

Evaluating Community Engagement: Experiences from Queensland, Australia

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Abstract

While anecdotally the call for greater 'community engagement' (CE) appears to be increasingly taken up by many governments, the evidence base to support CE practice in the public sector does not appear to be keeping pace. From the author's experience, this is due in part to the paucity of quality evaluations of CE being undertaken within the public sector. This is perhaps a reflection of the general lack of evaluation skills within government, or the overemphasis on performance reporting, with its focus on output measures or disjointed outcome measures rather than performance improvement. Evaluation, along with well-designed and focussed social research, is crucial to expanding our understanding of effective mechanisms for CE within a variety of social, political, and decision contexts, as well as the potential role of CE in supporting governments' and communities' aspirations.

This paper explores some of the challenges and opportunities for governments in evaluating community engagement (CE) at the program-level through to the whole-of-government level based on the experiences of the author with developing and implementing a strategy for CE evaluation capacity development within the Queensland Government. In do so it will explore some of the more vexing questions facing CE evaluation including: should CE be treated as an outcome, 'an end' for example to have 'engaged communities', or a means to an end? And if so, what ends? How do we evaluate the contribution of CE to the outcomes of programs? And how can evaluation be used to improve CE performance?

Introduction

Community engagement¹ (alternatively referred to as public/community/civic consultation/participation/involvement) has continued to be considered an important part of good governance practice for governments² worldwide since the flurry of interest in the 1970s following Arnstein's (1969) famous 'ladder of participation'. While it is generally accepted 'best practice' for governments to communicate with their communities in the development and implementation of policies, programs and services, the evidence base for how to engage with communities under what circumstances is poorly developed.

[#] Paper presented by Rick Williams, Manager, Research and Planning Unit, Department of Communities, Queensland, Australia. I am pleased and honoured to be asked to present Dr Johnson's work to an eminent international audience. I believe that this paper presents valuable insights into a too often neglected aspect of community engagement, assessing real impact. However, the argument and opinions I will present are those of Dr Johnson and do not represent the official view of the Queensland Department of Communities.

¹ For the purpose of this paper, 'community engagement' refers to the range of mechanisms to involve members of a geographic, cultural or interest-based community in a decision process from information provision, to consultation (the gathering of information), to active participation in decisions.

² By 'governments' we are referring to the full spectrum of government from local through to regional, state and national government.

That is not to say there is not an enormous amount of guidance material out there. There is, in fact, an overwhelming amount of material available via the Internet, guidebooks, and other publications. The issue is the evidence-base that has been used to develop these materials. In some cases, the evidence-base is experiential learning, usually the reflections of the authors — generally professionals with varying levels of experience in implementing engagement processes. In some cases this experiential learning is based on varying styles of qualitative inquiry — usually in the form of a ‘rough’ case study approach.

Unfortunately, in many cases it is hard to tell where the evidence-base is for the information provided and, in the opinion of the author, this leads to the problem of the CE ‘urban myth’. This is where certain opinions about good CE practice are slowly transferred and exaggerated in guidance material. It results from the fact that many guidebooks are merely repetitions of other guidance material without enough (or at times any) original evidence to support the claims.³ As a result, what might have started as a claim about the usefulness of a particular CE tool in a particular circumstance is quickly exaggerated into a general principle useful in all circumstances. This is exacerbated by the tendency for opinions expressed in guidance material to be transferred across geographic areas and organisational structures with any thought as to the transferability of the ideas into the new social/ cultural/ and political contexts.

One of the consequences of this phenomenon has been the promotion of a ‘more is better’ myth about CE. Increasingly, it appears that large-scale, often expensive and time intensive engagement exercises are being promoted as the solution to all CE situations without adequate consideration of the relationship between the type of decision, the type of community, and the appropriate type of CE.

The problem described above is likely to be a consequence of two main issues. The first is the choice in approach taken by the authors of the guidance who generally do not appreciate the need to ground their advice in a well-developed and locally relevant evidence-base. The second, and the one that this paper tries to address, is the limited growth in the evidence-base for CE practice because of poor evaluation practice amongst CE practitioners.

