Evaluation and Community Development: Mantras, challenges and dilemmas

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Background
I want to begin with some experiences in evaluation research in Russia. The first experience happened in August 2002. I was talking with a human rights activist about the influences of Western thinking on NGOs in Russia and the growing hostility to the requirements for receipt of international funding. In particular, my Russian friend noted the Russian impatience with what he saw as the time-wasting and irrelevant monitoring and evaluation. To explain his point my Russian colleague referred to tale that has now been translated internationally:

> *On a dark night a man was walking down a street. He came across another man who was on his hands and knees searching the ground. 'Can I help you?' says the first man. 'Indeed yes, comes the reply. I have lost my keys'. At which the second man also gets down on his hands and knees and searches for the keys. After about five minutes they still have not found anything. 'Where do you think you dropped them?' asks the second man. 'Over there' says the first man, pointing to a spot about four metres away. 'Then why are you looking here?' asks the first man. 'Because' says the second man, 'this is where the light is'.*

According to my friend, monitoring and evaluation are Western preoccupations that focus only on 'where the light is'.

A second experience happened in 1999, when I was interviewing people at the Ford Foundation Small Grants Project office in Moscow. This project was concerned only with grants of less than US $5000. The office, as is usual for NGOs in Russia, was a private apartment. The apartment was crammed with tables, on which were placed piles of applications, hundreds in all. 'How do you decide on who is successful? What criteria do you use? How do you evaluate the success of each project?' I asked. These, of course, are central questions when collecting information about NGOs, or community organisations in Australia.

The respondent looked at me blankly. 'Why do you Westerners always want to measure things?' he replied. 'You have this fetish for measuring and evaluating... Don't you trust people to do the best with what they get? And why do you increasingly pay exorbitant amounts to experts to do evaluation? Don't you come from community development, where people themselves know what is best for them? Just think of all the time, resources and energy you waste when you run around evaluating all the time?'

When I returned to Australia in 1999 I recounted this story, with, I admit some smugness. However, my community development colleagues here is Australia suggested that I think again about whether, or at least how far, the Russian NGOs were getting it wrong. They suggested that I should re-think my commitment to monitoring and evaluation. Could I be sure that setting up a rigorous methodology for monitoring and evaluating a community project would really ensure a better outcome than if I posted out $A10,000 each to randomly selected community organisations all over Australia, with no more of a proviso than that they should spend the money where they think it is most needed.

This comment caused me to reconsider the early community development critiques of monitoring and evaluation and take account of the developing theoretical understandings of risk society, regulatory practices and the conception of audit as mantra. In this paper I discuss some of the key rationales for undertaking monitoring and evaluation. The approach I take is informed by a community development perspective. However this perspective is not without its own issues and dilemmas. I conclude with some thoughts for options for a community development orientation to monitoring and evaluation.

Rationales

For those engaged in community development work monitoring and evaluation are often thought about as demanding and often ineffective technical tasks that have to be done to please some external body. Yet, of course as we know, evaluation is not an alien activity, we do it as part of our everyday lives (Wadsworth, 1997; Owen & Rogers, 1999). But we also undertake monitoring and evaluation as part of more systematic critical reflection upon programs and projects we are involved in, and as a way of thinking about better ways of doing things in the future. Moreover, monitoring and evaluation are not just technical processes. They are fundamentally social, political and value-oriented activities (Guba and Lincoln,1989:7).

The key issue underpinning the Russian critiques of monitoring and evaluation is 'Why do it? From a community development perspective there are five main ways of answering this question. The first three answers are broad and involve reference to, and interpretations of the general organisation of contemporary society. The first answer locates monitoring and evaluation in the development of what has come to be known in Western industrial societies as instrumentally rational thinking. This response promises evaluation as a tool to improve 'what we do'. The issue for my Russian colleagues is that, because society is so complex, we can never really know the full and unintended effects of our interventions into society, 'so why waste our time'.

The second answer takes the instrumental thinking approach further, and identifies monitoring and evaluation as a form of control. The third answer understands monitoring and evaluation as a form of risk management in what has come to be known as 'risk society' (Beck,1992). Monitoring and evaluation activities provide a sort of insurance against the collapse or failure of a program, for example. The fourth response to the question locates monitoring and evaluation in the community development framework. From a community development perspective monitoring and evaluation are tools for the empowerment of disadvantaged people, through for example, providing information and knowledge and a forum for reflection and analysis of what they do. The final way of answering the question 'why undertake monitoring and evaluation?' is to provide more concrete reasons as to why people undertake monitoring and evaluation, such as for the purpose of accountability to funding bodies. We will consider these answers in turn.

