Good evaluation practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander settings:

Putting ethical principles into practice — a protocol to support ethical evaluation practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander settings
This document is considered a ‘working document’ that will be revised over time based on our experience with using it for the continuation of the BetterEvaluation project and informed by the experience from other initiatives or organisations working in this space.

We are keen:
- to receive your feedback at any time to help us improve this protocol
- to hear how you have used this protocol in your work

**Purpose of the protocol**

To promote the full implementation of ethical principles when engaging in monitoring and evaluation activities with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with the aim to support M&E practices that respect the rights of, and function for the benefit of, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

**Content of the protocol**

This document lays out a set of principles organised under six key themes or domains which, together, represent a holistic approach to ethical M&E practice. Each principle is defined in terms of expected knowledge, attitudes and behaviours of those engaging in the design, implementation, reporting and/or use of M&E in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander settings. The document also specifies common barriers to ethical practice that were identified by evaluators and communities and will be further explored over time.

**Intended users of the protocol**

The BetterEvaluation team – consisting of the BE core team and the members of the Project Working Group (current and future) – in their work on identifying and sharing examples of good evaluation practice from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander settings.

Any government agency, non-governmental or other type of organisation which wants a principles-based approach to applying ethics and wants to put this into practice. They can learn from this protocol and further adapt it to their specific type of work and context.
How to use the protocol

The BetterEvaluation team will use the principles and associated practice guidance to identify and verify examples of good evaluation practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander settings.

Others can use it as an example of how to put principles into practice. The protocol can be applied across various contexts, evaluation methods and approaches.

It is intended as a companion document to:

- Australian Evaluation Society (AES). *Code of Ethics*. AES, 2013. Available at www.aes.asn.au The AES Policy on the Application of the Code of Ethics, as adopted by the AES Board on 12 December 2000, states that upholding the Code is a condition of AES membership. The Code does not currently cover specific statements related to ‘Indigenous groups or communities, or other cross-cultural issues and issues of cultural safety’ as was noted by AES members in a recent survey.

- Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS). 2019 Revision of the AIATSIS Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies, Consultation Draft. “These guidelines apply to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research including research activities relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collections. In the Australian context, research has generally been defined as ‘investigation undertaken to gain knowledge and understanding’ and casts a wide net in terms of what constitutes research. Research includes not only academic research carried out in and by universities and publicly funded research agencies, but also archival research, evaluation, quality assurance, social marketing, government policy and program design, and re-use of data for public policy and clinical trials, among others.” (p.8).

This BetterEvaluation ethical protocol builds on these (and other) existing codes and guidelines to support practical application within the context of monitoring and evaluation activities.

Preferred citation

Acknowledgements

This ethical protocol was written in 2019 by a collaborative Working Group including: Belinda Gibb & Sharon Babyack (Indigenous Community Volunteers), Donna Stephens (Menzies School of Health Research), Kate Kelleher (Kate Kelleher Consulting), Carol Vale & Debbie Hoger (Murawin Consulting), and Greet Peersman (BetterEvaluation). This document is part of the BetterEvaluation Project: Good evaluation practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Settings.

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We acknowledge the work of a range of people and organisations that we have drawn on to develop the protocol, including:

- Indigenous Data Sovereignty Summit and Australian Indigenous Governance Institute, *Data Sovereignty Communique*. Available at: [https://www.maiamnayriwingara.org/key-principles](https://www.maiamnayriwingara.org/key-principles)
- National Health and Medical Research Council, *Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities: Guidelines for researchers and stakeholders and Keeping research on track II*.
- Terri Janke and Co. *Advice on Copyright and Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property*.

We acknowledge and thank Maria Stephens, an Arrabi/Binning woman who speaks the Iwaidja language. She generously provided her artwork for this project.
Ethical protocol for evaluation in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander settings

This ethical protocol contains a set of ethical principles to hear and privilege the voice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in monitoring and evaluation that involves them or impacts on them.