This paper will address the issue raised above by discussing the author’s experience in designing and implementing a capacity-development program for community engagement evaluation while working for the Queensland Government’s Community Engagement Division (now part of the Queensland Government Department of Communities).⁴ The paper is not intended to be a rigorous academic exploration of the subject of CE evaluation, but rather a personal reflection based on the experiences of the author working in this field. It is hoped that this reflection, while limited in its perspective, will provide useful guidance to others contemplating efforts to build evaluation capacity in government. The introductory sections of this paper draw

³ There are, of course, notable exceptions to this trend; for example an excellent, well-researched book by Wondolleck and Yaffee (2000).

⁴ While this project was the primary responsibility of the author, a number of people contributed to the success of the project through participation in a reference group for the project. Special acknowledgment should go out to members of this group and other members of the Community Engagement Division. However, the opinions expressed in this paper belong solely to the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the project advisors or of the Queensland Government or any of its departments.

heavily on the primary output of the Queensland capacity building exercise — the guide *Engaging Queenslanders — evaluating community engagement*⁵ (heretofore referred to as ‘the guidebook’). The paper does not, however, attempt to repeat the guidance in that publication which should be read separately for details on the evaluation methodology developed for the project.

What is evaluation?

Evaluation can be defined as “a process of assessment used to generate information about the way in which an activity or program of activities is undertaken (process) and the results of the activity or program (outcomes) (Johnson 2004, p. 3). There are many different approaches and methodologies for evaluation that have been articulated in the literature. However, in practice evaluation generally involves three key functions:

- Developing an evaluation framework and data collection tools
- Collecting and analysing data
- Interpreting, sharing, reporting and responding to results.

The purpose of evaluation is generally to compare the information collected about a program with expectations based on performance standards or anticipated outcomes in order to judge its ‘success’.

However, another important, but sometimes neglected aspect of evaluation, is to explore how the outcomes of a program are linked to the context of the program, in particular how the program was conducted, the social/political/cultural/decision⁶ context of the program, and any other external factors that impacted on the program. This aspect of evaluation provides some of the most important information required to build the evidence-base for CE.

The role of evaluation in CE

Evaluation is an important aspect of good CE practice. Evaluations should be undertaken for all levels of CE — from the one-off CE activity, such as a single-issue public meeting, to the more involved CE program that may involve a series of CE activities designed to feed into the development or implementation of a government policy, program or service.

In practice, the scale of evaluations can range from small-scale evaluations by those conducting and/or participating in the activity or program based on a few key evaluation questions and simple data collection methods such as participant feedback questionnaires, to large-scale evaluations conducted by external evaluators utilising multiple methods based on a detailed evaluation framework and project plan.

⁵ <http://www.getinvolved.qld.gov.au/share_your_knowledge/resources/guides_publications.html>

⁶ Meaning the way in which decisions are made, including the political context of the decision process

Effective evaluation of CE can provide a number of benefits or functions, including:

- improving CE activities as they are on-going and contributing the skill development of CE practitioners by providing feedback on performance (formative evaluation)
- enhancing the accountability of government programs and services by providing information on performance ('summative' evaluation)
- helping to build the evidence-base for 'what works, under what circumstances' for CE (evaluation research).

These benefits or functions are illustrated in Figure 1.

