Introduction

The purpose of this presentation is to explore how Action Research (AR) as an evaluative tool can contribute to bridging the seeming gap between the needs, goals (values) and expectations of programme funders at the national level and those of the programme implementers, and people targeted by the policy, at the local level. Often there is such a disparity between these two settings that the evaluation is seen more as a battle field which inevitably causes one or both of the parties (and also including other stakeholders) distress or damage. We are confining our comments to a programme area which has nominated AR as an evaluative mechanism and need to state that these claims are not for all evaluations in all circumstances. The programme area is that of the Federally funded Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS) in which sits the Communities for Children (CfC) project area. We explore some of the evaluation challenges presented by the initial requirement of SFCS to use AR as both a practice in the implementation of the projects and as an evaluation tool. But because these challenges have been experienced and addressed elsewhere we take heart that these seeming differences can be overcome, so we describe an example before ending with a summary of the possibilities in which we believe AR can value add to evaluation processes which can meet the needs spanning the national -local policy divide. We aim further to invite not a new process of evaluation but one that indeed has demonstrated effectiveness in how AR processes and principles can be applied to negotiating an evaluation space involving disparate stakeholders.

Action Research is generally known for its collaborative, democratic, participatory and change-oriented characteristics. Additionally, AR is usually considered to be small scale and specific to a particular group. This makes its requirement as part of a National programme somewhat surprising.

Stronger Families and Communities Strategy started in April 2001 with an aim to build community strengths and capacities to develop locally owned and devised solutions to spatially identified disadvantage. It was conceived as an early intervention and prevention strategy to address child development disadvantage. In the second rollout of SFCS, informed by the first stage, the Communities for Children (CFC) initiative rolled out over 45 sites across the Nation to which funding, ranging from 1.5 to $5 million dollars, was directed through a Facilitating Partner (FP) model. These FP non-government organisations were intended to broker early childhood services in their areas and coordinate services which would enhance the ability of communities to develop capacity in families. The FPs funded the Community Partners (CP), also NGOs, to provide relevant and identified services as determined through a committee structure. Within each CFC site the FP is further tasked with the role of locating and employing a Local Evaluator (LE). What the LE is contracted to evaluate, how and alongside whom

differs between sites as does how the LE is connected to the project. For instance a LE has taken the form of an individual research institute, a university, a PhD candidate, an employee of the FP, an independent consultant and so on. A national evaluation framework has also been designed and is being implemented. There is no clarity yet as to how these should merge or inform each other with evaluative processes developed following the rollout of the programmes themselves.

Although AR was originally noted in earlier projects under the SFCS, such as its Stronger Family Fund, it no longer appears amongst later documentation but remains in the memories of some of the original participants, and has filtered through to many CFC site evaluation strategies. AR has generally not been used either as a process for generating programmes or for evaluating them at the policy making level. However, the model as envisaged for CfC was creative and provided the opportunity for participation and inclusion of people who are usually not considered to have a great deal to contribute to how programmes should work – rather they are often regarded as programme recipients.

The evaluating process

There is a tendency to define the area into the binary, or polarisation, of National-Local and indeed that is how this paper has thus far represented the issues. However, there are many different stakeholders at different levels, each of which could itself be divided into oppositional stances. This should be born in mind during this discussion. We identify here some of the ensuing challenges present in this policy/practice environment.

Competing interests - whose goals?