The protocol is principles-based and offers the flexibility to be applied across various contexts, evaluation methods and approaches. Application of the principles demonstrates rigour and is essential for credibility within evaluation processes.

Article 3 of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples states ‘Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development’ (UN 2007).

The ethical protocol prioritises self-determination and reinforces the inherent human rights of our people. The protocol offers information about the practical application of the principles at every stage of a monitoring and evaluation task or process.

Evaluation is a process of change rather than an endpoint and the ethical protocol provides principles and practical suggestions for improving the benefits of evaluation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. This can be done through the following pathway:

- High quality ethics
- Trust with participants
- Increased accuracy of data
- Informed & improved program design
- Improved outcomes and positive change

The ethical protocol provides principles and guidance on how to respect the elders, cultural knowledge, and lands and seas of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. It provides a tool to frame and design an ethical approach to apply throughout all stages of monitoring and evaluation tasks and processes.
Key themes of the ethical protocol for evaluation in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander settings

The principles for each theme and how to apply them are further detailed below. The themes are represented in a circle to illustrate a holistic approach to ethical evaluation practice – all themes are equally important. The visual representation can be used as a tool to ensure a high ethical standard is included in the design and execution of any monitoring and evaluation activity; each theme must be addressed at every stage of the M&E process. It is also a communication tool that can be used to illustrate to participants the ethical standards that will be adhered to within the monitoring and evaluation activity. Overcoming barriers to Ethical Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander evaluations

Prioritise self-determination, community agency and self-governance

Communicate transparently, build trust and obtain individual and community consent

Facilitate control and data sovereignty

Strengths-based recognition of cultures, acknowledging communities and individuals

Formalise accountability processes on ethical practice

Share benefits and apply two-way learning

COURAGE, INTEGRITY, & CULTURAL HUMILITY
The following barriers to ethical practice in evaluations (depicted in the outer ring) have been identified by evaluators and communities. Adherence to the ethical protocol, along with courage, integrity and cultural humility, will assist with overcoming these barriers.

1 Barriers have been identified by the BetterEvaluation working party. These barriers will be further tested and reviewed as part of the interviews to be undertaken in the next phase of the project.
Principles of ethical practice

Below you will find an overview of the principles under each theme. On the following pages, guidance is presented on how to apply each principle in practice.

Prioritise self-determination, community agency and self-governance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Empowerment principle</th>
<th>Diversity principle</th>
<th>Inclusion principle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the right to self-determination and to be encouraged and empowered in decision-making processes. Evaluators must listen and advise to the benefit of communities above all else.</td>
<td>Recognise the diversity and uniqueness of First Nations Cultures, Peoples and Individuals.</td>
<td>Involve Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander people in all levels of the evaluation, from design phase right through to analysis and communicating findings.</td>
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Communicate transparently, build trust and obtain individual and community consent

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<th>Equity principle</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Obtain the free prior informed consent of Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander people before commencing the evaluation.</td>
<td>Evaluation must be transparent, equitable and respect the integrity of the community.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Strengths-based recognition of cultures, acknowledging communities and individuals

**Attribution principle**
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities have the right to choose to be acknowledged and attributed for their contributions to an evaluation.

**Strengths-based principle**
Affirm and celebrate culture. Take a based approach and build from cultural strengths.

**Strengthening of culture principle**
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are not static and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the right to protect, maintain, revitalise and strengthen their cultures.

**Participation principle**
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are evaluators and should be regarded as equal partners.

Share benefits and apply two-way learning

**Community transformation principle**
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples involved in, or affected by, evaluation should benefit from the evaluation project and not be disadvantaged by it.

**Community priorities principle**
Evaluation must reflect the priorities of the community.

**Strengthen capacity principle**
Evaluation must strengthen capacity and capability for decision making and voluntary actions of participants and the communities in which they live.

**Share results principle**
Evaluation results must be presented and available to communities in a form that is translatable to community needs.
Formalise accountability processes on ethical practice

**Accountability principle**
Include appropriate mechanisms and procedures for reporting on ethical aspects of the research and complying with this ethical protocol.

