

Participatory Modelling of Pathways to Aboriginal Wellbeing

LaFlamme, M.¹

¹ *CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems and Desert Knowledge CRC*
Email: michael.laflamme@csiro.au

Abstract: Australia is home to ~1,216 discrete Aboriginal settlements with a total population of ~108,085 (ABS 2002). Many of these groups have traditional aspirations for wellbeing they seek to achieve through cultural processes such as sharing knowledge and maintaining relationship with country. There is a body of evidence that these cultural processes also contribute to achieving national goals of improvements in healthy development, livelihood skills and lifespan. However, it is a challenge for many Aboriginal groups to achieve their goals when important local services are managed by external political and economic entities. This challenge is exacerbated by their limited control over the structure and processes of these service enterprises, such as school curriculum design. In many ways, Aboriginal control is a major determinant of wellbeing.

Participatory modelling is being developed as a way for one desert Aboriginal group to clarify pathways to reliably achieve their traditional aspirations for wellbeing by increasing control of their local enterprises. Their modelling requirements were for a visually-clear structure and process, built around fundamental principles, which can reliably lead to measurable changes in elements of wellbeing. These requirements determined the choice of system dynamics as the modelling approach.

The process begins with interview stories coded and diagrammed to create positive and negative causal loops. These interacting loops provide a clear illustration of how cross-cultural interactions impact important stocks of wellbeing. Each causal loop is then modelled around the few principles/equations that determine changes in that stock. Each resulting model is very small, but a few models can be linked. Sensitivity analysis, diagrams and discussion help identify the drivers in each system. A few simple equations are critical to limit and focus action. Clear understanding of these equations and drivers enable people to develop strategies that are likely to improve wellbeing.

This approach to participatory modelling is a transparent way for groups to develop a shared understanding of the handful of important principles and drivers within complicated and confusing cross-cultural systems. This shared focus gives them the flexibility to develop a variety of alternate processes to link those drivers and principles. With confidence in their ability to understand and to manage their local enterprises, groups can then take greater control from outside entities, and improve the conditions that affect their wellbeing. In these ways, modeling contributes a tool for indigenous groups to design ways to develop their livelihoods and wellbeing in contemporary contexts.

Keywords: *Participatory modelling, Aboriginal wellbeing.*

Abstract only