Moving toward the fire – developing a tool to provide meaningful results to both government funders and to remote community members

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Abstract:

This paper discusses the development of a new evaluation tool developed for use in remote Australian Indigenous communities, where English fluency and literacy issues as well as cultural differences mean that standard evaluation tools can often not be used. It also attempts to address the issue of government funders seeking easily-summarised quantitative data while Indigenous peoples around the world are calling for evaluation tools look at their experience holistically and represent it in a way that is useful to them. How can these two different perspectives be reconciled? The development, piloting and evolution of a tool designed to meet both sets of needs provided many learnings, particularly on the processes required to build remote community engagement in the use of this evaluation tool.

Introduction

Large investments are being made by governments to try to 'close the gap' on Indigenous disadvantage, many with a special focus on remote communities in the Northern Territory. Government funders typically focus on accountability measures, often in the form of quantitative data. This can pose challenges for evaluations in remote communities, where benchmarked data is often not readily available at a local level, and regional data may be uninformative on local dynamics. Evaluations of initiatives tackling violence and abuse are particularly problematic. Many common measures are ambiguous; increased reports of violence may indicate a worsening situation, but may equally well indicate an improvement, if victims who once accepted violence are now reporting it and action is being taken to support them and address the perpetrators' behaviour. This dynamic is particularly marked in Indigenous communities where ongoing violence has been normalised and other local factors have acted as a barrier to reporting family violence incidents (Markiewicz 2007).

Other factors have to be taken into account in evaluating remote community interventions. Cultural differences, English language fluency and literacy issues are barriers to using standard techniques such as survey questions and Likert measures. More importantly, Indigenous peoples are increasingly seeking evaluations that are respectful of their holistic experience and knowledge, and enable them to control the information that is provided, focusing on elements which are meaningful and useful to them (Henry et al 2004, Stevens 2007). Although work has begun on how best to address this issue including better ethical guidelines (Dunbar and Scrimgeour 2006), much more remains to be done.

As Scougall (2006:49) notes, although the ideal evaluator

> *'is someone in close relationship with the community, employing culturally sensitive methods, fostering broad community involvement, transferring evaluation skills and contributing to a process of empowerment and positive social change…[the] hard reality is that evaluators are most often outsiders with limited resources and precious little time to spend in the field'.*

With such issues in mind, two individuals with experience in this area determined to try to build a tool that would:

- provide quantitative data that could track local violence and abuse in a less ambiguous way than police and justice data;
- enable a fuller picture of local violence and abuse issues, including those – such as sexual violence – often concealed;
- focus not just on measuring incidence, but on building capacity to better address issues identified locally;
- enable input from a wide range of community members, including those often not able to participate in more conventional, mainstream evaluation and assessment methodologies; and
- lead to improved responses internally and externally to identified issues, and potentially could act to help direct future investment in anti-violence initiatives.

Eileen Cummings is a Rembanggarr-Ngalakan woman who has worked for many years in policy and service development, and has expertise in remote community issues; during the development phase of the tool, she was facilitating groups of men and women from communities who wanted to learn better ways of reducing violence and abuse in their communities. Emma Williams has experience in building innovative and internationally recognised research and evaluation tools, including participatory 'community report cards', and linking the results to investment allocations. The combination of skills proved important in the tool's development and piloting.

Tool design

The tool was developed with Indigenous guidance and leadership. Over forty Indigenous remote community members contributed their input (25 females and 18 males) from the communities of Yarralin, Milikapiti, Pirlangimpi, Mutitjulu, Barunga, Manyallaluk and Wugularr, as well as a number of Indigenous staff based in Darwin.

To determine the focus of the instrument, potential topics were discussed at a workshop of Indigenous community members seeking to learn more about aspects of family violence and how they could address them in their own communities.

The short-listed topics were further refined by Indigenous community members receiving training in how to work with families affected by violence, abuse and dysfunction. Importantly, the participants did not solely request measures of local problems, but also sought ways for community members to comment on the perceived effectiveness of potential solutions. These included a range of programs and services including family support and child protection services as well as prison sentences and programs, and 'restraining orders', police-enforced bans on offenders interacting with victims. The topics selected by participants were:

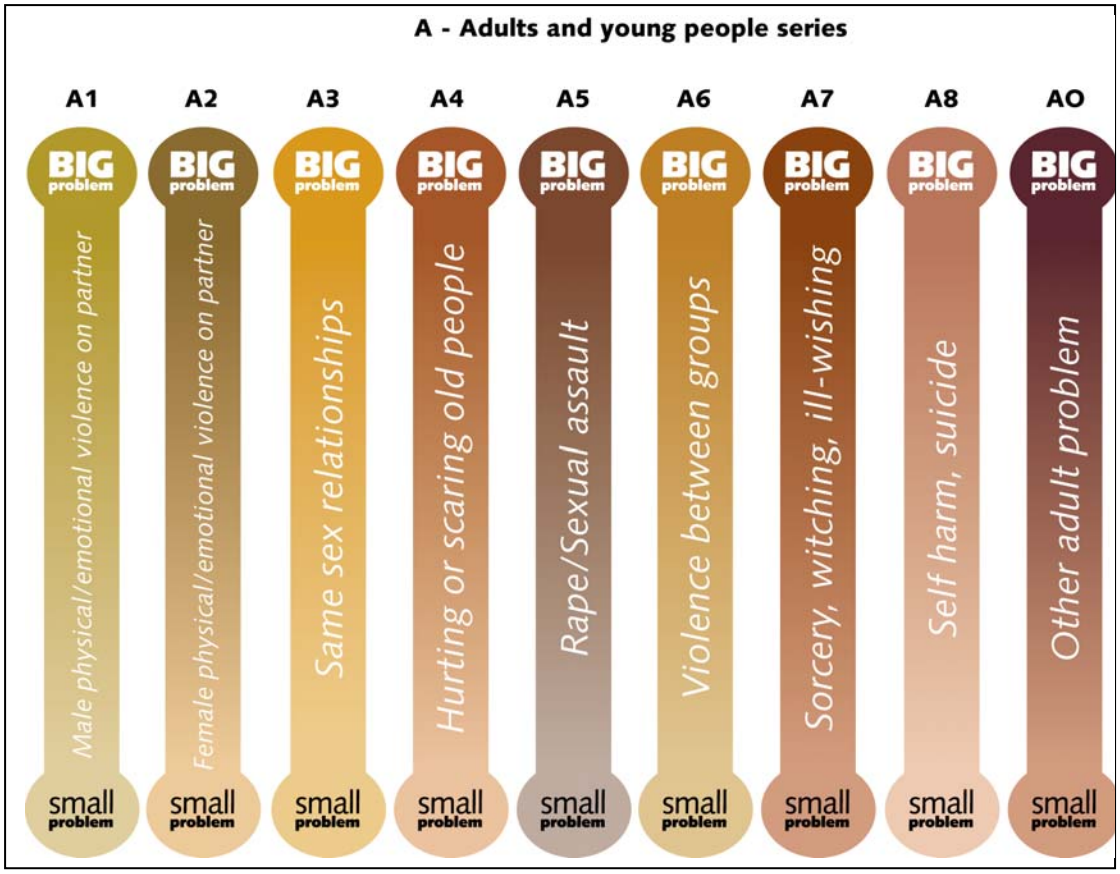
- Adult violence issues (eg partner violence, abuse of older people);
- Issues related to children (eg people hitting or kicking children, children not going to school, people using children sexually);
- Local triggers for violence (eg alcohol, petrol, drugs, jealousy, gambling); and
- Local responses for violence (eg offender programs, safe houses, restraining orders).