Facilitate control and data sovereignty

**Community ownership principle**
Evaluation, and the knowledge created through evaluation, is owned by the community.

**Respect principle**
Respect the custodianship of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures, their ongoing and unbroken connection to their land and water and the right to protect, maintain, control and benefit from their Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander Cultural Intellectual Property (ICIP).

**Integrity and authenticity of culture and knowledge principle**
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the right to maintain the integrity of their ICIP.

**Interpretation of culture principle**
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the right to determine and approve the interpretation of their culture as the primary guardians and interpreters of their cultural heritage.

**Secrecy and confidentiality principle**
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the right to keep secret their sacred and ritual knowledge in accordance with their customary laws.
Prioritise self-determination, community agency and self-governance

Empowerment principle
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the right to self-determination and to be encouraged and empowered in decision-making processes. Evaluators must listen and advise to the benefit of communities above all else.

How to put this into practice:

- This involves time, ongoing negotiation, consultation and informing custodians about the implications of participating in the evaluation.
- Seek what is important and what needs to be evaluated from the community – take a ground up perspective to understand community priorities. Even top down projects should include community-led evaluation, together with what funders want to know.
- Ensure you have an established relationship with a community before you commence the evaluation. If you do not have an established relationship, consider partnering with someone who does.
- Before commencing the evaluation, ensure communities have a full understanding of the intent of the evaluation and that their input is valued and welcomed. Discuss and identify how the evaluation will benefit them, including the ownership of data.
- Include community members in the co-design phase of the evaluation. Accept that you may need to return to the evaluation commissioner with a revised approach.
- In consultation with community members, choose the most appropriate method(s) to collect and/or retrieve data. For a list of examples refer to the BetterEvaluation Rainbow Framework (https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/rainbow_framework).
- Include community members in the collection and retrieval of data and analysis of numeric and textual data patterns.
- Build community capacity and if needed capability to engage in data collection in ways that are meaningful to the community.
Prioritise self-determination, community agency and self-governance

Diversity principle
Recognise the diversity and uniqueness of First Nations Cultures, Peoples and Individuals.

How to put this into practice:

- Recognise the unique cultural identities of each Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander community and their unique practices and processes. Take the time to look, listen and learn about the specific cultural context you are entering before commencing any evaluation.

- Recognition of individual communities requires explicitly sharing and explaining individual Indigenous cultural materials rather than perpetuating a homogenous view of Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander peoples.

- Stereotypes and quietly held beliefs require unpacking. Put aside assumptions about communities and their governance structures before and during the evaluation. Be aware that your cultural lens will impact on your understanding.

- Understand that there are different governance structures and roles within a community. At the outset of, and throughout the evaluation, make sure you are talking to the right person or people.

- When synthesising data from other evaluations, be aware that findings from other communities may not be relevant. Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander communities represent over 300 different nations. This includes differences in language, culture and societal structure. Homogenising data can skew results.

- If utilising findings from different communities, validate this first with the community that is central to the evaluation.

- There may be opportunities to generalise findings across programs or sites within the community that is central to the evaluation. Ensure you test and validate this approach with the community. There may be different language groups and cultures represented within one site.
Prioritise self-determination, community agency and self-governance

Inclusion principle
Involve Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander people in all levels of the evaluation, from design phase right through to analysis and communicating findings.

How to put this into practice:

- Build trust with participants by demonstrating to them the value and benefit of the information they will share as part of the evaluation.
- Prioritise the use of participatory methods as they have benefits to achieving a higher ethical standard on inclusion and can allow you to build relationships and trust with community members, particularly where multiple monitoring points provide an ongoing connection.
- Consider if there are alternative explanations for causes and ensure causal questions are directed to community members. They are the experts of their communities and may see something you have missed.
- When understanding what may have happened without the program being evaluated, ensure that the community can critique any assumptions you have made. Do not use the word ‘intervention’ when questioning causal attribution. The word ‘intervention’ can have other connotations for community.
Communicate transparently, build trust and obtain individual and community consent

Consent principle
Obtain the free prior informed consent of Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander people before commencing the evaluation.

