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## **Evaluative Aspects of Partnerships**

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### **Introduction**

Two factors impel our interest in the evaluative aspects of partnerships: the promise of good evaluation, and the threat of bad evaluation

Good evaluation can help make things better. It can help us to make incremental improvements, help build knowledge for the next implementation cycle or the next project, help everyone to focus on the things that matter, and can help build the partnership.

Bad evaluation can threaten the project and the partnership by being wasteful and destructive. It can too easily lead to a deluge of paperwork, if the project has to comply with the reporting requirements of all partners, or to goal displacement, where people are encouraged to meet targets even though these will not help to achieve the overall goals.

In my own work as an evaluation academic, I have worked on various partnerships for evaluation and evaluation of partnership programs. The best of these have built knowledge about the program, the organisation and evaluation itself – knowledge that has only been possible because of the combined and enduring joint efforts. They have been based on trust, shared values, respect for the different skills and knowledge contributed by each partner, and sufficient time and other resources to spend the necessary time working together to make partnerships grow. The worst of these have ended in disappointment – due to role confusion, diffusion of responsibility, and insufficient time to develop and follow through partnership work on evaluation.

In this paper, I want to discuss three evaluative aspects of partnerships: evaluating partnerships; evaluating programs and projects that are based on a partnership; and building partnerships for evaluation. Australian and international examples will be used to illustrate significant evaluative issues.

### **Evaluating partnerships**

Given the focus of other addresses during this conference, I won't belabour the definition of partnership and partner, except to observe how loosely these terms are used when referring to projects that involve more than one entity. Some partnerships seem to refer to a life partner who will be with you through good times and bad times. Some seem more like a gold-digging partner, where you work together to improve your chances – but you wouldn't leave them alone by the claim. Others seem a temporary expediency – like a dance partner chosen to allow you to join in the dancing, but who will be replaced as soon as someone more attractive comes along. More formally, we should clarify, for any putative partnership where it actually falls along the spectrum of partnership (Maxwell and Conway, 2000) or the ladder of collaboration.

I would expect a partnership to involve at least the following three elements:

- a longer-term commitment to work together beyond a single discrete project,
- joint responsibility for achieving outcomes, and
- attention to issues of power in the partnership.

### Evaluating process and/or outcomes

Just like the evaluation of a program, the evaluation of a partnership can focus on process and/or outcomes.

Evaluation of process focuses on compliance with agreed procedures, and opportunities for improvement, including processes for or structure for dealing with disparate levels of power, (whether these processes involve a broker or an ombudsman, as advocated by Fowler (1999), or some other arrangement). It should include a process for reviewing and renegotiating the partnership as circumstances change.

It is important to evaluate the process of partnerships in ways that support the partnership. The evaluation of the implementation of Local Priority Policing in Victoria, Australia, provides an example of this (Gassner, 2001). An important part of the implementation of Local Priority Policing is to establish Local Safety Committees in each local government area, involving representatives of agencies who have authority to allocate resources to resolve identified community safety issues. District Inspectors are held accountable for developing these Committees but not for blindly meeting targets. Where existing local structures already provide a forum, District Inspectors are not required to set up a new committee, nor are they required to chair the committees in order to demonstrate their leadership of the initiative in their area.

The evaluation of a partnership needs also to recognise that the partners in a given project can have other partnerships in other arrangements, with subsequent opportunities and limitations. There can be partnerships between sectors of government, between government and non-government agencies, between government and community groups, between public sector and private sector, between agencies and professional groups (such as evaluation societies), between joint contributors to projects, between projects operating in a local region or an international region. The partnerships existing at different levels of an agency may vary considerably.

Evaluation of the outcomes of the partnership will obviously focus primarily on its impact on the partnership project. What has the project achieved that seems due to the partnership arrangement? But there is another set of impacts that goes beyond the achievements of a single project or program. What has been learned or achieved through the partnership that can assist future programs? Developing a partnership is a slow process and takes a lot of work. The returns from this work may not be evident in the first partnership program, but may become evident over time and over other projects.

### **Evaluating partnership programs**

There are three issues in the evaluation of partnership programs that I want to discuss today. The first is the challenge of recognising and respecting the different values that partners bring to the evaluation of a project. The second is the issue of accountability - what is it that agencies are held accountable for, and how can the demands for accountability interfere with evaluation for knowledge building and improvement. The third is the practical issue of data collection, analysis, interpretation and reporting given the different requirements and capabilities of partners.

#### Recognising and respecting different values

What is valued in a project might seem self-evident, given the statements of missions, goals, needs and objectives usually developed in the planning stages. But evaluations that have looked carefully at the values of the different stakeholders have often found important differences. For example, Mussell (1995) described an evaluation of a project based at a remote First Nation community. Local residents were being interviewed about the impact of the project, and there was general agreement that there had been little change. For a while this seemed strong evidence that the project had failed until the residents went on to explain that this was a good thing. Traditional ways were being maintained, rather than rapidly changed, as had previously been the case.

