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Methodological Challenges to Evaluations of Partnerships¹

James R. Sanders

The Evaluation Center
Western Michigan University

I have been asked to share my thoughts about methodological challenges associated with evaluations of partnerships, especially issues related to the creation of partnerships, the selection of partners, reaching agreements on goals, the design of governance structure, and documenting the effectiveness, actual performance, and successes and failures of partnerships. How the lessons and implications of evaluation can be used to assess partnerships is yet another topic listed for discussion. This is a lot of ground to cover in a short period and I will accordingly focus on what I consider to be critical issues.

I must confess that my perspective is limited by my experience in conducting evaluations at the community, state, and national levels in the United States. These evaluations have been funded by one source. My experience with partnerships has been at the community level in the United States where nonprofit organizations have joined together to accomplish common community goals. I will draw from these experiences as I share my thoughts about evaluations of partnerships.

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I will begin by listing methodological issues that arise out of the literature on partnerships. I will then look at the methodological implications of different approaches to evaluation. I will end this presentation with issues that emerge from standards used to judge the quality of evaluations.

Issues Based on Partnership Literature

Arthur Himmelman, a consultant on community partnerships in the United States, once began a keynote address by noting that it seemed strange when people meet to discuss partnerships to support the development of youth, that there are no youth there. This is a recurring theme in the partnership literature: **the issue of who is to be served by the partnership and do they have a voice in the design and conduct of evaluation procedures.**

Himmelman has also raised questions about what makes a quality partner. The most critical issue is: **whether people are willing to give up something that they are currently working on to do something else, and do both things with a high level of quality.** Will level of quality go down if more and more is taken on?

Another related issue is the **role conflicts** partners can find themselves in when they are **working on the inside to bring about change and also working on the outside to represent donor interests.** So, when one says slow down, we're going too fast and the other says why don't you move faster, partners can find themselves caught in the middle.

Partnerships often ask cooperating parties to contribute their own resources to the partnership rather than to expect to get resources out of it. That is, the resources will be spent on some common good, but **how long can partnerships be sustained with this outflow model?**

Himmelman refers to the **three A's of time, trust, and turf as issues when working with other people**. **Networking** requires little time, has few turf issues, and doesn't take a lot of trust. It is easy to do. **Coordination** involves networking and a willingness to alter activities for some common purpose. It takes more time and trust, but doesn't involve stepping on the other's turf. **Cooperation** gets you into other people's turf as you share resources as well as network and coordinate. It does require more trust. It does take more time. Two important forms of resources in cooperation are (1) **when people offer to come to your table and provide access to a constituency or community** and (2) **when people bring different ways of knowing, or viewing the world, to the table**. Our old methodologies just may not work when new coalitions are formed. Training and content expertise may conflict among partners. **Collaboration** builds on network, coordination, and cooperation to enhance the capacity of another for a common purpose by sharing risks, responsibilities, and rewards. This requires tremendous levels of trust.

Issues Based on Evaluation Approaches

As we know, there is no single approach to evaluating any entity. There are multiple perspectives about what is important to look at **B** criteria, expectations, standards **B** and how to look at those

things. The evaluation literature has produced some very useful heuristics that suggest ways to approach evaluations. These approaches each have their strengths and weaknesses, but together they are useful in generating issues that may guide the design of an evaluation. Here I will describe a few issues that seem to be relevant to evaluations of partnerships, based on six evaluation approaches. The six approaches are: (1) objectives based evaluation, (2) management oriented evaluation, (3) consumer oriented evaluation, (4) expertise oriented evaluation, (5) adversary oriented evaluation, and (6) participatory oriented evaluation.

The objectives based approach to evaluation places a premium on the clarification of outcome, in this case partnership outcomes. Using a logic model, one might ask about the **ultimate outcomes of the partnerships** (e.g., how will people's lives be better off in twenty years because of the partnership?), **intermediate outcomes** (if we are to be there in twenty years what benchmarks can be used to measure progress or deviations, in 15 years, 10 years, 5 years, 1 year, six months), and **immediate outcomes** (immediate task results). Thus partnership could be evaluated as a developmental process, requiring clear descriptions of **intended outcomes, outputs** (numbers served in different categories, infrastructure developments), **processes**, and **inputs** with comparisons to the **actual** accomplishments. The question of **who should be involved** in defining benchmarks and interpreting progress is an important issue.