Instrumental rationality

With the economic dominance of Western societies has also come the global ascendancy of Western thinking about the 'best' ways of organising ourselves. One writer who reflected on this way of thinking at the beginning of the 20th century was the German sociologist, Max Weber (1864-1920). Weber described how a certain way of acting, namely, that based on rational action involving systematic action aimed at achieving a goal, had become the prevailing mode of action in industrial societies. Rational action, in this sense, involves selecting the most appropriate means to achieve a goal. Much of the Western led endeavour to implement evaluations is embedded in the increasing rationalisation of human life, based on commitment to the 'methodical attainment of a definitely given practical end' by selection of the most appropriate means.

After the death of Weber other German social scientists, connected to what is known as the Frankfurt School, reflected further on the ways in which 'instrumental action' had become the basis for the organisation of (Western) industrial societies, where management decisions are dominated by

‘rational’ decision-making processes. The ascendancy of ‘instrumental rationality’ has meant that decision-making has become a technical exercise, to be developed ‘scientifically’, in a value-free context, and requiring expertise beyond the scope of ordinary people. Habermas (1971) explained how this tendency to define problems within technical or technocratic terms of reference (technocratic consciousness), rather than within political or moral terms of reference, undermines our capacity to take a critical view of our own society. Judgements about an action or program come to be valued only on the basis of efficiency and productivity, which become ends in themselves.

The increasing rationalisation of social organisation and the rise of neo-liberal economics have brought with it a preoccupation with ‘value for money’ in community programs. That is, the need to ensure that the ‘most efficient’ and ‘most effective’ means have been selected to achieve a chosen goal. It is in this context that there has been an increasing requirement by funding bodies that community programs are monitored and evaluated. In particular, funding bodies are requiring monitoring and evaluation processes to be built into funding submissions.

Many of the texts and handbooks on monitoring and evaluation take an approach based on this Western ‘scientific’ notion of value, outlined above. Indeed, as monitoring and evaluation have become more complex, there are many who argue the evaluation process is beyond the capability of ordinary people. It requires experts, who are trained in monitoring and evaluation techniques.

There are several important implications of this ‘scientific’ approach to monitoring and evaluation. The expertise it invokes functions to disempower ordinary people. It reduces tasks to technical procedures and thus provides a tool for enhancing management control. And it fails to understand the political nature of monitoring and evaluation (Marsden and Oakley, 1995).

The ‘power’ perspective

A second rationale for undertaking monitoring and evaluation begins not so much from reflections on the implications of monitoring and evaluation as scientific discourse, but from the perspective of power. The simple approach to understanding monitoring and evaluation as a form of control focuses on the questions of who sets the terms of reference and who actually undertakes the monitoring and evaluation processes. It comes up with the answer that it is mainly eternal ‘experts’ and if not external experts, then a least those exercising power within a project or organisation, even where a participatory action process takes place. The reason why these external and internal experts have the power is because they control the ‘discourses of knowledge’. As Foucault pointed out ‘experts’ have the power to establish rules of conduct, select, organise, reveal and distribute knowledge (Foucault, 1977). From this perspective, for example, performance indicators provide an effective tool for validating and invalidating values and practices. Monitoring and evaluation activities constitute ‘micro technologies of power’.

The idea of control of the discourses of power is taken up by Fraser (1989) who is concerned with how ‘needs discourses’ are constructed. In regard to monitoring and evaluation of community programs, for example, we might ask whether they are doing a good job in responding to the needs of their constituent communities. However, according to Fraser, what constitutes needs, or needs priorities, is the result of political struggle between interest groups, or what she calls ‘power publics’ (1989:167).

