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A Framework for Participatory Action Research in the Reconnect and HOME Advice Programs

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This paper briefly considers various forms of action inquiry and in particular participatory action research. A framework is outlined to assist in the continued application of participatory action research in two programs funded by the Australian Department of Family and Community Services, these being Reconnect and Home Advice. Both these programs fund non-profit human services to undertake early intervention in respect of homelessness.

Following on from the Youth Homelessness Pilot Programme, Reconnect has been in operation since 1999 as a national early intervention program aimed at reducing youth homelessness. It seeks to reconnect young people (aged 12 to 18 years) who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, with their families, education, employment and community.

The Household Organisational Management Expenses (HOME) Advice Program commenced in 2004 following on from the Family Homelessness Prevention and Early Intervention Pilots which commenced in the budget year 2001-2002. The objective of HOME Advice is to identify effective methods of recognising families at risk of homelessness and provide early assistance to prevent family homelessness.

Participatory action research has particular relevance to programs such as these. Participatory action research is best understood as one of a number of action inquiry methods that can be used in human service delivery systems. It is particularly useful as a framework and set of tools for developing context responsive and outcomes oriented practice strategies. Participatory action research builds on "the naturally-occurring human qualities to observe, question, reflect, understand, create, plan, trial or act" (Wadsworth 2002).

The relevance of 'action inquiry' processes to early intervention

The Reconnect Action Research Kit (Crane and Richardson 2000, p.1.6) lists a number of reasons why action research is particularly relevant to early intervention in the Reconnect context:

- The range of factors that underpin youth homelessness are varied, complex and often inter-related;
- To be successful, early intervention relies on young people, their families and other people involved finding support through a range of possible pathways and first-to-know agents;
- A range of agencies and community resources can contribute to effective early intervention services, but the specific types of strategies developed will differ between communities;
- Developing early intervention capacity over time requires pro-active efforts to find the best ways to structure and improve practice in particular communities; and
- The relevance of early intervention strategies depends on the active involvement of people with insights into their outcomes and on the communities' capacity to provide the range of support needed. This can only be achieved if local agencies and stakeholders, including young people and their families, work cooperatively together.

The varied factors and conditions that may contribute to a particular experience of homelessness means that to be effective early intervention cannot be formulaic or methodologically driven. Whilst practice in human services is generally highly contextualised, this is particularly true of early intervention practice. 'Action inquiry' processes are essential if early intervention services are to be responsive and effective. This is not an argument against the relevance of more traditional 'scientific' approaches to research but rather a recognition that these do not, and cannot, do what action inquiry processes do- namely combine the processes of understanding and change.

There are a wide range of approaches to learning through action (or action inquiry) that have been detailed over time. The next section of this paper briefly overviews a number of these, then considers the way traditional research can complement these.

Various approaches to learning through action

Action inquiry is a whole family of different methods which are all similar in that they share the same basic cycle of activities. When people first see this cycle, it seems very familiar to them, because they feel it is what they do when they are acting thoughtfully (rather than automatically). However, while thoughtful action may contain elements of planning, acting and reviewing, these are not consciously employed as a cycle (Murdoch University accessed on-line 5 August 2004).

There are a variety of approaches to learning through action (Tripp 1995) which might legitimately be part of, and contribute to better outcomes for those early intervention services that are intended to assist and to the improvement of practice which achieves this. What all these have in common is recognition that the inquiry process contains a mix of conscious planning, acting, observing and reflection (or meaning making).