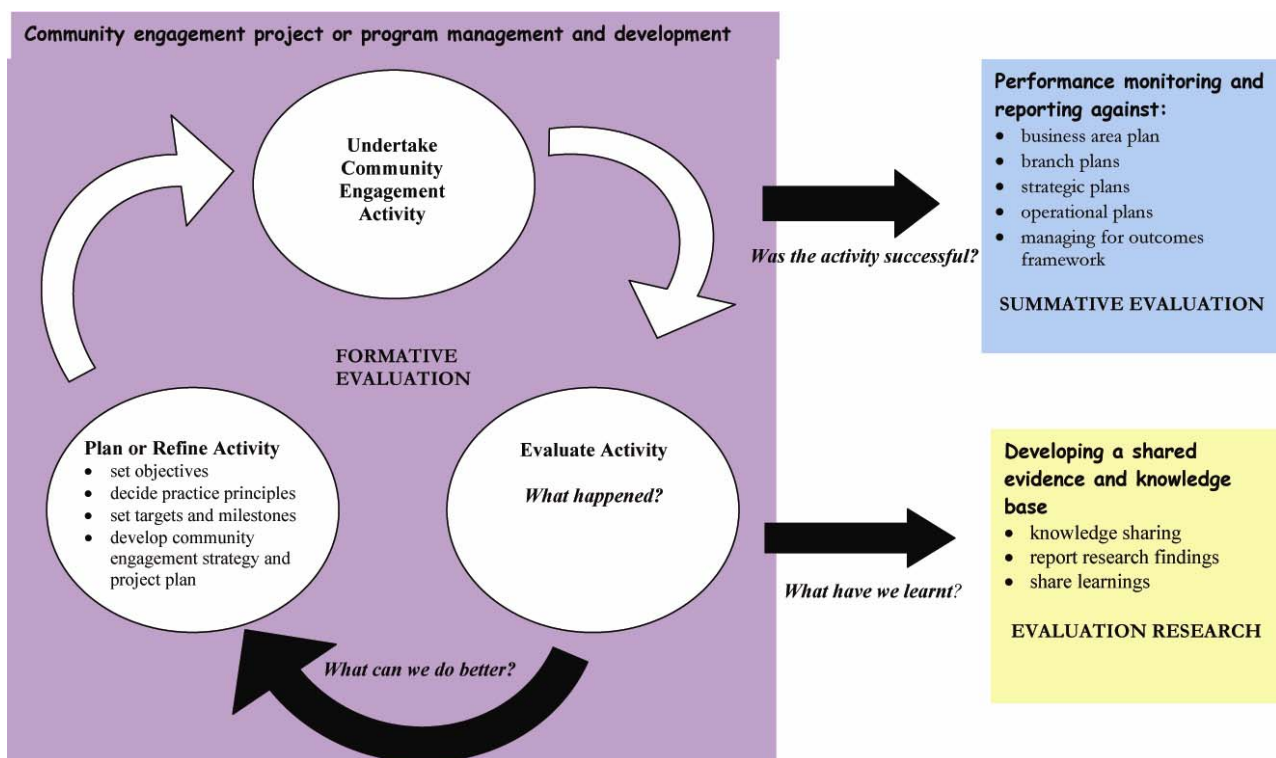


Figure 1. The key functions of community engagement evaluation (taken from Johnson 2004)

The principles of good evaluation practice in CE

To successfully fulfil the three key functions of evaluation outlined above, it is considered that a number of core principles of practice must be met. Evaluation should:

- be purposeful and focused on key questions of concern
- include clear performance criteria derived from the clearly articulated goals, objectives, and anticipated outcomes of the CE activity
- apply systematic procedures to gather trustworthy evidence
- be an integrated part of the CE program and linked to a continuous improvement cycle
- have formalised processes in place to analyse, interpret, share and respond to results (Johnson 2004).

Unfortunately in practice, these principles are often not met.

The practice of CE evaluation

At the time of this program, it was observed that the practice of CE evaluation within the Queensland Government varied significantly in both content and quality. In many cases there was no evaluation or it was limited to a reflective process on the part of practitioners who might discuss the 'success' of a CE activity amongst themselves or with key participants or observers. While this type of process may have limited value in terms of formative evaluation, it does little to contribute to the other functions of evaluation.

At the next level was evaluation which was a 'tacked-on' process of data collection. This occurs when practitioners develop and implement some form of limited data collection — generally a participant feedback questionnaire with some basic questions along the lines of:

“What did you like about...?”

“What could be improved?”

While this type of process provides greater value in terms of formative evaluation because it accesses a broad range of opinions, it generally has limited value in terms of 'summative' evaluation or evaluation research because it does not address the basic issues of what happened and why?

Overall, the major observed problems with CE evaluation practice were:

- evaluation being tacked on at the end of a CE program as an afterthought (usually with no budget allocated)
- evaluations focusing on measuring outputs because of lack of thinking about and articulation of intended CE program objectives or outcomes
- evaluation design focussed solely on the development of data collection tools without consideration of what information was required
- poor consideration of the audience for evaluation and mechanisms for sharing results
- lack of consideration of participatory approaches to evaluation.

