

Small NGO landscapes and the importance of context in evaluation utilisation



Small NGOs dominate the sector

- What are small NGOs in this research?
- 81% of Australian NGOs have revenue <\$1mill AUD
- 93% of English and Welsh NGOs <£500k GBP
- Australian NGOs income >\$100bn AUD per annum
- Small NGOs account for 4.2% of this income
- NGO sector equivalent 5th largest global economy
- Improving evaluation utilisation would have economic and human benefits

Why small NGOs?

- Innovations to share
- Closest to communities and grassroots
- Often great outcomes with limited resources
- Often closer accountability to beneficiaries
- Passionate and enthused
- Evaluation = 'tick-a-box' or 'not needed'?



The operating landscape

- More susceptible to changes in macro environment (policy changes, budget cuts)
- More dependent on less sustainable/secure



funding

- * Susceptible to dictatorship
- * Resourcing restrictions: staffing, training, budget, trade-offs

The evaluation landscape

- Less scope to divert staff and funds from program work to evaluation work
- Less opportunity for ECB and training
- Less able to afford external evaluation



The evaluation landscape



- Small donors may not demand evaluation
- Lack of understanding benefits of evaluation
- Overworked staff may have less capacity for reflection and ECB

The evaluation landscape

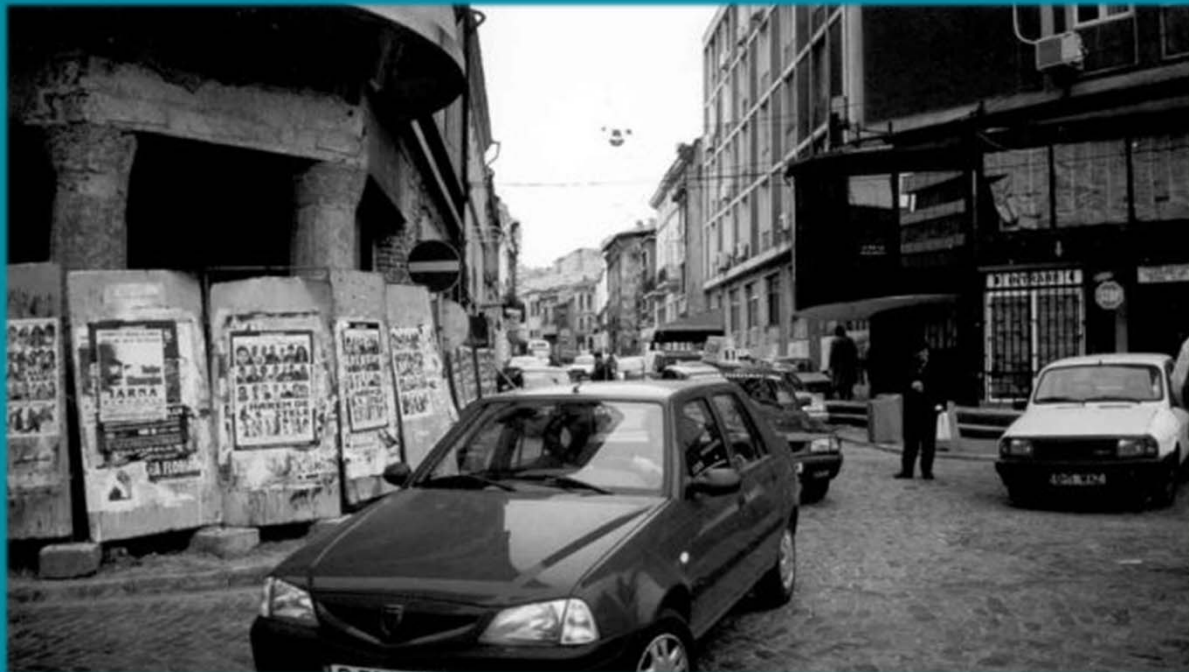
- Externally mandated evaluation can = non-use
- Potential for irrelevant methodology, lack of user buy-in, and recommendations that are not meaningful and, subsequently, not used
- This can happen in all organisations but can have a significant impact on small NGOs where resources are even tighter

Key factors influencing evaluation

- Power and politics (both internal and external)
- Extrinsic or intrinsic accountability (or informal downwards accountability?)
- Learning organisations (this can be cultivated – but do they have time and will?)
- Organisational readiness (is evaluation on radar?)
- Resources (funds, skill, time, staff)
- Evaluation worth the cost?