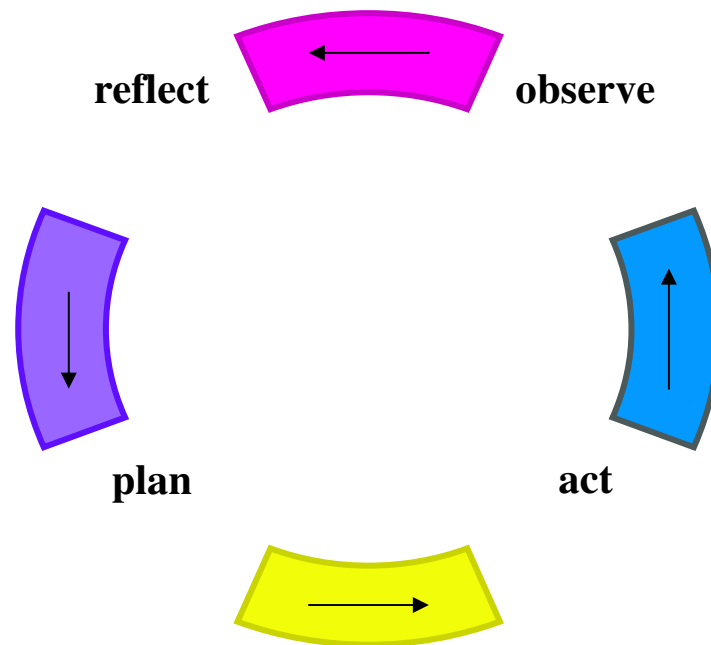


Figure 1 The Action Inquiry Cycle

A robust action inquiry process may involve undertaking numerous cycles where the reflections from one cycle informs revised plans and actions, the development of more than one line of ongoing inquiry, the changing of direction, and/or the development over time of 'bigger' questions.

There is a wide range of action inquiry approaches, some very similar with each other. Three distinct approaches will be discussed below:

- Reflective practice
- Participatory action research
- Top-down (organisationally driven) inquiry processes.

Tradition research is also a process of inquiry though in its pure form it does not involve being trialled in action. These various types of inquiry are not mutually exclusive. All can play a useful role in building a culture of responsiveness to service users, a concern with outcomes rather than methodologically driven practice, and an increasingly informed understanding of the links between practice and outcomes. Whilst it is important not to become caught up in the debates about terminology and 'jargon' it is also important to have some common language and shared understandings.

Reflective practice

The importance of human service practitioners taking a reflective approach to practice has been emphasised for many years. Various terms have been used and distinctions made about this very broad notion. Some of these are:

Distinguishing between 'concrete reflection' and 'critical reflection' (Fook 1996):

- *Concrete reflection* refers to reflection about how the work might be done differently. It is generally very 'practical'.
- *Critical reflection* involves the worker challenging the attitudes, values and assumptions that underpin the workers practice. Our cultural vantage point can for example significantly influence how we see a practice situation and what we consider as practice possibilities. Because we are not consciously aware of much of our knowledge we can easily not appreciate how it affects our practice.

Distinguishing between reflecting *in* action and reflection *on* action (Westberg 2001 citing Schon 1983 & 1987):

- *Reflecting in action* involves questioning, observing, and assessing practice as it happens, making continuous adjustments in what is done and how it is done.
- *Reflection on action* involves being reflective after a practice event, considering any surprises that occurred or unanswered questions.

Core skills and processes of reflective practice include:

- The use of cycles consisting of planning, action, observation and reflection
- A questioning approach to practice which involves being able to suspend judgement and observe/ listen deeply
- Engagement and networking with key people, and organisations, in the practice environment
- Good interpersonal and group skills, and
- Cultural self-awareness and cross-cultural competencies

... to mention a few.

Action research

Action research builds on this foundation of reflective practice. In the Reconnect and Home Advice programs action research is a commitment to **improving our understandings and using these understandings to seek change**. Both programs include action research as a formally

endorsed component of the program logic. For example the HOME program guidelines state:

Participatory action research aims to improve practice and service delivery through a reflective process where action and reflection inform each other. Participatory action research has two core goals:

- 1. a better understanding of what influences practice; and*
- 2. the application of this understanding in a continuous process of change.*

Importantly in action research improving practice is a vehicle for the larger goal of **improving the outcomes** for people using services (Crane and Richardson 2000).

Action research goes beyond reflective practice in a number of important ways. Action research:

- identifies **action oriented questions** to pursue over time, such as What would it take to.....(Quixley, 1998),
- explored through **cycles** of observation, reflection, planning and action which are **consciously interlinked**,
- in a **systematic** way,
- involving a **range of people** with interests in the question,
- in an **ethical process**,
- where the conclusions drawn and changes made to practice are **well-founded**.

Developing skills and processes in each of these facets of action research is necessary for those facilitating or playing a role in action research processes.

Participatory action research is a particular form of action research. It gives a special place and role to those who are affected by the situations being examined and the improvement of practice.

... a process of continual service improvement in which stakeholders are treated as experts (Quixley 1998, p.xii).

It researches *with people* rather than *on people*. In human services contexts the targets of the intervention, young people and their families, are seen as important participants in the action research process. In some more tightly professionalised service delivery contexts such as education provision it is front line professionals who are generally conceived of as the 'participants' in action research, with service users (eg students) left out of key aspects of the process.