How to put this into practice:

- Some Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander people have multiple languages. Planning documents, consent forms and all documentation relating to the evaluation should be in plain English. Ensure that literacy, and participants with a different language have been considered. Explain documents in person and work with a translator when required.
- Information on the evaluation purpose, methods, process and management of related data must be clearly communicated before the evaluation process begins, including how research material will be stored and disposed of.
- Clearly communicate who is funding the evaluation.
- Participants should be informed that they can opt out of the evaluation at any time without any damage to their relationship with you or others.
- Participants must be informed clearly about any risks involved in their participation, including any risks to maintaining anonymity (where applicable).
- Participants should have a key point of contact provided to them to address any concerns they have about the evaluation.

Equity principle
Evaluation must be transparent, equitable and respect the integrity of the community.

How to put this into practice:

- When defining the budget for the evaluation, carefully map out the project into phases to allow time for relationship building and to adequately facilitate community input. Ensure both the timeline and budget, factors in time upfront for understanding the community structures and then planning and designing the evaluation in partnership with the community.
Strengths-based recognition of cultures, acknowledging communities and individuals

**Attribution principle**
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities have the right to choose to be acknowledged and attributed for their contributions to an evaluation.

**How to put this into practice:**
- All work must be attributed to the original author and or knowledge custodian. This demonstrates respect for the author and shares with them how their work is being used by others. It also ensures they are happy for their work to be used in this way.
- Draft a copy of the attribution to check with the community member(s) to ensure it is correct and appropriate.

**Strengths-based principle**
Affirm and celebrate culture. Take a strengths-based approach and build from cultural strengths.

**How to put this into practice:**
- Strengths-based works are key elements of creating meaningful change. In a strengths-based approach, it is important to understand what has worked, but it is also important to take the time to understand what could have worked better.
- Building on strengths-based practices is a key element of creating positive images of Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander contributions, communities and peoples.
- A strengths-based approach does not preclude issues or problems but rather facilitates successful negotiation to establish strong dialogue within and with communities.

**Strengthening of culture principle**
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are not static and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the right to protect, maintain, revitalise and strengthen their cultures.

**How to put this into practice:**
- Be respectful of cultural protocols acknowledging that each community has different protocols – ask what the protocols are.
- Undertake cultural training if offered by the community, before commencing the evaluation. If there is no specific cultural training available for the community, undertake a cultural training that has the flexibility and sensitivity to be applied in multiple contexts.
Strengths-based recognition of cultures, acknowledging communities and individuals

Participation principle
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are evaluators and should be regarded as equal partners.

How to put this into practice:
- Include community members in the design of program theory and logic models and the testing of existing models. Community perception and expertise is required to fully develop and understand the effectiveness of models. Ensure the models are communicated in a way that is meaningful to community members. You may be required to translate the model into something more appropriate for the community setting.
Share benefits and apply two-way learning

**Community transformation principle**
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples involved in, or affected by, evaluation should benefit from the evaluation project and not be disadvantaged by it.

**How to put this into practice:**
- Evaluation must drive and support positive transformation for and of communities.
- All data and reports produced in relation to the evaluation must be made available for the use of communities.
- Data must be relevant to the community and empower sustainable self-determination and effective self-governance.

**Community priorities principle**
Evaluation must reflect the priorities of the community.

**How to put this into practice:**
- In addition to the evaluation purpose provided by the commissioner, ensure that the community’s purpose for the evaluation is included. Consider both equally important.
- Ensure that community members are involved in the meta-evaluation, analysis and interpretation of results. This will ensure community priorities are not over-looked at key stages of the evaluation process.
- Consider how an evaluation report can equip communities to better advocate and influence for community self-determination.
- Community standards and criteria matter. When determining what ‘success looks like’, develop the standards and metrics in partnership with community as well as the commissioner.
- Work closely with the community to develop the recommendations of the report.
Share benefits and apply two-way learning

Strengthen capacity principle
Evaluation must strengthen capacity and capability for decision making and voluntary actions of participants and the communities in which they live.