Only in a few cases was evaluation observed to meet at least some of the good practice principles outlined in the last section, usually because the program had access to staff with some evaluation expertise.

It has been observed that the reason for poor evaluation practice is often blamed on a lack of resources (financial/ time), however, evaluation need not be an expensive exercise. Furthermore, evaluation should be planned early as part of a program's budget so that resources are set aside and do not need to be found at the end of a program when they are usually scarce. A well designed evaluation usually also results in increased program effectiveness and efficiency, therefore saving resources over time.

Experience suggests that in reality the more common reason for poor evaluation practice is a lack of appreciation of the importance of evaluation and a lack of skills, and consequently confidence, in designing

and implementing evaluation. It is this second factor that led the Queensland Government's Community Engagement Division to undertake a program of evaluation capacity development.

Community engagement in Queensland

The improvement of the CE practice across the Queensland Government was identified as a priority by the premier of Queensland in 2000 and the Community Engagement Division was formed in 2001 to support that priority.

It was recognised within the Community Engagement Division that one of the key ways to improve CE practice was to encourage improved evaluation practice by CE practitioners across government.

Building CE evaluation capacity in the Queensland Government

The first step in building evaluation capacity was to develop a CE evaluation strategy. The strategy⁷ articulated an overall approach for CE evaluation for the Queensland Government and a number of program outputs to support evaluation capacity development.

The outputs of the strategy included:

- a set of indicators for measuring CE performance across government
- a project-level CE evaluation guidebook
- training materials and a training programme to support the evaluation guidebook
- establishing a CE research and evaluation network across government and the tertiary sector
- developing a framework for the evaluation of the government's *Community Engagement Improvement Strategy*.

This section will briefly overview the evaluation approach and methodology developed for the program.

The approach to evaluation advocated in the strategy focussed on supporting the three key functions of evaluation as articulated in Figure 1. It also recognised that evaluation as part of performance monitoring and reporting within the Queensland Government needed to occur at three levels:

- Micro-level — evaluation of individual CE projects or programs
- Macro-level — evaluation of divisional/departmental performance (departmental-level CE programs and policies)
- Mega-level — whole-of-government performance (cross-agency programs and policies).⁸

A methodology for CE evaluation was developed after a review of various evaluation methodologies in the literature, with particular emphasis on previous approaches to evaluating CE activities.⁹ This review, along with the experiences of the author, indicated that the key to undertaking effective evaluation was the