Another analysis of monitoring and evaluation as a form of control is concerned with methods of surveillance. Drawing on Foucault’s examination of surveillance strategies in modern society, this analysis demonstrates the role of monitoring and evaluation as a form of regulation, or more specifically, self-regulation. For example, when the subjects of evaluation know that an evaluation process is going on, they second-guess what they are ‘meant to be doing’ and continually regulate themselves according to their guesswork. This approach draws on Foucault’s adaptation of Jeremy Bentham’s eighteenth century prison design, where prisoners self-regulate because they understand that they are under the watch, or gaze of a prison officer. The idea of ‘the panoptican’, as a design for surveillance was identified by Foucault as ‘A superb formula (for control): power exercised continuously and for what turns out to be at minimal cost (Foucault, 1980: 155).

Risk society and the audit principle

One of the important new 'gazes' upon contemporary social control is informed by the concept of 'risk'. The idea of risk is based on an assessment of the possibility of a threat, hazard or danger. As Giddens (1998: 64) points out, risk refers to dangers that we seek actively to confront and assess. Humans have always faced hazards and dangers, but our understanding of the ways in which we reflexively respond to these is new and embedded in the constructions and meanings of late modernity. The perception of risk can evince different kinds of responses, some of which are seen to be harmful to society (such as threatening security and well-being), while others are identified as creative, or beneficial to the development of society (such as the unleashing of entrepreneurial activity). The idea that risk has a creative impetus has come hand in hand with the policy imperative of deregulation. The business and social world, in particular must be freed up from government intervention to allow for the unleashing of entrepreneurial and innovative capacity. The other side of deregulation, of course, is reregulation, which becomes necessary as the risks resulting from deregulation accumulate and explode. What we end up with then, is a dialectic of risk and regulation. Monitoring and evaluation are implicated in this dialectic as forms of audit, regulation and risk management.

The discourses of risk can be read through the lenses of uncertainty, scarcity, and blame, or as a way of responding to the frailty of human life. Whatever lens is used, much of the contemporary developments in social policy and social management are shaped through radar designed to pick up and respond to risk, hazard and danger. Whether in fact life is more risky today than it has been in the past, or it just takes place within new constructions of risk, is the subject of some debate. Yet as Culpitt (1999) demonstrates, the recent valorisation of the riskiness of life is a forceful tool in the hands of those in power. In particular, risk discourses have been used as part of the armory of new managerial regimes. They help set the backdrop for new technologies of power.

For example, according to Power (1997), contemporary societies are required to invest more and more time and resources in 'an industry of checking'. Monitoring and evaluation are examples, par excellence, of this 'industry of checking'. The checking is part of an administrative style of control. This control takes formal shape through the scrutiny of the 'audit'. However, for Power, the value and effectiveness of the 'audit principle' is questionable, for a number of reasons. He argues that audit involves the shallow ritual of verification, and in both ideological and practical terms the faith in audit is misplaced. Audit is not necessarily a reliable insurance mechanism. For example, it failed investors and stakeholders in the case of the collapses Enron and in Australia, One-Tel, and HIH. The question he poses ' Who audits the auditor?' opens the way to a never ending auditing cycle. Those who apply this analysis to monitoring and evaluation see monitoring and evaluation principles and practices as yet another manifestation of the 'audit tendency'.

Community development

In an interesting discussion of the differences between what she identifies as traditional and alternative approaches to evaluation, Rubin (1995) argues that traditional, or conventional approaches to evaluation see people involved in projects as 'objects' to be studied. From a Foucauldin approach, as mentioned above, these objects, knowing they are being scrutinised, come to regulate themselves. Rubin supports an alternative approach to monitoring and evaluation, which sees all the people involved, as 'subjects', who are actively involved in the process of evaluation. Rubin's approach, of course, is in the stable of community development.

As indicated above, from a community development perspective there is a broad purpose underlying monitoring and evaluation. The community development perspective begins with the people involved in a program or project. Monitoring and evaluation processes, whether they are undertaken in regard to a project, an organisation, a campaign, or a program, for example, are concerned with empowering communities. The ultimate aim is to enable communities to have effective control of their own destinies. Effective control requires the development of on-going structures and processes by which communities can identify and address their own issues, needs and problems, within their own terms of

reference (Kenny, 1999:80). Evaluation promises a learning experience and a type of educational intervention. The perspective informing monitoring and evaluation as a tool for community development tends to focus on process. For example, it privileges developmental purposes over judgements. Thus, monitoring and evaluation involve the sharing of knowledge, the skilling of communities, reflexive thinking about the ways in which programs, processes and organisations are operating, and where deemed appropriate (by community members and other stakeholders), interventions to improve programs, processes and organisations.

