	Warlpiri Education and Training Trust
What is measured?	Participants' understandings of empowerment shape what counts as impact	Yapa priorities shape what matters
How is it measured?	Stories of change, participant ratings and locally adapted methods	Warlpiri language, cultural protocols, stories and community feedback
Who measures it?	Indonesian researchers and evaluators lead data collection, bringing local knowledge and contextual expertise	Yapa researchers lead major parts of the process
Who makes sense of it?	Participants explain what change means in their lives, alongside interpretation by Indonesian researchers and the wider evaluation team	Community and Yapa researchers play a central role in interpreting what has been heard
Who uses it — and for what purposes?	Findings are used for program learning, decision-making and donor accountability	Findings go back to community and inform WETT planning and decisions
Who makes decisions?	Participants influence how impact is understood, while commissioning, resources and many evaluation decisions remain elsewhere	WETT and Yapa leadership have authority over much more of the process

At your table

THINK

Think of an evaluation you know well.

Where was power hardest to shift?

What helped — or might have helped — shift it?

SHARE AND DISCUSS

Share your examples and discuss…

What seems to make shifting power possible?

What seems hardest to change?

Keep the 6 questions in mind…

What is measured?

How is it measured?

Who measures it?

Who makes sense of it?

Who uses it and for what purposes?

Who makes decisions?

What can we change — and what needs to change around us?

WITHIN EVALUATOR PRACTICE

What can evaluators do differently to create more space for power to shift?

CONDITIONS AROUND EVALUATION

What needs to change in how evaluation is commissioned, funded, governed or used?

Closing reflection

YOUR PRACTICE

Is there one place where you could do something differently?

BEYOND PRACTICE

What is one thing that needs to change around evaluation?

Thank you.