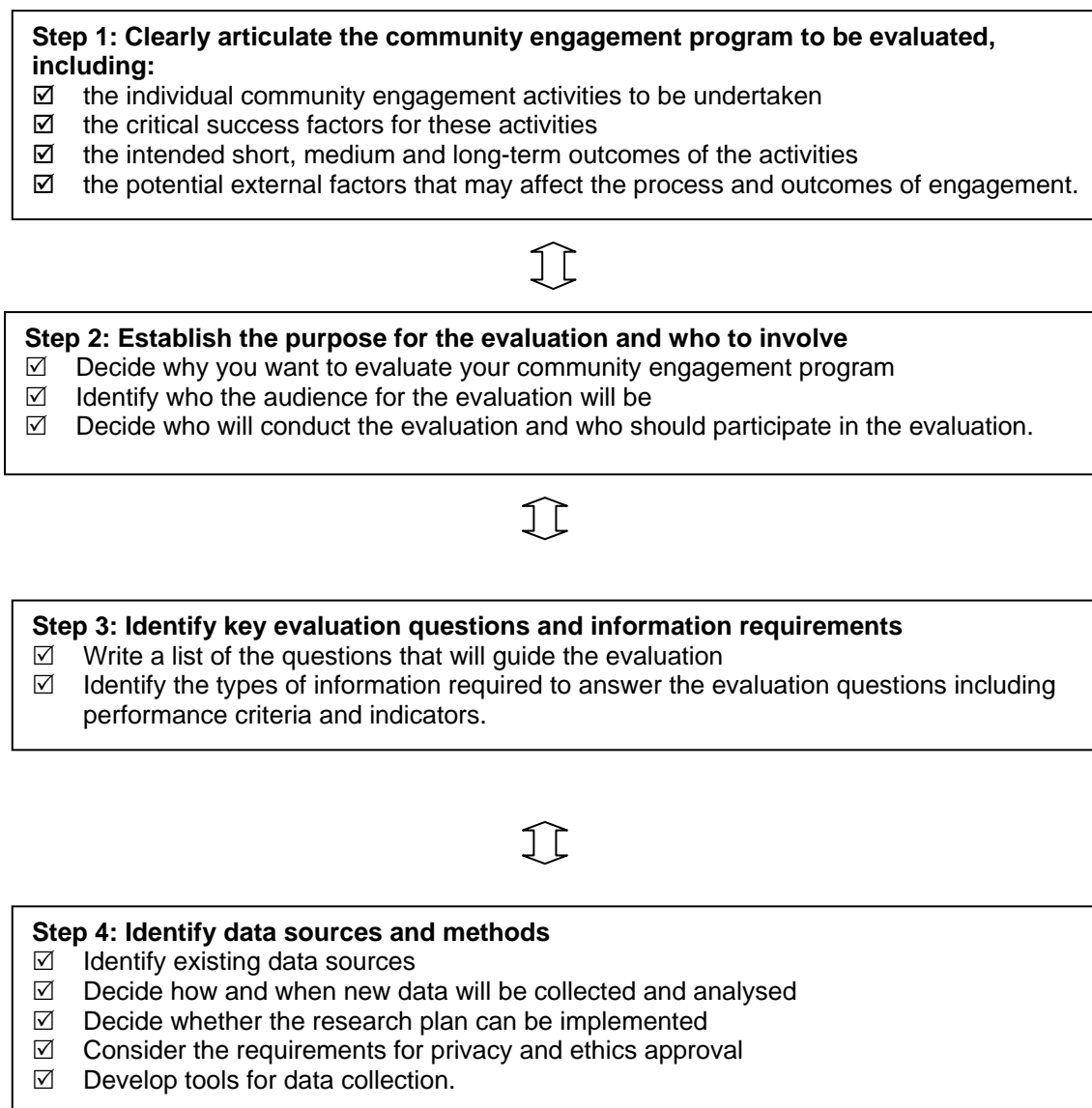
⁷ <http://www.getinvolved.qld.gov.au/share_your_knowledge/evaluation/strategy/index.html>

⁸ See Evaluation Strategy (footnote 4) for further information.

⁹ See references and resources in *Engaging Queenslanders – evaluating community engagement*.

development of well designed evaluation plans or frameworks. Therefore, a basic methodology for developing an evaluation framework was developed that emphasised the importance of the principles discussed in the previous section. The methodology involves four key steps as illustrated in Figure 2. The reasoning behind the steps is presented below.

Figure 2. Steps in developing a community engagement evaluation framework (taken from Johnson 2004)



Step 1: Clearly articulate the CE program to be evaluated

As discussed in the last section, one of the key problems observed in evaluation practice was that the intended outcomes of CE activities were often poorly articulated, if articulated at all. As a result there was an over-emphasis on measuring of CE outputs, for example the numbers of meetings held.

To rectify this situation, it was seen as key that CE practitioners were encouraged to think about evaluation early as part of their CE program planning. To this end it was decided to use a program-logic approach.¹⁰ Program-logic was seen as a useful methodology to encourage practitioners to think about the links between what they do, how they do it, and what that is intended to lead to, while also considering the context in which they are operating. This is particularly important in the case of CE as there appears to be too great a focus on undertaking CE purely because it is government policy or 'good practice' to do so. As a result, CE is often poorly designed and not 'fit for purpose', utilising one or a limited range of CE methods regardless of the context of the program. Therefore, the use of a program-logic approach not only has the benefit of improving evaluation practice, it also has the capacity to significantly improve the planning and implementation of CE activities in the first place.

