Evaluation challenges
(Skating on thin Ice)

Australasian Evaluation Society Conference 2004
ADELAIDE

John Pilla, Keryn Hassall, Jenni Leigh and Peter Tyler
Program Evaluation Unit
October 2004

Context for the presentation

Focus: **evaluation of long term multi-dimensional programs.**

Evidence: **participatory observation.**

Motivation: **to share frustration and inspiration.**

Perspective

The role of the evaluator is to provide an independent source of information that better informs program managers/funders in making policy and program decisions.

The Evaluator's strengths?

Skillful

Flexible

Artistic

Powerful

Overview of presentation

1. **Policy and decision making context.**

2. **Role of evaluation.**

3. **Critical success factors.**

4. **Risks and challenges.**

5. **Conclusion.**

Policy and decision making context

Government response to complex issues

BearingPoint

Governments are increasingly taking a multi-dimensional and multi-faceted approach in the design of strategies to address complex social issues. Examples include:

- **drug prevention;**

- **social inclusion;**

- **aboriginal health;**

- **community capacity building;**

- **school retention; and**

- **hospital reform.**

Strengths

Policy and Program responses:

- are multi-faceted mirroring the multi-dimensional nature of the many social issues;

- are partnerships between 'affected communities' and government, non-government and private organisations;

- use a mix of 'evidence' based and innovative approaches; and

- increasingly build in the capacity to learn.

Issues

Policy and program response often:

- **are politicised;**

- **lack a systems approach;**

- **are based on anecdotal rather than informed views of the nature of the problem;**

- **respond to vested interests;**

- **have unrealistic expectations; and**

- **have stakeholders with diverse and ambiguous expectations.**

Evaluation of multi-dimensional programs

Definition

BearingPoint™

A Program is multi-dimensional by virtue of:

- comprising multiple diverse strategies/projects; or

- having multiple objectives and expected outcomes resulting in interventions with multiple and significant components .

Not to be confused with multi-site evaluations (MSE) which are an evaluation approach.

Multi-site evaluations

Multi site evaluations (MSE) are often undertaken to assess the generalisability and replicability of an intervention that is:

…the use of multiple sites, in increasing the size of samples, elevates the statistical power of analyses and hence the validity and reliability of findings….Evaluation of programs at multiple locations is also advantageous when it is important to generalize program effects across a diverse range of individuals"

(Sinacore and Turpin 1991, p5)

Multi-dimensional programs

Policies to address complex social issues result in the funding of multi-dimensional programs that are often implemented in multiple settings for one of two reasons:

1. To 'test' ideas across a diversity of settings to address a diversity of needs; or

2. To have a widespread impact across a diverse range of 'communities' .

That is, the 'multi' in MDP is a characteristic of the policy context while the 'multi' in MSE is a function of the evaluation design.

Purpose of evaluation in MDP context

To improve or prove strategies?

Is the purpose of evaluation of multi-dimensional programs to prove the efficacy of the intervention or to improve policy making?

Evaluation is for the purpose of information decision making, the context for which could vary:

- investment mix;

- demonstration of what works;

- generalisability of intervention; and

- accountability for investment.

Matching the methodology

1. It is important that the evaluation methodology is matched to the program's state of development.

2. Often questions are asked of an evaluation that are not congruent with the the state of development of the program.

3. This leads to unrealistic expectations of evaluation and tension between the evaluator and evaluation funder.

4. It can also lead to the evaluator raising false expectations in order to 'please'.

Evaluation Critical Success Factors

Experience reinforcing the literature

1. **Program clarity:** clear understanding of the program to be evaluated.

2. **Program fidelity:** meaningful, realistic and valid program logic.

3. **Pro-active management:** integrate evaluation planning into program planning.

4. **Build capacity:** for evaluation into program delivery.

BearingPoint

5. **Progressive evaluation:** ensure the evaluation has formative elements.

6. **Participatory:** provide for stakeholder participation in all aspects of the evaluation.

7. **Evaluability:** Realistic expectation of what evaluation can deliver within key program parameters (timelines, information costs, methodology).

8. **Evaluation utility:** Link evaluation methodology to evaluation questions.

Example of program clarity

"The objective of the strategy is to reduce uptake of drugs in the community".

Issue: this is a statement of broad goal that reflects the shared aspirations of government, the community and a diverse set of government and non government agencies involved in drug prevention. It is not an objective that is sufficiently explicit to use to design and implement an evaluation strategy.

Example of evaluability

BearingPoint

"The purpose of the evaluation is to assess whether the program investment was commensurate with its benefits."

Issues: further assessment identified that:

- there would be minimal baseline information to assess impacts;

- there was little evidence within the literature of the intervention effects from which to assess cost benefits;

- the measurable impacts were largely limited to process outcomes

Example of program fidelity

Multi-dimensional national drug prevention strategy (overseas OECD jurisdiction) with prescribed Key Performance 'Indicators' such as:

"Numbers entering treatment via the Criminal Justice System"

Issue: this is not an indicator and should not be used in its current form to monitor performance.

