

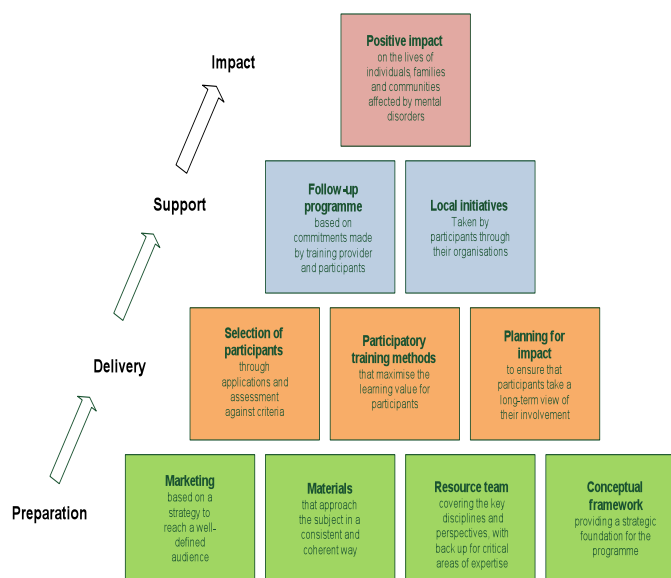


New ways to impact; reflecting on community projects

Steve Fisher

In striving to achieve the planned outcomes from a project, it can be easy to overlook what an organisation and a community has learned about the actual process of doing the work. In other words, a focus on results alone can lead us to under-value the methods and approach that have been used. I have known a few projects where it has taken community members, the participants in the project, to point this out and ask for time to review and reflect on process.

Recent experiences of Community Works have reinforced this point. In preparing the BasicNeeds publication 'Training for impact', for example, we enjoyed the luxury of actually needing to review thoroughly a training programme in community mental health in order to write about it. As a result, we started to see the work as building blocks towards a particular goal. Over a three-year period of conducting training courses in Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Bangladesh, we understood how each program had followed similar steps or phases of development. The simple diagram below describes those building blocks.



The important lesson from this work is that the overall goal of establishing new mental health initiatives was central to the programs in their early stages, even though we didn't explicitly plan it that way. In other words, we were focussed on impact when marketing the courses, selecting participants and choosing locations for each course, activities that were not necessarily directly associated with the eventual impact of the work.

Another example of effective reflection on the services of an NGO has been the development of a model of mediation practice by the Family Relationship Centre in Alice Springs in the Northern Territory. Community Works has assisted the process through action research that aims to understand exactly how the Aboriginal mediation team operates and what this looks like when formalised into a model of practice for working with Aboriginal families in Central Australia.

This work has identified areas of new learning about skills, methods and techniques. These are insights that would not have been apparent if time was not set aside for structured reflection. As a result, the organisation is finding new ways to be effective in its work with clients. It has also started to consult with practitioners from other organisations, ask for feedback and to share the results of the action research. The resulting way in which standard processes are being adapted to meet the needs and expectations of Aboriginal clients will ultimately enable the service to achieve a greater positive impact. This will also inform others working in the sector.

In conclusion, I continue to observe examples where structured reflection on practice is valuable. Several techniques are available to achieve this aim. The benefits to community-orientated projects and services can be realised very quickly.