The management approach to evaluation can be represented by the CIPP evaluation model developed by Stufflebeam (1985). **Context evaluations** of partnerships would evaluate the need and existing resources for a partnership, giving guidance to clear objectives. A methodological

issue is **what conditions are conducive for partnership development?** **Input evaluation** would help to structure the partnership. What is the best design of governance, mix of partners, management plan, and budget for each specific partnership? **A methodological issue is the identification and acceptance of criteria** for judging alternative designs, partnership members, plans, and budgets. The advocate team approach developed by Reinhard (1972) provides a framework for addressing these important design issues. **Process evaluation** would help to monitor the implementation of the design, and to sound alarms as deviations from the plan are detected. Since most partnerships will be evolutionary, process evaluation will be important for determining when changes are needed. **Appropriate benchmarks will help to monitor complex partnerships**, but the challenge will be to establish the logic model, agree upon appropriate benchmarks, and then to establish a workable database development system. In theory monitoring systems appear workable; in practice they require intelligent supervision. **Product evaluation** would document results (outputs and outcomes) as they develop and report on their cost effectiveness. An important question for the product evaluation will be **whether the results are worth the investment, and when partnerships should be terminated**. This issue will require formal agreements among the partners at the beginning of their relationships.

The consumer oriented approach to evaluation relies on checklists that may be used to assure donors, beneficiaries, and other stakeholders that the outputs and outcomes of the partnership are of high quality. Again, **criteria must be developed for each partnership for assessing effectiveness, actual performance, and successes and failures of each partnership**. This is no

easy task since the checklists will differ depending on the nature of each partnership. A checklist project may be found at the following website: www.wmich.edu/evalctr.

Expertise oriented evaluations can be used to generate qualitative site based reports on all aspects of partnership development. **Experts like Arthur Himmelman and Paul Mattessin at the Amherst Wilder Foundation in the U.S. know good partnerships when they see them and can advise, as external evaluators, on questions of design, actual performance, strengths and weaknesses, and lessons from past partnership experiences that apply to future partnerships that are being considered.** I have no doubt that many human instruments who will be useful for evaluating particular partnerships exist globally.

Adversary evaluations of partnerships can be used to examine completed partnership projects. **Hearings, advocate-adversary reports, panel discussions, and other analytical strategies can be useful in identifying lessons from completed projects and implications for future partnerships.** The partnership field is evolving as we learn and such summative analyses should be part of the overall evaluation plan.

Finally, participatory evaluation can be very useful for learning about effective, and ineffective, partnership practices by involving stakeholders in the design, sharing of information, and interpretations of findings within each partnership. If the World Bank is serious about learning from its partnership experiences, and then using what it learns to improve them in a continuous upward spiral toward excellence, the engagement to multiple perspectives in thinking about and

discuss what works and what is not working is critical. **Many minds working together to build the best partnership possible is the guiding principle in this approach to evaluation.** The issue here is one of how to identify and engage co-evaluators (Gray, 1998).

More on these six evaluation approaches can be found in Worthen, Sanders, and Fitzpatrick (1997).

Issues Based on Evaluation Standards

The Program Evaluation Standards (1994) provide a framework for analyzing the soundness of any evaluation. The framework lists four attributes of sound evaluation practice:

- B** utility
- B** feasibility
- B** propriety
- B** accuracy

There are then standards listed with each of these attributes that evaluators have found to contribute to the development of that attribute.

How do these standards relate to the World Bank criteria of efficacy, efficiency, relevance, and sustainability? The World Bank criteria are intended to be used to judge programs and projects,

including partnerships. The standards are intended to be used to judge the **evaluations** of programs and projects, including partnerships. What can we learn from the standards that would be useful for guiding evaluations of partnerships?

