

10 Questions Indigenous Communities Should Ask Evaluators

Indigenous knowledge has often been marginalised by colonisation or by development. Both involve newcomers entering Indigenous territories with their own worldview and often racist attitudes towards Indigenous peoples.¹ This is contrary to Indigenous rights to self-determination, including “the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions.”²

Evaluators wanting to work with Indigenous peoples must explicitly recognise and promote the “sovereignty and humanity of Indigenous peoples”³ including, for example, tribal governance and treaties, evaluation policies (including data sovereignty), and requests to have local evaluators who are known to them. In addition, evaluators should fully engage Indigenous peoples from the beginning through to the ‘end’ of an evaluation, including the dissemination and use of evaluation findings by Indigenous peoples.

Knowing that the Indigenous world is relationships should be at the heart of evaluators’ ethical responsibilities when they work with Indigenous peoples. The connections Indigenous peoples make with one another are at multiple levels; for example, who our ancestors are, who our people are, where our home place is. To engage in authentic relationships with Indigenous peoples, evaluators also need to know who and where they are connected to so they can share about themselves with Indigenous peoples.

Evaluators must also be clear and honest about the sort of relationship Indigenous peoples can expect to have with them. While this can be done verbally, communities can also ask for a more formal memorandum of understanding that lays out expectations, understandings and ethical principles for how the evaluators operate.⁴ It may take “many circles of dialogue and negotiation, cooperation and solidarity” to reach an agreement.⁵ If this process is rushed, tokenistic, or overlooked, the evaluation may actually cause harm.⁶

Evaluators need to get to know “the reality of the lived indigenous experience”⁷ so that they are able to authentically represent this reality. This includes gaining insight into the strengths and aspirations of Indigenous peoples as well as interrogating the structural barriers to Indigenous peoples reaching their full potential.⁸ This should include asking whether the decision to implement the initiative being evaluated was something that the Indigenous people were involved in or consulted about.

Just as evaluators are asking Indigenous peoples to share their knowledge, evaluators should also be prepared to be both learners and teachers – sharing knowledge about evaluation with communities and enabling people to be part of the evaluation so they learn by doing. In this way, evaluation funds can be spent locally to support evaluators, advisors and workers who, in turn, can help ensure the validity of the evaluation findings.⁹

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When evaluators show up at your door, wanting to evaluate an initiative that's been funded in your community, you might want to ask them some of following questions to see if they're able to work well in your community and to genuinely find out about what people in your community think about the initiative.

1. Who do you know in this community?

Do the evaluators have any relationships with people in your community? Have they come with someone who can guide them in behaving respectfully? Is there someone in their team from your community?

2. What do you know about this community?

Have the evaluators done 'homework' to get to know your community's cultural, historical, political context? Do they understand your worldview and how you live? Do they know what it means to be Indigenous?

3. Where are you from?

Are the evaluators willing to introduce themselves and share about themselves? Do they have an understanding of how their own background might differ from and be similar to the communities?

4. Do you speak our language?

How will the evaluators communicate and understand you? Do they know your language or are they reliant on interpreters? What language will the evaluation be conducted in and the evaluation report be written in?

5. What do you know about the history of the initiative?

Do the evaluators know how the initiative came to be in your community and whether or not the community needed or wanted it? Do they know about the decision-making behind the initiative? If not, are they curious?

6. What relationship will you have with us during this evaluation?

Are the evaluators interested in working alongside community advisors? Will they be spending time in the community, both formally (for the evaluation) and informally (getting to know the community)?

7. Will people in our community get work in the evaluation?

Will funding for the evaluation be spent locally, employing community members to help collect evaluation information? How will the community members be compensated for the time spent on this evaluation?

8. Will we have a say in the design of the evaluation?

Has the evaluation design already been decided, or will the community be able to have input into the evaluation design, the methods used, the people who are talked to, and the way information is collected?

9. Who will be analysing the evaluation findings and writing the report?

Will the evaluators collaborate with the community to analyse and report on the evaluation findings? Will community members be involved in dissemination activities (e.g., conferences, funder meetings)?

10. How will you support our use of the evaluation findings?

Will the evaluation findings be available to the community? Will the community be supported to use the findings to improve the initiative and/or to advocate for change (including more funding)?