How to put this into practice:

- Determine whether there are community members who can assist with conducting the evaluation, or who have been involved in evaluations before. Include their salary in your budget.
- Prior to evaluation commencement negotiate with community ways in which the evaluation could consider capacity strengthening methods such as: mentoring, community of practice, peer coaching, supervised practice in teams, reflective practice and learning circle. Include these in your budget from the start.
- Consider recommendations in the report that will support capacity building and voluntary actions within the project or program being evaluated.

Share results principle
Evaluation results must be presented and available to communities in a form that is translatable to community needs.

How to put this into practice:

- In conjunction with your evaluation commissioner, consider community members as the equal primary intended user of the evaluation.
- Discuss with community members how the findings of the data could be presented visually or through other relevant forms e.g. artistic expressions.
- Formalise at the start of the evaluation how the community will be presented the data for the evaluation. Consider several feedback sessions through the data analysis process.
- Ensure that the report is available to the community for its own use and support them to make use of it. This may include providing the data in different formats. Ensure this requirement is included in the evaluation budget and approved by the commissioner.
Formalise accountability processes on ethical practice

Accountability principle
Include appropriate mechanisms and procedures for reporting on ethical aspects of the research and complying with this ethical protocol.

How to put this into practice:

- Formalise the free, prior informed consent with a form for participants to sign. Consider including a check list to make sure each element of the evaluation has been discussed and understood by the participant.

- Develop a photo/video consent form if taking photos and footage of community members that may have not signed a consent form to participate in the evaluation. Explain how the photos and footage will be used before asking for consent.

- Contracts with evaluation commissioners must allow communities access to, and ownership of, data collected and created as a result of the evaluation, including all reports created.

- Consider the use of an ethics committee or independent assessment of the ethical approach of an evaluation. Check in regularly with the committee or assessor if changes have been made to the evaluation process or team members. Where available, include a community-based ethics group.
Formalise accountability processes on ethical practice

**Accountability principle**
Evaluation, and the knowledge created through evaluation, is owned by the community.

**How to put this into practice:**
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have the right to exercise control of the data ecosystem relating to them. This includes ownership, access, creation, development, stewardship, analysis, dissemination and infrastructure.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities retain the right to decide which sets of data require active governance and maintain the right to not participate in data processes.
- Data must be contextual and disaggregated (available and accessible at individual, community and First Nations levels).
- Data structures must be designed to be accountable to Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander people and communities.
- Data must respect individual and collective interests.

**Respect principle**
Respect the custodianship of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures, their ongoing and unbroken connection to their land and water and the right to protect, maintain, control and benefit from their Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander Cultural Intellectual Property (ICIP).

**How to put this into practice:**
- Accept the community's practices and protocols.
- Honour the rights of communities to control the use and distribution of their ICIP.
Formalise accountability processes on ethical practice

**Interpretation of culture principle**
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the right to determine and approve the interpretation of their culture as the primary guardians and interpreters of their cultural heritage.

**How to put this into practice:**
- Spend time developing an understanding of the community before engaging.
- Build trust and relationship to ensure participants feel safe.
- Be honest and transparent about all aspects of the evaluation, including management and access to data post evaluation.

**Integrity and authenticity of culture and knowledge principle**
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the right to maintain the integrity of their ICIP.

**How to put this into practice:**
- Reach agreement with communities on how data will be stored, managed and disposed of. Ensure that communities have ongoing access to the data during and post evaluation.

**Secrecy and confidentiality principle**
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the right to keep secret their sacred and ritual knowledge in accordance with their customary laws.

**How to put this into practice:**
- Privacy and confidentiality concerning aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' personal and cultural affairs must be respected.
- Ask questions about the management of cultural stories. There may be times where information has been shared with you, but not the relating protocol. Always check with community members before sharing material with commissioners or publicly.