

Principles for engagement in projects concerning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples



AIATSIS

AIATSIS is Australia's premier national institution dedicated to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, languages and histories. Our work frequently involves close partnerships and engagements with Indigenous communities. AIATSIS' projects and expertise cover a range of areas crucial to successful policy engagement with Indigenous peoples.

Principle 1:

Start from a position of ethical engagement

Many policy engagements involve working closely with people and communities, gathering data about them and making decisions that have important impacts on them. These engagements must begin from a position of ethics, and ensure that the rights of Indigenous peoples are respected. Begin by reading the [AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research \(2020\)](#) and the [UNDRIP \(2007\)](#). Ensure that you are familiar with these frameworks.

Questions to consider:

How does my project support and uphold the inherent rights of Indigenous peoples, including their right to self-determination?

How does my project ensure the free, prior and informed consent of those affected?

Is my project following the AIATSIS Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research?
Do I need ethics approval?

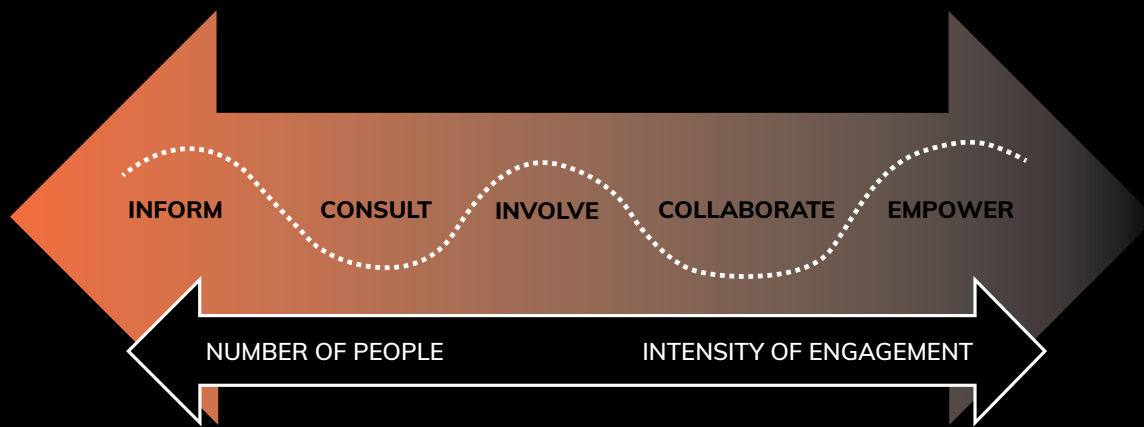
Principle 2:

Make sure your projects are culturally informed

Over many years, Australian governments have done untold harm to Indigenous people and communities through policies and programs that have ignored Indigenous aspirations, perspectives, and ultimately self-determination. All people are culturally embedded and there is no such thing as a culturally neutral or 'objective' government program. Many important concepts in policy work, such as 'health', are understood differently in different cultural contexts and this needs to be reflected in your work.

What are some steps to make your project more culturally informed?

- Consult! Talk to people and communities that will be affected by your policy. Give them plenty of time and actual opportunity to shape the policy being informed (Principle 3)
- Form partnerships – Indigenous corporations can be indispensable for providing feedback on your work, facilitating engagement and implementing policy. Bring them on board with formal partnerships and ensure that they benefit from their engagement with you
- Consider an advisory group – perhaps your policy is on a national level, or requires regular feedback. Consider forming an advisory group of key stakeholders who can speak to different perspectives



Engagement spectrum adapted from IAP2: International Association for Public Participation (AIATSI 2016)

Principle 3:

Make sure your engagement is meaningful

Engagement takes many different forms, and it is important that the level of your engagement appropriately matches what you are doing. Generally, it is best to ensure the highest degree of engagement.

This is not as easy as it sounds. Engagement is a time-intensive process and people do not always have capacity or interest to engage with you at the times that are convenient for you. This is not an excuse to skip engagement.

What can I do to facilitate engagement?

- Invest in relationship building – relationality is fundamental to many Indigenous cultures; you cannot expect productive engagement if you do not have strong, working relationships with members of the community. Show up to community events, be a consistent presence (do not fly-in-fly-out), and think of how you can support the community in ways outside the project
- Invest in capacity building – sometimes communities cannot engage because they do not have the money or time; consider hiring community members as researchers or project officers – their help for your project is indispensable to you and deserves to be remunerated!

- Give it time – leave space for people to get to know you and to build trust; leave time for unexpected occurrences (e.g. sorry business); be sensitive to the different timelines of the communities you are working with; do not rush ahead with your project if establishing agreements and getting things right is taking longer than you had anticipated
- Do your homework – what is the history of this area? Have previous interactions with government been positive or negative? Who do you know already that has links to this community?

Who do I talk to?

A useful starting point is often an Aboriginal corporation in the sector or geographical area where your policy will take place. This may be a local land council, or a peak Aboriginal body for a particular aspect of public policy.

But engagement does not end there! As with all bodies, Aboriginal corporations cannot be assumed to speak for all people, and it is important to seek feedback from other stakeholders and ensure that they have had meaningful opportunity to contribute.

Principle 4:

Conduct your projects with cultural competence

Not only must your project be designed to be culturally informed, but you must ensure that the staff delivering policies are culturally competent, too.

Have you completed CORE Cultural Learning – AIATSIS' online cultural competency course?

Cultural competence begins from a place of respect and is an ongoing journey built through self-reflection, knowledge and engagement with others. It creates an environment where others feel that they are able to engage with you and not like they are at risk.

- Do the people in your project team have experience in cross-cultural government policies? Have they worked with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people before?
- Do you have any Indigenous staff on this project?
- Are there people on your team with existing relationships in the community? Have you considered hiring community researchers?
- Do certain cultural protocols need to be embedded in formal agreements? For example, how does your project take into account any Indigenous cultural and intellectual property that is generated?

Principle 5:

Plan for and evaluate impact

Impact evaluation is fundamental to the success of policy design and implementation.

This is increasingly being recognised by government agencies in the Indigenous context. When planning for and measuring impact, it is important to recognise that this constitutes a form of research and must be similarly culturally informed.

Quantitative methodologies and surveys are not always appropriate. People may not understand what you are asking, or they might be very

Have you read the Productivity Commission's [Indigenous Evaluation Strategy?](#)

reluctant to engage with you if you do not have relationships. There is increasing recognition of a variety of Indigenous frameworks of research.

- Yarning and narrative methodologies
- Dadirri – deep listening
- Ganma – two-way knowledge sharing

How can you embed these into your evaluation process?

By recognising these approaches as meaningful and rigorous forms of knowledge production, you can conduct more effective and meaningful evaluations of your projects. It is important to remember that what you are ultimately doing by employing these methodologies is making sure there is real and meaningful space for those impacted by your project to communicate their experiences.

Principle 6:

An ongoing journey

So your project is finished? Not quite. Consider how the communities and people you worked with are and can still be involved with your organisation:

- Are you publishing any material? Have you followed up with those whose intellectual property you are using? Are you following the agreements you signed?
- How can you remain involved? For example, are you able to provide in-kind assistance for community events?
- Are you going to return to examine longer-term impacts of your projects?
- How can your future work stand to benefit by building on existing relationships? Can this extend the reach of future projects?