There are seven utility standards. They suggest that if partnership evaluations are to be useful they should attend to the following:

- Utility** 1. Clarity of evaluation purpose, role in the developmental process; meaningful involvement of stakeholders at critical points during the evaluation; Clarity of information needs at different levels of audience.
2. Use of evaluators who have integrity and are trustworthy to all audiences.
 3. Evaluations that cast a broad net, using multiple criteria, methods, and information sources. Partnerships are complex and the evaluation's need to be equally complex.
 4. Clarity and acceptance of criteria for judging each component of the partnership development and implementation process
 5. Clarity of reporting evaluation procedures and findings
 6. Timely and appropriate dissemination of evaluation information
 7. Followup analysis of evaluation impact, design, and procedures

The same guidance to evaluation can be found from the feasibility, propriety, and accuracy standards:

- Feasibility** 1. Use of workable procedures so that the evaluation is realistic given its constraints

1. Representing voices and positions of different interest groups in the design, implementation, and interpretation of evaluation findings
2. Producing a product that is worth the cost.

Propriety 1. Producing an evaluation that addresses the needs of the intended partnership beneficiaries

- 2.Documenting in writing the obligations of the various partnership members
- 3.Protecting human subjects
- 4.Respecting dignity and worth of participants
- 5.Developing a balanced report of strengths and weaknesses
- 6.Reporting all salient findings, even if potentially embarrassing
- 7.Avoiding evaluator conflict of interest; preparing open and honest reports
- 8.Responsible spending for the evaluation

Accuracy 1. Describing the **actual** partnership inputs, activities, processes, outputs, and outcomes

- 2.Describing the context of the partnership that may have affected its success
- 3.Reporting the actual evaluation purposes and procedures
- 4.Using defensible information sources when collecting data
- 5.Revealing the strengths and limitations of the quality of information, especially concerning validity and reliability
- 6.Using systematic data processing methods that protect the integrity of the data

7. Using qualitative and quantitative data analysis methods that are appropriate for the data and conditions of data that were collected, recognizing publically any limitations.
8. Providing justification for all conclusions
9. Controlling for personal/corporate/governmental biases
10. Arranging for metaevaluation of each partnership evaluation in order to strengthen current and future evaluations

Summary

There are other sources on which we might depend to help us to identify methodological issues, viz. interviews with stakeholders and evaluators experienced in partnership evaluations, past partnership evaluations, and of course the expertise found here at this conference. If I had access to these other sources I am sure my list of issues would grow. The fact is, however, that it is already pretty sizable. Going back to my original charge, I will summarize the methodological challenges that I see related to the creation of partnerships.

Partnership Component

Associated Methodological Issues

- | | |
|----------------------------|--|
| 1. Creation of partnership | 1 a. Clarity of needs, goals, purpose |
| | 2. Identification of appropriate participants in the partnership evaluation whose voices?; evaluator credibility |
| 2. Selection of partners | 2 a. Development of criteria for selecting partners who can achieve partnership goals. |
| | 2. Assessment of time, turf, and trust by |

- potential partners.
3. Reaching agreements on goals
 - 3 a. Use of needs assessments, visioning processes, strategic planning to arrive at goal consensus; Delphi methods
 2. Whose voices?
 3. Development of a logic model for the partnership
 4. Design of governance structure
 - 4 a. Use of past practices or advocate teams
 - b. Development of criteria for judging alternative options
 - c. Whose voices?
 - d. Use/role of evaluation in governance; dissemination of reports; formal agreements for partnership evaluation
 - e.
 5. Documentation of effectiveness, actual performance, and strengths and weaknesses of the partnership
 - 5 a. Process and product evaluations need to be designed and budgeted; criteria for judging the partnership are needed.
 2. External vs. internal evaluation
 3. Use of developmental benchmarks
 4. Data quality
 5. Whose voices?
 6. Scope of the evaluation that matches the complexity of the partnership
 7. Use of workable evaluation procedures given the context of the evaluation
 8. Protection of human subjects
 9. Balance of evaluation reports
 10. Analysis of contextual factors affecting the partnership
 6. Use of lessons and implications of partnership evaluation
 - 6 a. Appropriate methodology? Bexpert consultants, hearings, interpretation panels

1. Whose voices?
2. Clarity and usefulness of evaluation reports
3. Plan for follow up analyses of the evaluation that can inform other partnerships
4. Examination of cost effectiveness of partnership evaluations

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