Step 2: Establish the purpose for the evaluation and who to involve

Another weakness that was observed was a lack of consideration of the purpose and audience for evaluation. It appeared that evaluation, if performed, was a ritualistic activity of data collection based on well-known tools, often participant questionnaires, without any guiding thought on what information it was important to collect. A common scenario that was encountered by the author that illustrates this problem is as follows:

"I have prepared this questionnaire to evaluate my CE activity can you give me some feedback on it?"
"Sure, tell me first what you want to find out through your evaluation and I will let you know if your questions will capture the information you are after".
"I am not sure, I haven't really thought about, I just wanted to evaluate the activity".

Therefore, the methodology suggests that after we determine what we are evaluating, we need to determine why we are evaluating it. Firstly, practitioners need to consider which of the functions of evaluation, illustrated in Figure 1, the evaluation is trying to achieve. In most instances we encourage evaluations to fulfil all three functions. Next, practitioners are encouraged to consider the different potential audiences for the evaluation and what they might want to know — this is best done by articulating a list of key questions for each audience (a process which is taken further in the next step). In this step we also encourage practitioners to consider who might conduct the evaluation and who should participate in the evaluation process.

Step 3: Identify the key evaluation questions and information requirements

After the audience and their broad information requirements have been determined, the next step is to determine, more specifically, the questions that need to be answered through an evaluation. The methodology suggests developing questions around the four key questions illustrated in Figure 1 which reflect the various functions of evaluation:

- What happened?
- What can we do better?

¹⁰ Roughly based on the approach outlined in <http://cecommerce.uwex.edu/pdfs/G3658_8.PDF>

- Was the activity successful?
- What have we learnt?

These questions will provide a guide to what information is required for the evaluation. Examples of this are presented in the guidebook, along with a more in-depth discussion of different types of information that might be required including:

- the use of qualitative vs. quantitative information
- the use of performance criteria and indicators
- different types of indicators, including: subjective vs. objective indicators and input, output, process and outcome indicators
- how to choose good indicators.

Step 4: Identify data sources and methods

It is not until all of the above have been accomplished that specific data sources and data collection methods should be determined. The guidebook provides a brief discussion of data collection, including the difference between qualitative and quantitative methods, the applicability of different data collection methods, and some of the challenges of data analysis including the difference between correlation and causation.

Interpreting, sharing, reporting and responding to results

In addition to developing an effective evaluation framework through the steps above, the methodology also emphasises the importance of detailing a plan for using the results of evaluation. It highlights the importance of not only ensuring that evaluation results are used internally as part of formative evaluation and reported through formal reporting requirements, but also shared as widely as possible as part of a broader programme of evaluation research and/or professional development.

This later sharing of results is pivotal to addressing the problem that was introduced at the start of this paper, that is, the lack of a broad empirically-based evidence-base for CE practice. Even the smallest evaluation of an individual CE activity can add to this evidence-base through collecting data around a limited number of evaluation questions. The trick is to reach consensus on what are some of the important research questions of concern to the department (or to government more widely) and provide guidance on how to reliably collect data on these questions across programs. For example, key questions might be:

- Why do different segments of communities participate (or choose not to participate) in CE opportunities and what factors appear to affect their willingness to participate?
- What information do different types of participants find most important in reaching conclusions about issues under consideration?
- What types of CE feedback are seen as most useful to decision-makers and why?

The sharing of results is also important for CE skill development and practitioners need to think outside the square in terms of the mechanisms used to communicate results. The guidebook emphasises the usefulness

of mechanisms such as showcase events, seminars and presentations, the Internet, and professional and academic publications to share information between CE practitioners.

Key learnings from the capacity-building process

Unfortunately, due to the elections in 2004, the subsequent government restructure which resulted in the split and relocation of the Community Engagement Division, and the author leaving the department shortly after, the Evaluation Strategy has not been fully developed and a formal evaluation of the capacity-building program could not be undertaken. Nonetheless, a number of key learnings, as follows, were still gained from the program based on observation and informal feedback from CE and evaluation practitioners.