Key factors influencing evaluation

- Relevance to key users (purpose? If it's not going to be used, don't do it) – but deciding this is a long deliberative ECB process...



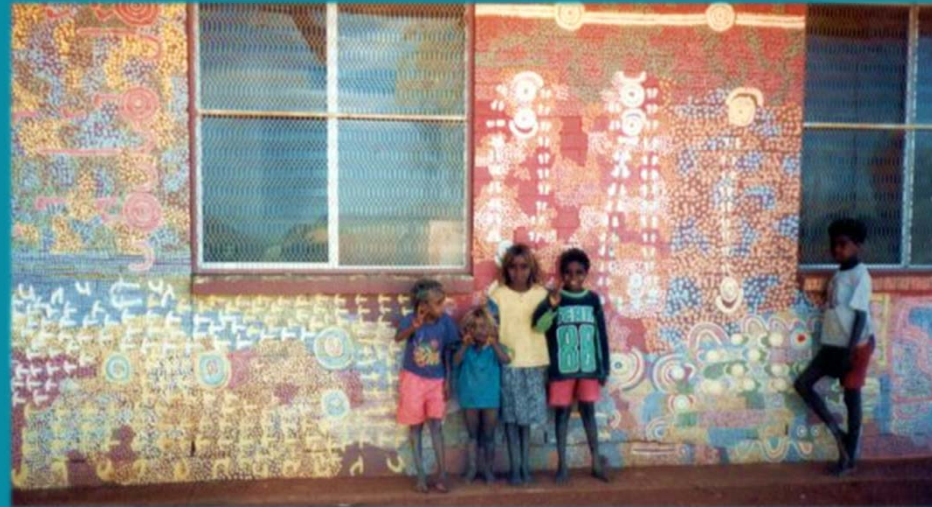
Key factors influencing evaluation

- The personal factor (user interest/power in evaluation and results)
- Evaluator personality, communication, rapport
- Context sensitivity (cultural, political...)
- Active user involvement throughout evaluation process
- Focus on end use of evaluation results
- Timeliness
- Clear recommendations

In small NGO contexts

- Awareness of external context (funding situation, affect of current policy, expectations)
- Awareness of internal context (staff dynamics, decision-making processes)
- Small NGOs are less likely to be ready for, or have prior experience with, evaluation, they may need ECB

In small NGO contexts



- Who do they feel most accountable toward (up or down?)
- Small NGOs often work more closely with a specific community (need for keen context-sensitivity)

In small NGO contexts

- Budget constraints for evaluation
- Time constraints on staff involvement and upskilling in evaluation
- A smaller pool of staff results in less potential for identification of the personal factor
- Fewer dynamics between evaluators and staff due to lower numbers (more intimate rapport but less buffer in case of personality conflicts)
- Ensure cost-effectiveness (wastage felt more keenly when funds are tight)

In small NGO contexts

- Acknowledge local and practice wisdom
- As always, clearly define the evaluation's purpose with users and ensure each step of the evaluation is done with users and their identified purpose to



maintain
relevance and
increase utility

Internal or external evaluation?



- Apparently institutional distance between evaluators and evaluatees does not affect utilisation – it has also found that internal is better and external is better.
- Internal: cheaper, understand needs, context, and scope for use.
- External: ‘objective’, skilled in evaluation, expensive.

Further research

- Little academic research specifically on small NGOs
- This presentation is based on my experience and literature review
- Conducting case studies of 1/3 of Victoria's small, community development NGOs (interviews, observation, document analysis)
- Examining how and why they evaluate - what's the point? What's more useful; mandated or informal? Can these come together?

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