

0031

Evaluating partnership programs – challenges and approaches

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Increasingly programs are being delivered through partnerships of organisations that may vary greatly in terms of sector, size, structure, objectives and nature of contribution to the overall objectives of the partnership as a whole. Such programs present a number of challenges for designing and conducting evaluations. Amongst the challenges identified by Toulemonde et al (1998) are the following:

1. Objectives are based on compromise amongst partners and different aims
2. Scattering of interventions makes it difficult to choose suitable and feasible common measures
3. Diversity across projects and partner activities increases complexity of information gathering
4. Each partner has different criteria for judging success and weights them differently.

This paper shows how evaluations can be designed to address some of these challenges, using as a case study the evaluation design for the NSW 'Our Environment: It's a Living Thing Partnership Program' (an environmental education program). The program is a partnership amongst several government and non-government agencies and the evaluation is currently in progress.

In addition to describing and discussing the evaluation design that is being used to determine the effectiveness of the program with respect to its contributions to sustainable living, the paper will also describe the processes that are being used to evaluate the partnership itself as a partnership, including the use of the Nuffield Partnership Assessment Tool.