Within this broad perspective there are a number of issues and dilemmas. For example, is there a place in community development practice for judgements, for tight instrumentalism (such as a gap or audit based evaluation for the purposes of improving the efficiency of a program, or the bench-marking or checking approach) or for external evaluation 'experts'? My answer to this question is that a community development perspective aims to establish a framework for discussion of the differing roles and processes of monitoring and evaluation. Good community development practice requires informed discussion and decisions. This includes discussion of the tensions in the choices available in undertaking monitoring and evaluation. An example of these tensions are the choice between the empowering functions of self-evaluation and the provision of new knowledge through engaging an outsider in an evaluation.

Specific reasons and accountability

Much of the activity of monitoring and evaluation, of course, is done for specific practical reasons, such as to see whether it is worth continuing a project, to find out what we got right, to find out what went wrong, or to find ways of improving a program. The framework in which these practical questions takes place, like the audit approach discussed above, is one concerned with accountability. Two approaches to accountability can be discerned.

In the first approach the line of accountability is thought of in lineal and hierarchical terms, as going from the project, program or organisation to the funding body, such as a government department, an international aid organisation or a private institution. In Australia, most community programs are still partly or fully funded by the state (see Brown, et al., 2000), despite the anti-statist rhetoric underlying the ascendancy of neo-liberal economics. The promises of tax reduction come with the reminder that the state has limited fiscal resources and these must always be used with maximum efficiency. Thus it is important that governments establish ways of knowing whether state funding for community programs has been used efficiently. In this context monitoring and evaluation have become increasingly important. International funding bodies, such as the World Bank, and the United Nations Development Programme, are also increasingly requiring evaluations of the efficiency and effectiveness of their funded programs. The dominant idea of accountability tends to be one-way, from the program to those who have control of the program, such as funding bodies or regulating bodies, such as the state. Many of us have had the experience of undertaking an evaluation exercise for the purpose of legitimating a policy intent of a government department.

However, accountability can also be seen in terms of the relation between the program and the community it is serving, and in terms of the obligation of funding bodies to the program and the community. That is, accountability is not just a top-down, one-way thing. It should stretch in different directions. The rhetoric of this second approach is currently dominant, and is manifested in commitment to consultative process and partnership arrangements between government, business and the community, and in ideas of community building. How far this 'equality of accountability' actually takes place is a moot question.

To conclude this paper, I would like to make three points. First, it is very important to understand and take into account the critiques of monitoring and evaluation if we are to be able to undertake effective and useful evaluations. Second, in response to the critiques of the Western orientations of evaluation my argument is that that there are choices in ways in which we 'do' monitoring and evaluation, and these include the choice of monitoring and evaluation for learning and empowerment. From my

perspective, elements of community development must always be embedded in the ways in which I undertake an evaluation, although of course, I nearly always have to make compromises. The third, and final point is one that I want to explain with an example. This point is that monitoring and evaluation, as a type of research, is strengthened when a triangulated research process is used. The example I give is a project with a local council in Victoria, which required an evaluation of the outcomes of its health plan. While the evaluation was a formative one, there had been no monitoring program. We used both audit based, benchmarking to provide a comparative perspective (secondary data) and an open –enquiry approach (how do you feel about the project?) based on focus groups and a questionnaire. Importantly we both trained local people to undertake the research (such as facilitate focus groups and administer and assist in analysis of questionnaires) and involved external evaluators to assist in introducing new ideas. We organised the focus group discussions for a range of times, and as far as possible on the territory of the respondents, such as a Sunday afternoon barbecue, funded by the council, in a park adjacent to a public housing estate, where food and drink was provided by the local council. But we did more than just an evaluation. Because evaluations are often invitations to raise expectations that are not fulfilled, we also built into the research a strategic component that invited discussion on ways of responding to the issues raised.

Overall we tried to maximise the principles of community empowerment at every level. By training the local residents we passed on skills to the community. We tried to make the collection of data an activity that was not alien. Rather we tried to make it both fun and meaningful. The important principle of using the data and analysis in ways that could actually change things was absolutely crucial to avoiding the (often justified) cynical approach of community members to evaluation research.

The answer to the question ‘why undertake an evaluation?’ is indeed critical to the success of any monitoring and evaluation research.

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