1. The first step in building evaluation capacity should be to build internal support for the capacity-building agenda. This is particularly challenging, given that evaluation experts in different government departments often have differing preferences in terms of the methodology for evaluation they like to work with, often a reflection of their background in either quantitative or qualitative research traditions. Therefore, one of the keys to the success of this program was pulling together these experts into a reference panel to guide the direction of the overall evaluation strategy and to provide feedback on the guidance produced for the guidebook.
2. It is, and will continue to be, a major challenge to get people to consider and plan their evaluations at the start of their programs. It may be necessary, in some cases, to make this a funding requirement.
3. People vary in their ability to think like an evaluator. Many people just aren't capable of analysing or articulating the 'why' behind their actions, instead they act on experience and instinct (often quite successfully). These are not the people that should be charged with developing an evaluation framework, although they should be part of the process
4. Because of the above, provision of written guidance is not enough. Being able to design an effective evaluation is a particular skill that requires training and, even with training, not everyone will be good at it (just like communication, leadership, and physical skills).
5. Evaluation support should include:
 - a. written guidance
 - b. templates, forms, and examples (particularly for data collection)
 - c. ongoing evaluation training
 - d. specialised evaluation experts to provide case-by-case guidance (for this project the evaluation methodology was developed into a half-day workshop process to be used with CE program staff)
 - e. financial resources (funding for evaluation included in project budgets).
6. Requirements for performance reporting for macro and mega level evaluation need to be well designed (using similar principles to those discussed here for program-level evaluation) so that they are efficient

and effective in contributing to improved program and policy outcomes from the individual program-level to the whole-of-government level. They should also be tied into, wherever possible, a research agenda that is designed to build the evidence base for CE practice.

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the experience of developing a CE evaluation strategy and process within a government organisation formally committed to advancing the principles and practice of community engagement. I have recounted some of the difficulties related to differing perceptions, expectations and understanding of CE on the part of evaluators and users, and some of the institutional barriers to gaining acceptance and building capacity for evaluation. However, there is a positive side to this story.

The results of that work, in the form of a guide for evaluation of community engagement processes, *Engaging Queenslanders — evaluating community engagement*, won the Australasian Evaluation Society's 2004 Development Award. The guide was the basis for the development of an evaluation framework for CE in another Queensland Government department. When the guide was initially made available, two print runs of 500 were distributed within weeks of publication, mostly to public and private organisations requesting copies. Another 200 electronic copies were distributed in response to email requests received from around Australia and the world. There has been a steady stream of downloads from the website.

Clearly, there is an awareness both of the value of CE and of evaluating the process and results of CE initiatives and processes. The guide is a tool, but also seems to have been a catalyst for people and organisations wanting to be able to demonstrate results and a wider relevance of CE.

As a contribution to that role, this paper will pose for further discussion two of the ongoing questions that came up in the process of developing a methodology for CE evaluation:

1. Is CE a “means to an end or an end in itself?”
2. “How do we evaluate the contribution of CE to the outcomes of programs, where the decision process and final decisions about programs are inevitably complex and influenced by a number of factors and the final outcomes of programs are influenced by an even greater number of internal and external variables?”

Evaluation is not a mechanism to provide any definitive answer to either of these questions. Nonetheless, the author would like to provide as a closing thought that maybe CE is both a means to an end and an end in itself.

Most people would agree that CE is meant to contribute to improved outcomes for government programs, policies and services — a means to an end. But maybe CE should also be considered as an end in itself — that is to have ‘engaged communities’. I would argue that even in cases where for whatever reason CE does not improve government decisions — often it is contended the community merely comes up with the same solution the experts did in the first place at a huge cost in terms of time and money — that the process of CE changes (government and community) participants fundamentally, and if done right, in a positive way. This

position is increasingly supported by the burgeoning research and literature on concepts such as community capacity (Bush et al. 2002), social capital (Putnam 1995) and quality of life (World Health Organisation). Therefore, as a final note of advice I would suggest that CE evaluators try not to worry so much about the fact that it is often impossible to measure the contribution of CE to the outcomes of programs (in more than a subjective way) and consider how we can better measure the contribution of CE to the broader agenda of building 'engaged communities' with high community capacity, social capital and quality of life.

References

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