



## **Evaluation Principles and Frameworks**

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## **Introduction**

Evaluations contribute to transparency and accountability to clients, stakeholders and funders. The use of evaluation within the community sector can not only contribute to quality improvement within services and organisations, but it is also a critical way in which the community sector can inform policy development.

Green and Kreuter (1991) have perhaps the broadest definition of evaluation, outlining it as a “comparison of an object of interest against a standard of acceptability”. Weiss (1998) has a more targeted view: “Evaluation is the systematic assessment of the operation and/or the outcomes of a program or a policy, compared to a set of explicit or implicit standards, as a means of contributing to the improvement of the program or policy”.

However we scope the definition, the extent of evaluation needs to be related to the original goals and the complexity of the activity in question. Ideally, evaluation should be designed at the time of planning and be a part of the ongoing policy design and management of any activities. The evaluation framework needs to include components that are consistent across programs or organisations, but it also needs to allow indicators and methods that can be tailor-made for particular situations and organisations.

Good evaluations are based on clear performance requirements and systematic procedures. They must balance the criteria and outcomes relevant to the main stakeholders: community service organisation, government agency and the broader community.

### ***The sector***

The community sector is a large sector comprising 700,000 organisations across Australia. These organisations range from large organisations with budgets in the millions of dollars and large physical environments, organisational structures and human resources, to small agencies which may employ one or two people and have less access to resources, organisational structures and human resources (Barraket, 2006).

There are substantial obstacles to adequately addressing need within our target populations. We are seeing growing need for support services in Australia, and with our changing demographics this will continue to grow. Obstacles can also include decreased funding, an unstable and understaffed workforce and increasing demand for services.

## Evaluation

It is in the best interest of organisations to evaluate what they do in order to ascertain whether they are achieving the goals that they set for themselves and to ensure quality and relevance of service. Community service organisations, especially non-government organisations, need to know that the limited resources they have are going towards the best and most relevant services possible.

Development of a clear framework to drive consistent and transparent evaluation must have an underpinning principle of addressing the real and growing disadvantage in our community. There should be an altruistic base that does not seek to secure funding, or perpetuate the current services and delivery mechanisms. There is much to be gained by the community sector developing and adopting cross sectoral evaluation principles and frameworks that can be adopted and adapted to suit the diversity of community sector organisations, as this would allow the sector to demonstrate the prevalence of need in the community, respond more appropriately with services, and influence better public policy. The development of a clear framework also represents a range of challenges in respect of data capture, analysis and reporting that meets the needs of all parties.

Evaluation can assess organisational practices and enable an identification of assumptions and intentions. The process can therefore open up a myriad possibilities in regard to the development of new goals and objectives of what an organisation wants to achieve. The findings of an evaluation may highlight deficiencies in governance, policy, procedure, processes, service provision and resource management. Alternatively the findings can identify the elements of service delivery or process that are most successful in fulfilling the needs of the community they serve.

From a government perspective, evaluation should inform and provide the evidentiary basis of strategic planning, funding arrangements, social service planning, and ultimately determine policy decisions. Government should rely upon effective evaluation to not only determine whether money has been spent efficiently and appropriately but also that actions have conformed to strategic directives and the needs in the community.

### ***Current data use / Contracting concerns***

Increasing managerialism within government has seen many changes in the operational environment for the community sector in Australia. Policy shifts have included new standards of performance measurement, the movement away from core funding to purchaser-provider contracts, and an emphasis on partnerships between government and the community sector to deliver services. For the community sector these changes have brought both obstacles and opportunities for innovation and diversification. However, the evidentiary and evaluation systems attached to many government contracts are not sufficiently linked to the aims or objectives of either the funded agency or the government department. Key performance indicators and other requirements often seem to be arbitrarily included, are output based and do not contribute to the evidentiary base of whether the service is actually delivering effective services to their clients (Barraket, 2006).