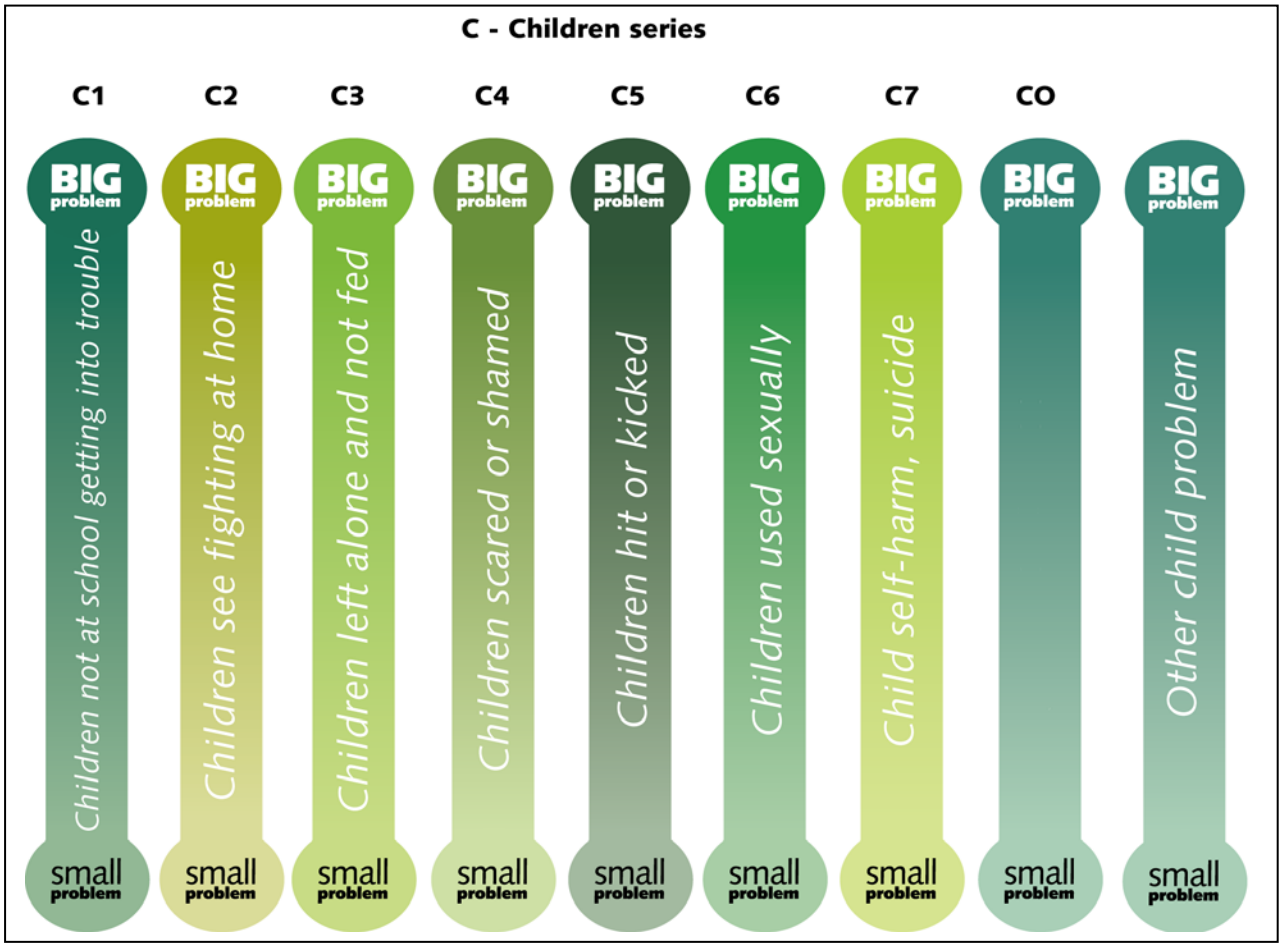
Indigenous and remote community priorities are evident in these categories. For example, children respecting elders and going to school shared space with more traditional measures such as partner violence. Triggers for violence included 'wrong way' or 'poison' relationships; Indigenous culture has strong protocols for which types

