

The place for place

Place-based approaches have received a lot of interest of late. In fact, they've received a lot of interest for an extended period. The people who work closely with colleagues and community in place tell a compelling story of connection, voice and impact for the people they support. Yet even 'successful' examples can struggle to offer good quantitative longitudinal data on their effectiveness. And systemic examples of scaled-up place-based models are hard to come by.

So, what is going on? I'm worried that there are competing narratives about what matters most which come from differing (but both valid) world views. Meaning the risk of misinterpretation between groups is high. Here is how I explain the place for place.

To start with, some definitions – not everything happening in a place is a place-based program. As defined [here](#), a place-based approach is one that transfers a high degree of power and decision-making to a local level in support of collaborative service delivery. It lives and works in place. And is more than a local delivery arm of a broader program.

Place-based programs are the best way of doing things where they work

The circular logic in that statement is intentional. And it is not as meaningless as it sounds. Effective place-based programs need a special mix of ingredients with a healthy dose of collaboration, commitment, and time. I think the mix is so special that it needs to be found, not constructed.

It is found through experimentation and learning at the local level, by local leaders (ingredient one). Who find local collaborators (ingredient two) with a common purpose (ingredient three). And then critically, this team is able to bring together the resource base of funding, skills, time and energy to do the work – see box below.

The key barrier for good place-based work is that our systems are built in ways which make it harder to assemble and sustain this kind of collaboration. And the massive upside is lost due to inflexible systems and missing capabilities.

Things place-based programs need but can't always get (any one missing factor can be detrimental to a program's success)

1. A convening organisation (or home) to support the mechanics of collaboration)
2. A sustainable funding base to support collaborative activity
3. Charismatic leader(s) that go 'above and beyond' to get things done
4. A willing group of collaborators with the organisational freedom to collaborate
5. A skill-base that supports inclusive collaborative work and the challenges this entails
6. An ability to experiment and learn and change as new information comes in

We can't make all these things happen in a chosen place. **We can lower the barriers** that stop them from happening and make each factor easier to achieve.

Place-based programs do not deliver system-level outcomes, they deliver person-level outcomes

A confounding misconception is that effective place-based programs should deliver outcomes that 'show-up' in 'the data.'

Place-based programs deliver micro level outcomes – and people live in the micro level. They also do not aggregate up to create system level outcomes. They are small and patchy and vary in terms of the targeted purpose and outcomes.

Critically, place-based programs often deliver impacts that are meaningful for the community and the individual, in terms of “agency” and connection. Agency is under appreciated outcome that is strongly connected to a person’s wellbeing and self-worth. It means having a say and some control over the actions that affect your life. And place-based programs are best placed to offer this as an outcome due to their understanding of context and their level of relationship.

Other impacts can be traced in terms of near-term outputs for people at the evaluation level. But even place-level data can fall below the statistical level information collected by governments and agencies. And economic conditions, social mobility and other factors can dilute the impacts.

I’m not suggesting that measures of return on investment are irrelevant. They just need to be measured in different ways. This is not a simple proposition, as it is difficult to specify a control-group setting, and to cover the vast array of variables for person, place, and program.

Evidence of impact is still essential and more sophisticated ways of gaining structured qualitative data plus longitudinal individual impacts are needed. This information should sit comfortable alongside data from local feedback loops used to support learning and sharing of what is working.

A better way of framing this story is required to give central decision-makers the information they need and to set up the right level of expectations.

Universal services are the main game, but they shouldn’t constrain people working in place

It is important to state clearly that effective universal services are more important than place-based programs. Specifically, because they do impact system-level outcomes.

Yet the way they work should not constrain or inhibit place-based programs which seek to

better match supports to a local context. Unfortunately, and more often than not, they do. They can do this in three different ways:

- i. By underserving an area and leaving a gap that place-based work is forced to fill
- ii. By applying a model that doesn’t meet the context of the local area by means of access, cultural appropriateness, or nature of support
- iii. By being overly restrictive in how the funding ‘must’ be spent or how the service ‘must’ be delivered, limiting collaborative opportunities

When these conditions are in place, place-based programs must work *against* the system. Rather than playing a role to enhance the system for particular groups, needs, or ambitions.

A good system adapts universal services to places they serve. A great system empowers people to create networked programs within and alongside the universal services – founded in place.

Place-based programs can then be the amazing complement to universal services for some of the most vulnerable cohorts in or community.

Place-based principles and capabilities can scale into other work

Place-based programs are rarely suited to ‘scaling-up.’ They work because of the local conditions and the local people that drive them. But place-based thinking is scalable.

The principles used in place-based work are the same principles as those of delivering better government. They include being inclusive of the cultures and contexts of the people being supported. Giving meaning to that inclusion through voice and participation in the work. A transfer of power to enable self-determination for first nations peoples. And accounting for the complex needs of people by creating collaborative, iterative and learning environments for the work to take place.