Participatory action research builds on our capacity for linking reflection and action by being (Wadsworth 1998):

- more conscious of 'problematising' an existing action or practice and why we are problematising it;
- more explicit about naming the problem, and more self-conscious about raising an unanswered question;
- more planned and deliberate about commencing a process of inquiry and involving others who could or should be involved in that inquiry;
- more systematic and rigorous in our efforts to get answers;
- more carefully documenting and recording action and what people think about it, in ways others will find accessible;
- more intensive and comprehensive, waiting longer before we 'jump' to a conclusion;
- more self-sceptical in checking our hunches;
- more prepared to seek deeper understandings and 'theories' to inform practice;
- more committed to changing our actions, and then further researching these.

Technical action research (Carr and Kemmis 1986), whilst having the characteristics of a cyclic process and being sufficiently robust to claim the tag of 'research' involves practitioners working on management or externally formulated questions and often relies on specialist facilitators/ researchers. Those affected by the practices being researched (clients/ front-line workers/ partner organisations) do not have an influential role in framing and interpreting the action research. This approach sees action research as an alternative tool for top-down inquiry rather than as a way of providing opportunities for those affected by practice to be centrally involved.

What is the difference between reflective practice and participatory action research?

- *The 'r' (research) word.* Reflective practice provides a foundation for action research. However to be considered 'research' there are a number of additional characteristics required of a process.

Rigour refers to the qualities of action research that establish its validity and credibility- that is, qualities that ensure the outcomes and findings are seen to be and are well-founded (The Reconnect Action Research Kit p.3.21)

- *Specifically these qualities are:*
 - Having an evidence base
 - Transparency in the process of reviewing understandings and interpretations
 - Participation
 - Using multiple, flexible sources and methods
 - Seeking disagreement

- Some form of 'publishing' that gains feedback. The breadth of scrutiny sought should reflect the level of generalisation made or inferred, and the scope of the question asked.
- Adequate recording of the process
- Use of multiple cycles to check insights about how to improve practice
- Developing detailed answers to questions but not overgeneralising (the questions, the process used and the insights need to 'fit' with each other).

In the ... *pearls of wisdom* discussion of action research lessons from indigenous workers and workers with indigenous people working together, the following story is told:

What would it take to get those three young fellas together and go out and catch a fish this afternoon? This question was relevant, real and timely (p.5).

A question such as this is very specific to a local context. The inquiry process and answers to this question are going to relate to that particular time and place. There is no assumption that the insights gained apply to other places or contexts. This is not to say that over time this and other experiences may not point to deeper and more broadly applicable insights. But the question does not presume this- and to confirm the answers to this question one would look to what worked in that particular time and place with the people (stakeholders involved). The answers to the question can still be what is termed 'robust', in other words well founded and believable.

It is common over time for the process of inquiring into small questions to lead to larger 'more powerful' questions, the 'answers' to which suggest more generalisable conclusions. As this happens so the level and range of supporting information needs to become more comprehensive and the understandings developed more widely and critically reviewed.

- *The 'p' (participatory) word.* Reflective practice has its roots in professional practice. As part of gaining and maintaining a level of autonomy professionals have seen it as important that they take a substantial responsibility for assessing and re-assessing their practice environments and strive to improve their practice. The rise of group and team practice has seen the notion of reflective practice extended beyond this individualist application, and is manifested in a strong commitment to collegial sharing/

networking/ across agency processes for case management, and community development practice. Participatory action research extends this sphere of participation in the process of understanding and changing practice to others affected by practice, most significantly those the service or strategy is aimed at assisting. This is not to suggest that reflective practice is always bound within professional norms but that it positions the worker at the centre of the action inquiry process. In participatory action research this is not necessarily so.

Participation in action research involves:

- Collaboratively observing and understanding the practice context;
- Considering who potentially holds insights or relevant information, or may be affected by your practice, making sure to include the widest diversity of actual and potential service users;
- Engage people and organisations in collaborative, respectful and culturally sensitive/ relevant inquiry processes;
- Consciously considering how each part of the action research cycle might maximise the involvement of the people and stakeholders most central to a particular question;
- Building participation over time so that a culture of meaningful participation develops;
- Seeing action research as something conducted by groups of interested and affected people, not just by the service or the workers. In this sense the service is the 'hub' for participatory action research;
- Utilising participation as a way of bringing rigor and credibility to the conclusions drawn and changes made.

Top-down (organisationally driven) action inquiry processes

As mentioned previously technical action research involves practitioners working on management or externally formulated questions and often relies on specialist facilitators or researchers. From this perspective it can be seen as one of a number of action inquiry processes that are organisationally driven. 'Quality assurance', 'continuous improvement', and some other strategic change processes involving review and evaluation share this orientation. Whilst such processes often position service users as extremely important the authority for which questions are asked, and what processes are used, is vested in management.