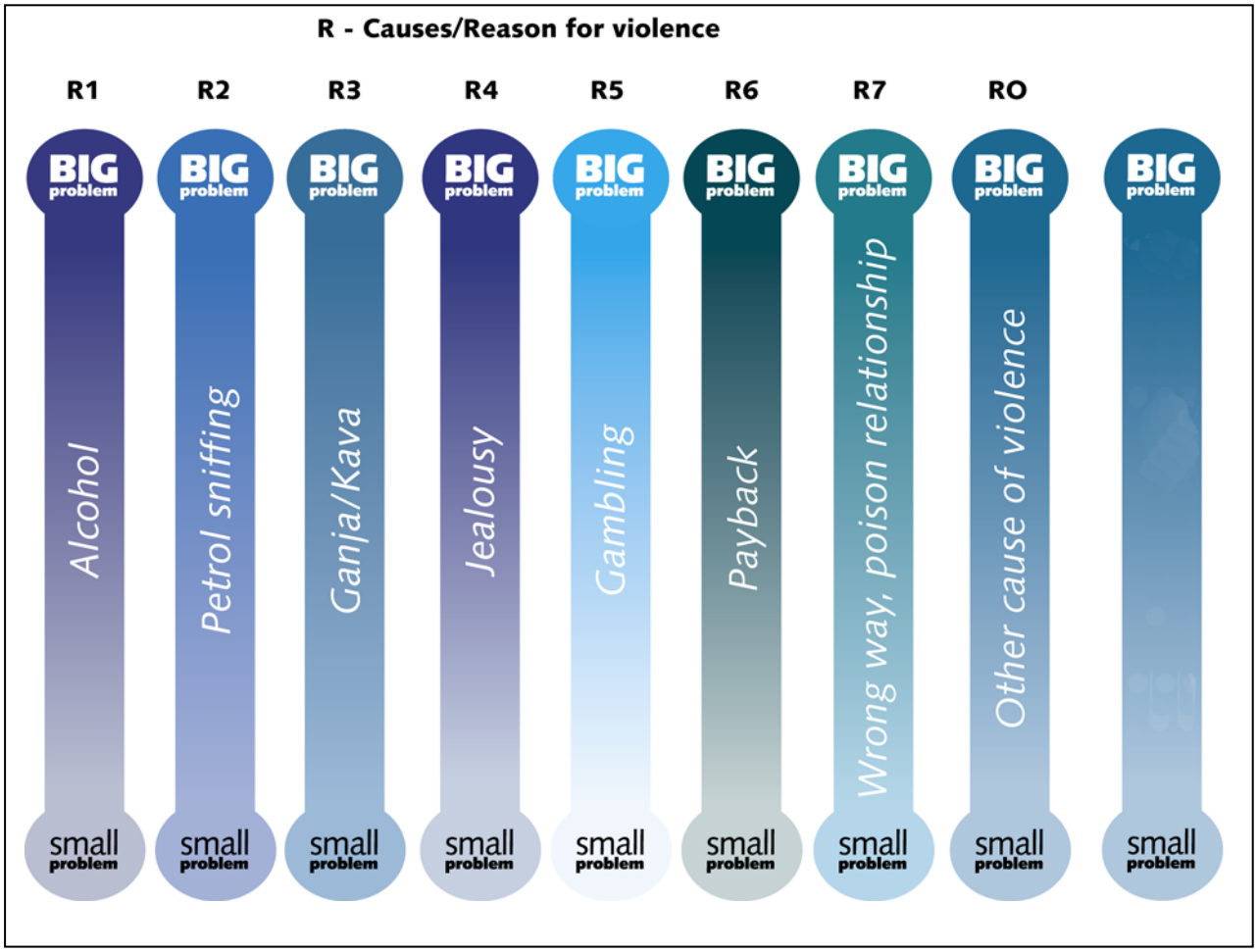
of blood and relatives acquired through marriage must be avoided and who can be a suitable partner; breaking these rules often triggers strong reactions.

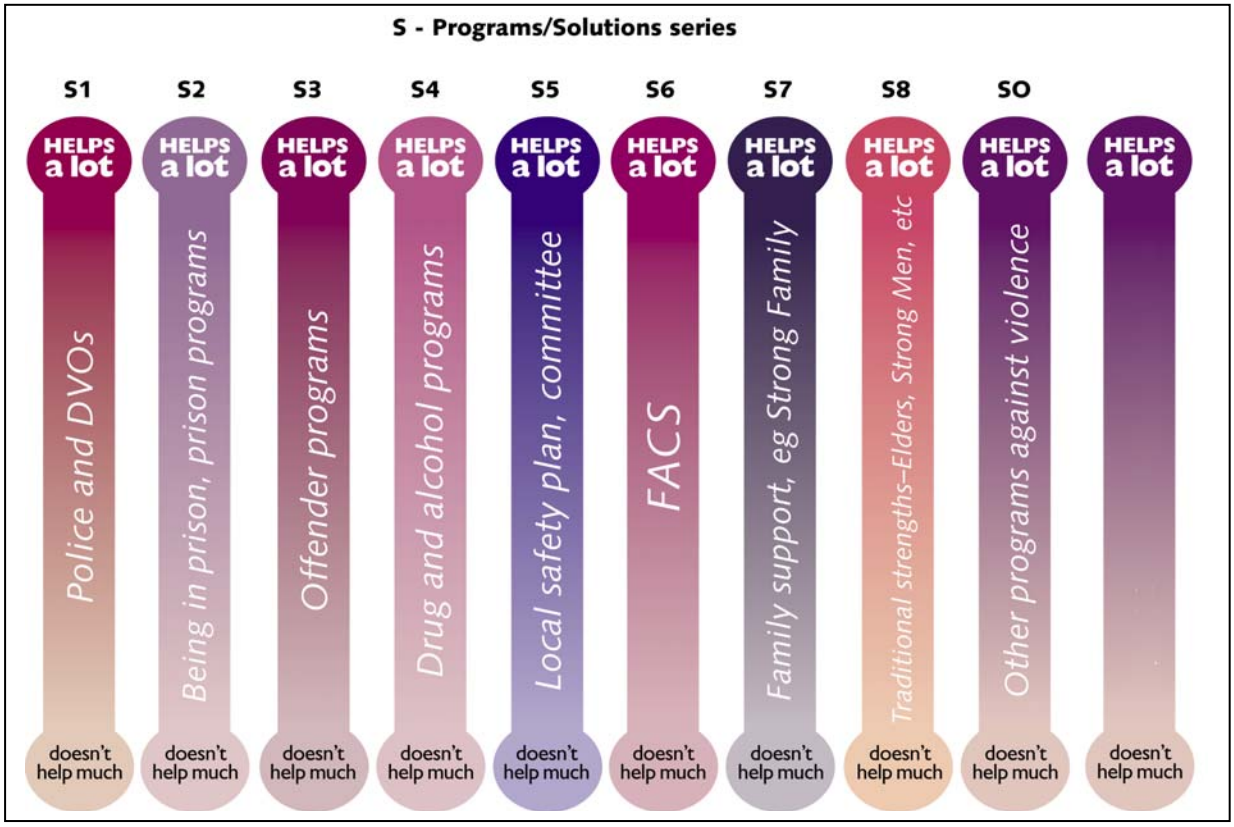
Once the topics had been chosen, the physical format was developed, again with guidance and leadership from Indigenous anti-violence workers. The original design that emerged was a modified Likert scale adapted for group use in remote communities, in the shape of four sets of eight ‘thermometers’ (shown below), with Velcro strips to attach them to portable display boards. They had words on the front (eg ***partner violence***) and numbers on the back (a scale from 0 to 100). They were relatively large (approx one metre in length) to allow use in front of large groups and were laminated to enable use in a range of weather conditions, particularly where discussions would occur outdoors.