How can evaluation help to articulate these different values, and assist the different partners to understand the different values? Dart's (1999) account of the Most Significant Change approach offers a useful example of an interactive monitoring process that helped different partners to identify

differences in what it was that they valued, as well as searching for common ground. The MSC approach follows a highly structured process of gathering, interpreting and reporting stories about the project. The different partners are involved in firstly establishing the domains of interest, and then in reviewing, selecting and commenting on the stories that are seen to be most important. Dart's case study showed how this approach was used in a multi-partner dairy extension project, involving people from local and regional committees, to senior managers and funders. Importantly, the project involved program clients both in generating stories, and in the process for selecting and interpreting stories. Dart's work suggests that significant time and goodwill are required to complete the cycles of collaborative review and discussion, together with an existing structure and process for involving the different partners.

Recognition of different values should not necessarily be followed by an attempt to find consensus on common values to guide a single evaluation – the commonly understood version of using a stakeholder group to guide the evaluation. It is quite likely that any joint evaluation will need to be complemented by other evaluations that meet the particular needs of the partners. For example, the evaluation of Local Safety Committees, for the Local Priority Policing initiative, will need to meet the information needs and values of both the Victoria Police and local agencies, and these may best be met through separate components (Gassner, 2001, Auditor-General Victoria, 2001).

Toulemonde et al (1998: 173), in their description of the evaluation of joint economic development programs, suggested that joint evaluations can often be of little use:

virtually all joint evaluations strive to produce consensual conclusions. However, each partner has its own judgement criteria, its own way of weighting the various criteria and has to be accountable to its own citizens and taxpayers. When efforts are made to paper over legitimate differences between the various points of view, the partnership becomes meaningless, and the evaluation risks being transformed into an essentially futile ritual.

#### Accountability in partnership programs

Very often some version of a causal model of the program is used to guide evaluation and to spell out the accountability of the different partners. The simplest level of accountability is at the level of inputs: to check that projects use resources as intended, in some cases to ensure that they have used all the resources. At the level of process, accountability is about checking that agreed procedures have been consistently followed. Moving further along the causal chain, projects and organisations are often held accountable for achieving outputs – specific measurable results, often expressed as completed units of service. It is rare for organisations to be asked to report on their success in achieving results further along the causal chain, such as the intended outcomes in terms of clients knowledge, behaviour, education or health.

For example, Partnerships Victoria, a \$1 billion dollar program of joint public-private infrastructure development in Victoria, Australia, is clearly labelled a partnership program. But its accountability, at least as currently outlined, focuses entirely on ensuring the non-government agency complies with the agreed process and deliverables – which seems much more like a joint project involving purchaser-provider arrangements than a partnership.

Such evaluations appear to be based on a causal model that assumes that it is possible to specify, and to deliver, the outputs that are necessary and sufficient to deliver the specified outcomes, without generating significant additional outcomes. For complex programs that are implemented in complex and changing environments, this assumption is often unfounded (Mark, Henry and Julnes, 2000; Rogers, 2000).

So what might evaluations for accountability in partnerships look like? A partnership project would recognise that a complex project cannot be completely reduced to a simple causal model, that such a

model could be a useful guide for implementation, but does not completely describe what is needed to make the project work. It would also look at outcomes, without leaping to blame if there is failure.

The Oregon Option (Dyer, 1996) suggests some of the characteristics that these sorts of evaluations should include. It encourages variation in the processes that are planned:

Our current intergovernmental relationships are like the classical symphony orchestra. Every note is written. Every instrument has its part. Any departure from the score is problematic. The Oregon Option and other experiments like it are more like a jazz ensemble. The musicians share a common key, a basic tempo, but the details emerge from the playing.

Attractive as this sounds, there is a risk that responsibilities can be excessively blurred, to the point where no-one takes responsibility (Crawford & Blair, 2000).

It can also be difficult to try to meet the different purposes of evaluation in a single evaluation. In particular, evaluation for accountability can jeopardise evaluation for improvement or knowledge building. Incentive and sanction systems can inhibit agencies from sharing information about the errors and inadequacies in any project, especially to another agency whose support is needed for the project to continue. The test is to see whether the partnership can reward intelligent failure - that is, failure of a good idea even though it has been well implemented due to accidental or unpredictable circumstances or simply because the idea doesn't work.

#### Data collection, analysis, interpretation and reporting

There are practical and political issues that arise from collecting, analysing, interpreting and reporting evaluation data. Who will control the decisions about methodology? Who will control the implementation of the methodology? Who will control and physically keep the data?

Scougall (1997), in his discussion of evaluating programs with Aboriginal communities in Australia, makes suggestions that seem relevant for all partnership programs, especially those that involve partnerships with local communities. The most important issues are ownership of the evaluation process and products by the community, and sufficient time to ensure adequate consultation within the community leading to real collaboration.