The place of traditional research

'Objective' research (Stringer 2005) starts with a hypothesis or model of how/why something occurs and through a process of fieldwork and analysis reaches conclusions about that hypothesis. It has been suggested

this is a linear process rather than one which involves checking the findings out in practice and refining them in light of what happens.

It also involves assumptions about knowledge that have termed 'positivist'. That is that there is a known world that operates according to rules and laws that can be discovered through objective scientific inquiry. Whilst this may apply to many physical phenomena the social world is heavily affected by complex and multiple relationships that exist in particular contexts and which people have different subjective understandings about.

Naturalistic research examines people's subjective experiences and perspectives and tends to use interpretive and qualitative methods to gain and analyse their views. The understandings gained tend to be context specific (not generalised). Such understanding generally do not feed into further cycles of planning and action. Participatory action research is usually more naturalistic than 'objective' or scientific. It differs in that it involves a range of people from a practice context, including those most affected by the target issues, in the process of action inquiry. This goes beyond a single cycle of action, observation and reflection to multiple refinements to practice as understandings about the practice contexts and the impacts of particular strategies are enhanced.

Traditional research can be extremely useful to the development of improved practice. Relevant studies in journals or reports may prompt questions about your practice context that you and others want to inquire into. They may provide an additional form of support for your findings or be a source of disagreement about your interpretations. That is they can assist your question posing and interpretations. However traditional research cannot do what participatory action research does, and so should be seen as informing and contributing to the action inquiry process rather than replacing it.

Multiple levels of inquiry

Inquiry can occur at a number of levels. A particular action research process may clarify barriers to improved outcomes and/or practices at structural and institutional levels beyond the control of those directly involved. In this sense action research can at times lead to better understandings but not directly to better practices. This is inevitable if the reflection that occurs is critical and not simply practical.

Second inquiry may be incorporated at different levels of human services systems. Participatory action research can be instigated by a single worker who seeks to involve those affected in a process of improving outcomes and practice. Or action research may be instigated by an organisation or, as in the case of Reconnect and HOME Advice, by a particular human services program or department.

When an organisation, program or department goes down this path it is challenged to find ways to engage consistently with those undertaking

action research at the frontline of practice, how to support the adoption and maintenance of action research across the organisation or range of services, and how to incorporate insights generated into the host body. This is usually a substantial activity, as many in host bodies will tend to approach action research as simply a strategic tool, rather than as incorporating a broad approach to understanding and improving situations and the practices that facilitate this.

The term 'action researching system' has been used to describe a multi-tiered approach to action research where cycles of planning-action-observation-reflection are undertaken at various levels of a system of service delivery which are linked to, and responsive to, each other (Bonser & Grundy 1988). In Reconnect for example, there are cycles which happen at the service level and the program level. These are connected by various reports, communications, and mechanisms. For example in Reconnect the action research reports from services represent one form of communication of insights to the program level, and the synthesised analysis of these represents communication from the program level to the service level. In order to create a viable action researching system it is important that:

- Key mechanisms for communication between the levels of the system are developed, maintained and themselves engage in action research for improvement. This requires legitimisation of action research values and processes by the host organisations as well as adequate resourcing.
- Action research needs to be both integrated into everyday practices and also have sufficient organisational space to survive in the face of resource and time competition from direct practice demands and administrative load. This is an ongoing balancing act.