Smaller graphics were developed were designed in the shape of hands or small human figures. These could be used as markers that the facilitator could move up and down the ‘thermometer’, as the group identified how big a problem – or how big a help – that particular factor was in that community. The brown hands were used for most sessions, but small male and female figures could be used to show differences between male and female community members’ perceptions of the same issue, or young people’s perceptions could be noted separately from older people’s by using both a ‘young’ figure and an ‘older person’ figure.


A - Adults and young people series
A1
A2
A3
A4
A5
A6
A7
A8
AO
BIG problem
Male physical/emotional violence on partner
Female physical/emotional violence on partner
Same sex relationships
Hurting or scaring old people
Rape/Sexual assault
Violence between groups
Sorcery, witching, ill-wishing
Self harm, suicide
Other adult problem
small problem


C - Children series
C1
C2
C3
C4
C5
C6
C7
CO
BIG problem
Children not at school getting into trouble
Children see fighting at home
Children left alone and not fed
Children scared or shamed
Children hit or kicked
Children used sexually
Child self-harm, suicide
Other child problem
small problem


R - Causes/Reason for violence
R1
R2
R3
R4
R5
R6
R7
RO
BIG problem
Alcohol
Petrol sniffing
Ganja/Kava
Jealousy
Gambling
Payback
Wrong way, poison relationship
Other cause of violence
small problem


S - Programs/Solutions series
S1
S2
S3
S4
S5
S6
S7
S8
SO
HELPS a lot
Police and DVOs
Being in prison, prison programs
Offender programs
Drug and alcohol programs
Local safety plan, committee
FACS
Family support, eg Strong Family
Traditional strengths–Elders, Strong Men, etc
Other programs against violence
doesn't help much

Piloting use of the tool

It was accepted that a tool requiring community members to talk openly about sexual violence, child abuse and assaults could only be successful implemented if it was embedded within a trusting relationship, and that significant time and resourcing would have to be devoted to building up that trust if an existing relationship was not already in place. Only after community members were ready to proceed could the next stage of trial commence. The community engagement phase typically required a period of several weeks to explain the tool and its purpose and to build up sufficient trust in the process and the facilitators that the community is willing to participate in the program. Having a person such as Eileen Cummings, who was already a person trusted and respected by a wide range of remote community members, greatly helped this process.

Once it was achieved, the tool was used at a community meeting, typically extended over one or two days, which might contain sub-groups such as men and women talking in separate areas, depending on the cultural context, or younger and older women discussing issues separately.

At the meeting, Indigenous facilitators explained to participants the background of the facilitators and use of the tool.