Finally, we should not forget some of the tangible, practical issues in evaluating partnership projects: the different reporting cycles of the partners; different notions of what constitutes credible evidence; who will pay for publishing formal evaluation reports; rights of veto over the evaluation report. These must be negotiated, along with the other elements of the partnership. Examples from the Oregon Option show how much time is needed to move from, for instance, 144 different measures relating to the workforce, to a smaller common set of indicators that are still useful (Dyer, 1996).

#### **Partnerships for evaluation**

I want to also raise some issues relating to partnerships for evaluation. One of the important partnerships is that between central agencies and line agencies (Petrie and Webber, 2001). Central agencies can develop evaluation guidelines and direct agencies to implement them; they can allow line agencies to develop evaluation to meet their own local needs; or they can work together to iteratively develop guidelines and resources for evaluation that support the needs of both.

Another important partnership is between service deliverers and/or funders and universities and other research agencies involved in the technical aspects of the evaluation. The work of the American Cancer Society in evaluation has illustrated the range and number of partnerships needed to achieve this. The ACS co-ordinated partnerships between local ACS agencies and local universities and colleges, whereby students undertook evaluations of ACS projects. As well as

negotiating projects, the ACS provided central technical support through the development of procedures and material, advised by evaluators Michael Patton and Hallie Preskill. The ACS was the linchpin - co-ordinating partnerships between local agencies, local students, local universities, and national evaluation experts. The scale of this undertaking reminds us of the resources required to do this comprehensively.

Effective partnerships for evaluation can also be formed among independent service deliverers, as illustrated by the development of the manual *Evaluating Community Safety Programs*. Four local government authorities in Victoria, Australia worked together to develop a brief for the evaluation manual, engage and manage academics to prepare the manual, and review and revise the manual. Publication of the manual was supported through an additional partnership with the State Government Department of Justice, who not only supported printing of hard copies of the manual for distribution to other local government authorities, but also published it on their web page. The next stage of the development of this manual will involve the development of case studies as examples and to guide future revision of the manual.

But both of these examples focus on evaluation theory informing evaluation practice. The rest of the partnership for evaluation that is needed is practice informing theory.

The Agriculture Division, in the Department of Natural Resources and Environment, in the Australian State of Victoria, has an approach to developing its evaluation capacity that might offer some useful pointers. This is an agency that is heavily involved in partnership projects in agricultural research, development and extension, developed, funded and implemented with other agencies and often with significant and formal community involvement. The organisation has also taken a partnership approach to developing its evaluation framework. Working with external agencies, including evaluation academics and practitioners from the U.S., Canada, the U.K. and Australia, and also with its staff from various projects, the Agriculture Division has iteratively developed, trialled and implemented an evaluation framework that both learns from and contributes to evaluation theory (McDonald & Kefferd, 1998; McDonald & Rogers, 1999).

For example it has recently completed a research project into impact evaluation that built on previous evaluation theory, and involved fieldwork to trial various methods for impact evaluation, working in a partnership involving an external academic, an internal evaluation unit, and internal program managers and staff.

Not all the technical experts are to be found in academia, of course. In many cases, private consultants and consulting firms form valuable partnerships for evaluation with service delivery agencies either directly, or in collaboration with universities. For example, over the past 2 years a partnership project involving the private sector as well as the public sector has been underway to develop the evaluation capacity of Malaysian government departments and agencies. This partnership involves 2 private sector consulting firms (one from Malaysia and one from Australia), and an Australian university, working with the Ministry of Finance and various departments. The partnership's outcomes will not be observed for a few more years, but already the partnership is developing and testing evaluation models, training methods and has led to a number of internal, self-evaluations. The partnership is also contributing to the development and testing of evaluation policy.

Partnerships for evaluation are needed that recognise that the laboratory for research on program evaluation is in organisations, not in universities, and that partnerships for evaluation are needed to iteratively develop and test approaches to evaluation. Ideally such partnerships would address issues of power so that the agencies providing technical support are neither the obedient hired hands of a powerful agency, nor the technocrats with all the answers and deciding votes on methodology.

External partners in evaluation are different to external, objective evaluators, and successful partnerships do not confuse these different and complementary roles. Nor are partnerships in evaluation easy or quick. It can be much quicker to engage an external consultant to complete an

evaluation or provide advice. Sometimes organisations cannot afford or do not need a partnership for evaluation, but need to hire someone to do a job. This can be entirely appropriate as long as we do not call this a partnership, and as long as the option of developing a partnership for evaluation is at least considered.

### Summary

The ability of agencies to respond to the challenges posed in this paper will depend heavily on the authenticity of the partnership. If the term partnership is being used to paper over unresolved differences in values, power, and needs, then no methodological solution will be adequate. If these are real partnerships, then there will be progress – slow but authentic progress in understanding and improving partnerships, partnership projects, and evaluation.

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