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Success case method: Uses and adaptations in New Zealand housing evaluation

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This paper shares our experiences of adapting Robert Brinkerhoff's (2003) Success Case Method (SCM) approach to evaluate two Housing New Zealand initiatives - the Healthy Housing programme and Home Ownership Education and Support initiative. The adaptations to the SCM in each evaluation are compared and contrasted to highlight what we have learnt about using this methodology.

SCM is used to find out quickly and easily which parts of an initiative work well enough to be left alone or built on and extended, which parts need revision, and which should be abandoned. The method seeks to understand why things worked and why they did not.

Practitioners of this approach create a model of what defines success; seek out the best, and the worst, stories from an initiative; and document the experiences captured in them. The stories are corroborated and backed up with evidence to confirm their veracity - "A success story is not considered valid and reportable until we are convinced that we have enough compelling evidence that the story would 'stand up in court'...if pressed we could prove it beyond a reasonable doubt" (2003:20).

Both our evaluations required adapting Brinkerhoff's approach. Points of variation included timescales, the extent to which results could be attributed to an initiative and how 'success' was defined. Selecting cases for each evaluation was also challenging. We ask: have we fundamentally departed from SCM or is the approach robust enough to allow for adaptations?