Depicting various approaches to inquiry

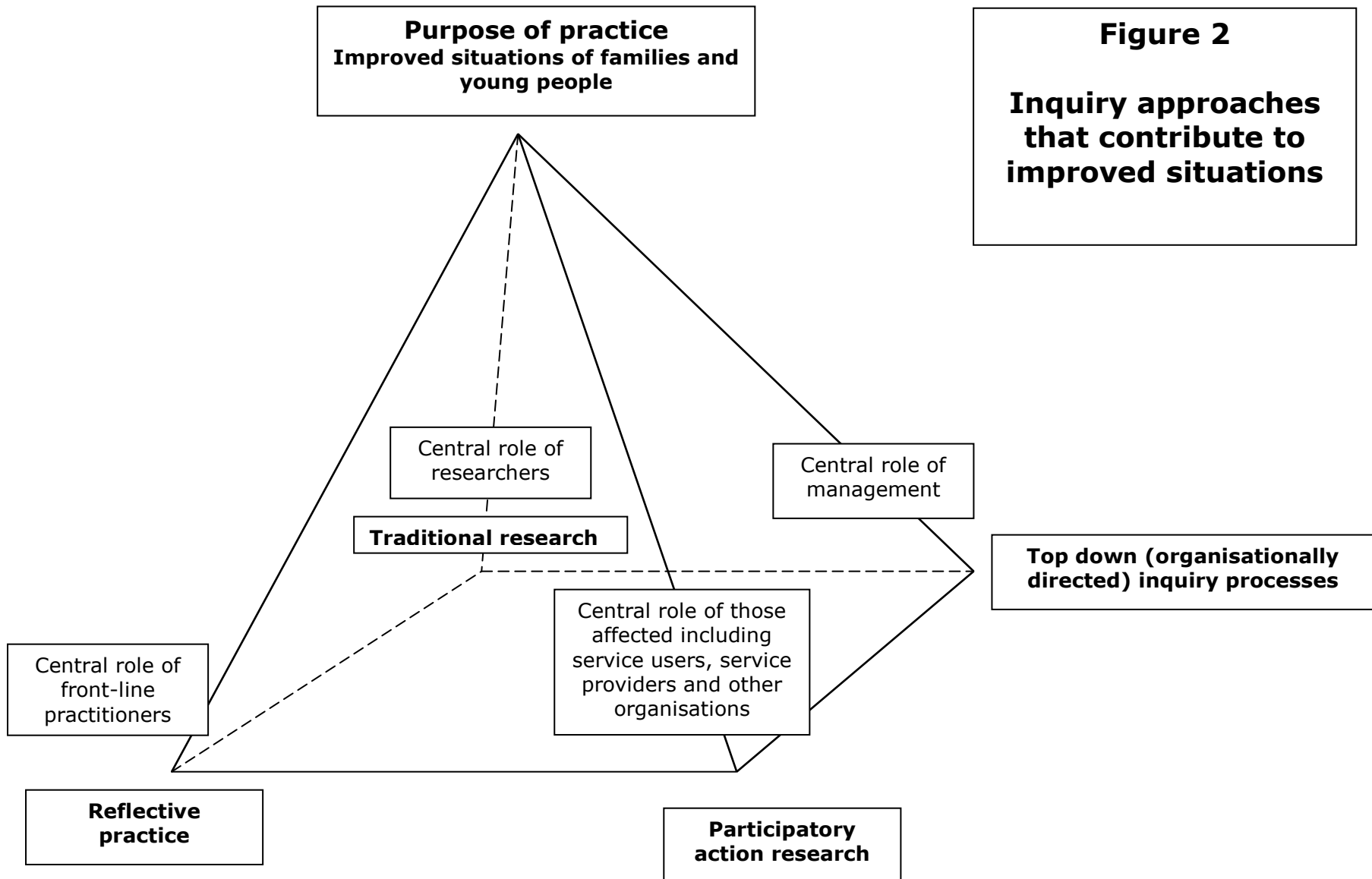
As indicated previously a range of inquiry approaches can contribute to better outcomes in people's situations through the improvement of practice. Some approaches can be seen as doing this through cycles of action and reflection whilst others can be understood as being more limited to traditional knowledge development (traditional research). These approaches differ in terms of who is central to the process of question posing, and to the interpretation of meaning, and the extent to which the directions and understandings are placed under critical review.

The figure below provides a simple map of four broad approaches to inquiry. At the apex is the core logic for a social program, namely the improvement of people's situations. Various methods of action inquiry as well as understandings from traditional research are seen to assist in realising this. In the early intervention contexts of Reconnect and Home Advice, where the development of contextually responsive and relevant approaches to practice are a key factor in achieving the program goals, inquiry is seen to go beyond the need for program/organisation driven planning and review processes, and reflective practice (both well accepted

within human services), to the incorporation of participatory action research as a key element.

All of these ways of generating insights have a place in contemporary human services. Ongoing service development is seen as essential to most human services and particularly so to those where there is both a vast complexity in the possible factors contributing to people's difficulties, as well as a range of commonalities or recurrent themes across these. Participatory action research provides a tool for the incorporation of action inquiry into this type of program context.

Figure 2 below depicts various forms of inquiry as contributing to the overall goal of improving the situations of those people early intervention aims to assist.



Conclusion

This paper argues that early intervention programs such as Reconnect and Home Advice need to have action research processes as a key component of their program logic and service development infrastructure. While a range of action inquiry approaches and traditional research can make important and complementary contributions to improving the situations of those who the programs are intended to assist, participatory action research has a particularly central role to play. It provides a mechanism for developing responsive, outcomes oriented strategies across the various levels of the program, and across a very wide range of service delivery contexts.

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