Evaluations that can explore and document some of the complexities of service to clients within the community sector need to comprise more than simply counting numbers of clients (output based). Both qualitative and quantitative elements need to be represented within funding and service evaluations. Qualitative elements have the ability to capture the layers of work and multitude of outcomes occurring within community sector organisations that have little or nothing to do with 'client numbers' (Barraket, 2006). The adoption by government of a more complex set of service indicators has the potential to significantly enhance the service provided by agencies, as well as provide an evidence base for better public policy.

### ***Why evaluate?***

- To determine whether resources are being used appropriately and efficiently.
- To determine whether the agency is achieving organisational goals and objectives.
- To fulfil the requirements of funding and service agreements.
- To determine the effect of service on the target population.
- To identify areas of service or organisational framework that could be enhanced to improve service.
- To determine the social effect of government policy decisions.
- To identify areas within policy that require change or amendment to provide better social outcomes.
- To determine if government is achieving strategic goals.
- To provide an evidentiary base.

### ***Questions to consider***

- What is the object of the evaluation?
- What values underpin the evaluation?
- What standards are to be used?
- What methods will be used and why?
- How can we measure the immeasurable?
- What are the ethical considerations?
- Who are the stakeholders?
- How will the process be articulated?
- What will the results of the evaluation be used for?

## Principles

In designing and agreeing on underpinning principles for a common evaluation framework, it is critical to understand that community service work is dynamic and complex. The core and common element in the sector is people. It is therefore imperative to recognise the unique dynamics of people and circumstance. All programs are context bound, so relationships and social and economic demographics must be considered.

Below is a starting point for the development of a sector-wide evaluation framework that draws on the World Health Organisation's 'Principles for Evaluation of Health Promotions' (World Health Organisation, 2001):

1. Recognise the diversity of people, circumstance and place.
2. Recognise the need for monitoring and evaluation and match to diversity.
3. Ensure consistency with community service principles
4. Emphasise and enable participation of all stakeholders
5. Contribute to empowerment of individuals and community through open and transparent process.
6. Maintain flexibility and responsiveness to changing circumstance and priorities.
7. Maintain accountability of all stakeholders, community sector, government and individuals.
8. Use a cyclic approach beginning at planning, and covering all steps.

## Steps

1. Describe the program/project, why it is necessary and who the stakeholders are.
2. Determine what will be achieved and how.
3. Identify the issues and questions of relevance to the program/project.
4. Decide on methods and process.
5. Develop an implementation plan with clear check points.
6. Collect information relevant to point four.
7. Analyse, evaluate and interpret information and draw conclusions based on evidence.
8. Develop recommendations.
9. Disseminate results.

## Dual Cycle

To ensure accuracy and consistency of evaluation it is proposed that there be two cycles developed. The first cycle will be for new and emerging work, it will assist in building evidence and proving concepts. Its structure and imperatives will be designed to ensure any new work is accurately and effectively assessed on its merits. The second cycle will be for established work and will take a greater maintenance role. It will have standardised checking points that ensure work is achieving aims or flag any potential issues that may require further investigation. If issues arise at the standard checking points, then the work can be referred back to the first cycle to identify any adjustments that need to be undertaken to ensure the work is achieving the stated and agreed aims.