Discussion commenced talking about the benefits of looking at local violence issues, allowing time for participants to be comfortable with the topics to be discussed or to raise areas of concern – such as some Aboriginal men fearing they were to be once again stigmatised. There was substantial discussion of the difference between measuring local incidence and discussion of particular incidents. Facilitators let participants know that names and specific examples did not have to be raised, although the facilitators remained available after each session, and a number of specific concerns were raised with them by individual participants, in a more private setting.

The presentation of graphic materials followed once groups were comfortable with the concept, and after a demonstration of how the graphic materials (‘thermometer’ and ‘marker’) would be used.

Groups were often separated at this point, with men and women holding separate discussions.

Staff from Charles Darwin University had been contracted to evaluate the project (Arnott et al 2007), and attended a number of sessions. At their suggestion, the use of later iterations of the tool in communities commenced with a group discussion on what the term would be in local language(s). Most remote communities have speakers from more than one language and some communities. Especially in the Top End, which is one of the world’s most linguistically complex areas, there may be speakers from half a dozen or more languages in a single small community.

The discussion was often lively, especially where community members spoke more than one language. Participants sometimes disagreed amongst themselves on what exactly constituted a term such as ‘people using children for sex’ and it could take considerable time before consensus would be reached. People would talk about the age considered a ‘child’, and also what constituted a sexual contact. Different types and levels of violence were discussed. Once consensus on the meaning of a term was reached, discussion moved to where the marker for that factor should be placed.

It was explained that putting the marker at the very top of the scale, where many participants first wanted to place it when talking about violence, would mean that everyone was violent all the time, and this community would be the worst community in the Territory for violence. Putting the marker at the very bottom of the scale would mean that no-one was ever violent in any way, even the milder forms of violence raised in the discussion.

The group then decided where the marker for each item should be placed, with a facilitated discussion leading to a consensus within the group on the current incidence of each issue, such as partner violence; abuse of older people; people using children sexually; the relative importance of alcohol, petrol, drugs, jealousy, etc as triggers for local violence; or the relative local efficacy of programs such as offender programs. The facilitators were able to easily note the location of the marker and translate it into a number, by using the 0-100 scale printed on the back of the instrument.

Discussion concluded with an identification of local priorities for action and progress, and discussion of how the day's discussion would be followed up and documented back to the community.

Discussion

The tool did seem to enable participants to think about local violence-related issues, in a relatively non-threatening manner, and proved a tool for community education as well as evaluation. For example, the initial discussion brought an opportunity to note that a person had to be sixteen years of age to legally consent to sex, and also provided an opportunity to discuss different types of violence, including those that may not previously been recognised as 'violence'.

The tool also proved capable of revealing substantial differences between communities on some issues. Perceptions of male violence against women tended to be high generally, but perception of violence against elders and female violence to men was more variable, ranging from low to extremely high. it proved important for the facilitators to remain aware of the risks to participants of speaking up about such issues. In one instance, the atmosphere become so threatening when women's ratings were reported back to a mixed gender audience that the exercise was quickly terminated, and a different topic was introduced.

The tool was therefore succeeded in many of its aims. Nevertheless, there were many learnings from the piloting process, and calls for a somewhat different type of instrument to be developed in future.

Two workshops with stakeholders working in many remote communities showed that the large version of the tool was cumbersome to carry to remote communities, and that many remote communities did not have display boards. A lighter and more flexible version needed to be developed.

There were comments that this tool, as with many other typical evaluation measures, focused solely on negative issues, and did not measure strengths in communities. This was considered an extremely important issue to address in any new version.

Also, and importantly, communities were looking for continuing support to follow up on the initial 'thermometer' session. For example, participants asked for results to be made available in poster form, which could be displayed in the local shop and maintain awareness of the issues. Reports on concerns with existing services, such as prison programs, were to be reported to agencies with the aim of building better

responses in future. Suggestions for new local initiatives to improve the situation needed follow-up.

All of this would only possible if an ongoing local resource was available to continue working with the tool and the community on a longer term basis.

Conclusion

Although the 'thermometer' tool proved to be of benefit, an improved version was required.

An updated instrument is about to be piloted in October 2009 addressing these issues, with less of a focus on deficit measurement and a greater emphasis on balancing the identification of strengths as well as problems. It replaces the 'thermometers' with a more culturally appropriate image of distance from a central fire, which is a metaphor well accepted across both central desert and Top End communities as meaningful. It is intended to link into newly implemented programs and resources in communities that can follow up on the results of the community evaluation exercise.

Results of the initial pilots of the updated tool will be available in late 2009.

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