Risks and challenges

Risks associated with program diversity

Risks	Consequences	Issues	Strategies	
			Risk Reduction	Contain impact of Consequences
Complex Evaluation Design	Difficult to engage stakeholder Diverse methodological & data requirements	Reduced understanding and confidence amongst stakeholders. Conceptual & logistical challenges	Robust and clear program design (logic)	Effective strategy to engage stakeholders. Clear & concise design & data specifications
Variable project capacity	Lags in data reporting. Greater demand on evaluation team	Delay/limit evaluation. Increase evaluation costs Reduce 'power of evaluation'	(Program management strategy requirements)	Effective and flexible strategies to engage projects. Allow for more capacity to support projects.

Risks associated with program duration

			Strategies	
Risks	**Consequences**	**Issues**	**Risk Reduction**	**Contain impact of Consequences**
Evaluation lags program	Inadequate baseline data Evaluation and program not fully congruent	Reduced 'power' of evaluation. Reduced 'power of evaluation	(Program management strategy requirements)	Optimise use of secondary data Engage stakeholders to clarify expectations
Program Management	Program departs from policy. Projects loose confidence and commitment	Evaluation and program not fully congruent Expectations & requirement change Project reporting to evaluation ??	(Program management strategy requirements)	Effective client engagement strategy.

Risks associated with program duration

			Strategies	
Risks	**Consequences**	**Issues**	**Risk Reduction**	**Contain impact of Consequences**
Requirements change	Alter methodology Different data needs	Limited capacity to collect new data, baseline data and/or time delay to implement new processes.	Develop robust design and methodology	Optimise use of secondary data Provide additional support to projects (training and resources)
Staff turnover-sponsor -projects - evaluation team	Loss of corporate memory Reduced capacity to participate in evaluation Reduced capacity to undertake evaluation	Expectations change. Unwritten understandings no longer valid. Delay in data provision. Additional demands on evaluation support. Potential of contravening contract conditions.	None None Sound HR Practices	Effective documentation and sign off practices Engage and 'induct' new client personnel Engage and 'induct' new client personnel Multi-skilled individuals on team. Shared knowledge of critical elements. Effective documentation.

Conclusions

Evaluation of Important and strategic policies and programs that respond to complex social issues carry risks for:

- **those who commission evaluation;**

- **the evaluated**

- **the 'affected community' and**

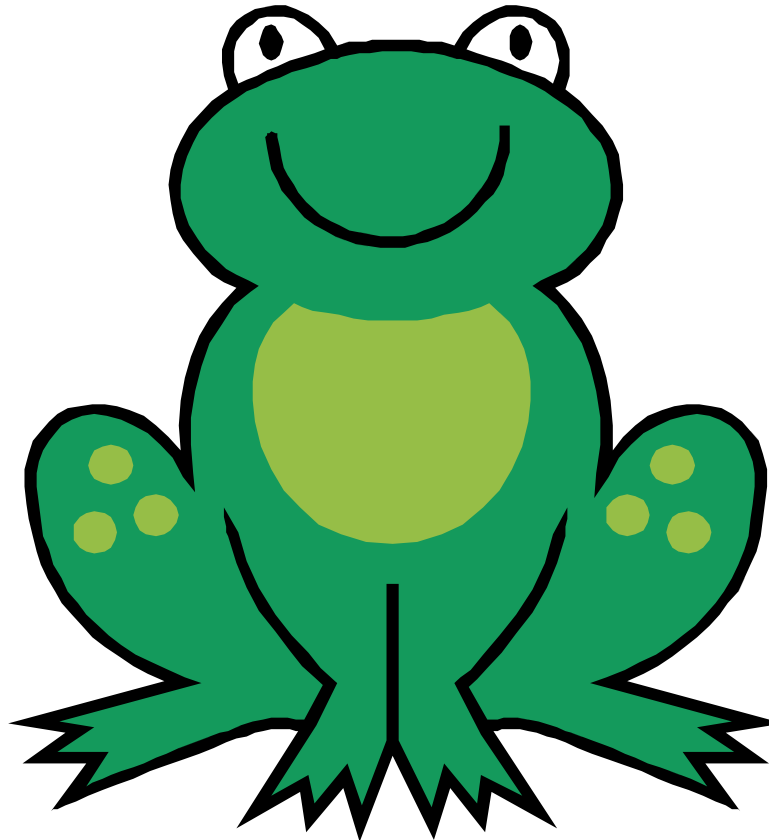- **the evaluator**

The opportunities however, outweigh the risks:

1. For the policy makers, evaluation provides the opportunity to improve decision making;

2. For the evaluated, evaluation provides the opportunity to learn;

3. For the 'affected community', evaluation can be empowering;

4. For the evaluator, the opportunity is to realise the above.

BearingPoint™

Business and Systems Aligned. Business Empowered.™