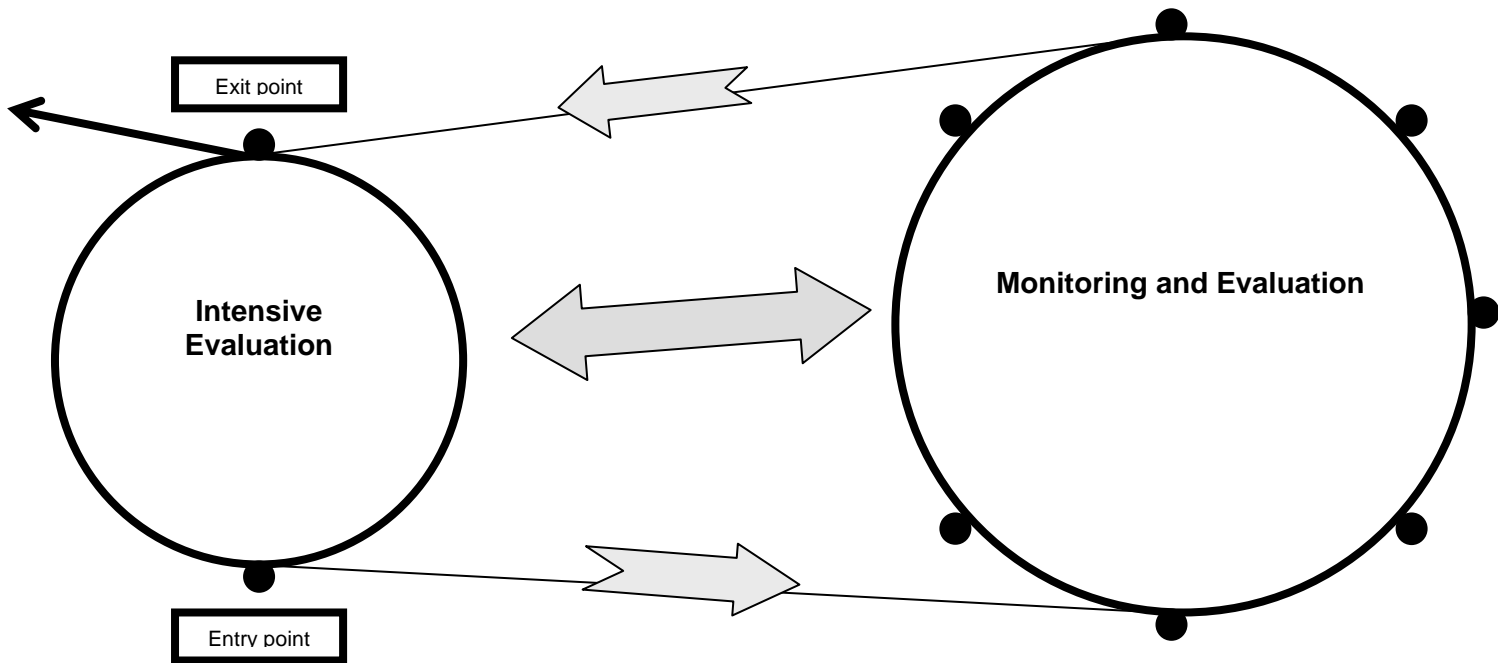
Trigger points in both cycles will be both positive and corrective, that is to say the process will strive to highlight where positive actions are occurring and will assist in identifying key areas of success as well as identifying areas requiring corrective action.

Trigger Points will be drawn from existing structures and cycles in organisations as well as from contract and reporting conditions. These points will include the cycles in place at both the government level and within the community organisations, and could include financial reports, client satisfaction surveys, annual reviews to name a few. These points could be managed through a traffic light system for ease of application and will assist in determining which points identify



opportunities for learning, issues of concern requiring adjustment and problems requiring resolution.

It is anticipated that the second maintenance cycle would be conducted within existing funding arrangements and used as part of the normal reporting requirements. This cycle would need to be embedded in the normal process of both the government and the community sector organisation. The first cycle is likely to require additional funding due its more intensive and additional nature. This cycle needs to be viewed as one of learning and adjustment and may give rise to additional funding requirements for training and assessment.



## Summary

As has been highlighted throughout this paper, evaluations can contribute both to organisational transparency and also to the accountability to clients, stakeholders and funders. However, for these evaluations to be truly effective they need to be strongly linked and informed by the original goals of the organisation, service or project. Evaluation should be designed at the time of planning and be an ongoing element within an organisation's processes.

For evaluation to become a uniform and inherent element within the management processes of the community sector, a collaborative set of principles of evaluation that can be adopted across the entire sector must be developed. These principles should be unique to the work done within the sector and the complexities of our client base.

The use of effective evaluation within the community sector can have a twofold effect. Firstly it provides an important framework to enable quality improvement and best practice, and secondly it provides a critical way for the community sector to inform and contribute to policy debate and development. This not only builds the capacity of the sector and increases participation within public policy development, but it also contributes to the delivery of quality services to our clients.

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