The National body had clear ideas of aims it wanted addressed, based on demographic and other research material which stated clearly that young children failed to reach their developmental potential if they had poor social and economic experiences in the first five years of life. Disadvantaged areas were identified and targeted for funding to support programmes which would assist in childhood development and help build capacities of families in their rearing of children and in the community. However, these areas were selected without thorough consultation with the people who were to be the targets of the programmes and further design of the programmes was made by service providers who may or may not have consulted or included families in an on-going way. There is some evidence to suggest that some of the projects selected to be funded under the CfC scheme were already in existence and wanted funding to continue so they applied to be part of the CfC without necessarily subscribing fully to its goals. Two issues here emerge: organisations already providing a similar service to that wanted by CfC had to compete in a tendering process for a service they were already providing; and secondly, if successful they then had

additional accountability requirements. If a service was unsuccessful in its tender, complete withdrawal was sometimes noted from either the relationship with CfC agencies or closed altogether, thus negatively affecting the local community. Valuable skills, knowledge and expertise (and targeted recipients) were therefore lost. This then resulted in tensions between the FP and the community partners and created a further distance between the aims and goals of the National body and those people on the ground responsible for delivering services. There were further indications that states had an interest in funding early years programmes, but withdrew when aware of Federal intentions. Questions around consultation and inclusivity arise in this instance as well as ownership of programme implementation.

Evidence based practice and interpretive paradigms

The trend towards evidence based practice in agencies has aligned with the need for accountability and demonstration of effectiveness in the implementation of programmes within the confines of a managerial discourse. The language of outcomes, outputs, effectiveness, efficiency, and best practice is uppermost in the requests of meeting the requirements of the funding agencies. This leaves little scope for the more interpretive accounts of the experiences of participants in programmes: the views, experiences, needs and values of those for whom the policy is intended. There is much now in the literature which recognises that it is essential for the views of the targets of policies be incorporated throughout the programme including evaluation.

Competition and collaboration

The history of funding of social services in the last couple of decades has been relying on what has come to be known as the purchaser-provider split or in more recent times the New Public Management model, leading to competitive tendering for the right to deliver programmes identified as necessary by funders. Some levels of secrecy and withdrawal from collaboration between agencies have resulted as previous partners were seen as competitors for relatively scarce funds. The CfC somehow expected partnerships to occur through the programme without necessarily recognising that the climate of competition needed to be addressed. There is still a level of suspicion existing between the Community Partners and the Facilitating Partners – who themselves have to compete for the right to manage the CfC.

Unskilled in processes

Whichever evaluative process is used, often agency personnel at the local level are unskilled in the methods of evaluation and/or find them time consuming. Providing an account each month or quarter to satisfy the funding agencies is often the most that they are able to do. There is little opportunity to engage busy service providers in discussions about their services, the goals set, and the hope for achievements for

themselves and the services recipients as well as the design of processes which would give them in depth accounts of how programmes are progressing. The other consideration needed here is the inability of many to participate in complex systems, which can be very unfamiliar to families and other community members, and to make decisions based upon service delivery and funding without the development first of particular knowledges and skills necessary for such processes. AR is an ideal means to gain this level of information, understanding and design for the future, as well as skilling participants, but remains an ideal yet to be realised in the busy-ness of the work and policy formation. It is interesting to note that the first SFCS documents mentions the need to 'read up on' AR further to apply it, implying a skilling of service providers (Australian Government: Department of Family and Community Services and RMIT University Circle 2004).

We take encouragement, though, that these issues are not uncommon and that they have indeed been dealt within one programme at least that appears in the literature, and this programme has many similarities to the CfC.

The Experiences from East Timor (Stringer 2008)– a case study
- **Needs:** Re-establish a nation wide education system
- **Expectations:** Development of Parent Teacher Associations across E. Timor
- **Values:** underlying beliefs in community engagement and parental participation

The needs and expectations were clearly articulated by the National Government authorities in the wake of the Indonesian withdrawal and the realisation of meagre resources. The values may have been latent and underdeveloped or stimulated by lack of resources but National policy makers were receptive to community engagement as a principle. It's less evident what the needs, expectations and values are of other stakeholders although Ernie Stringer mentions some middle level policy makers stated explicitly that some parents were not interested in their children's education, other middle level policy makers were disengaged and some communities were less than interested. Overall, however the response was in favour of the establishment and the development of the PTAs and being involved.

The Consultant applied AR, involving six steps over four phases, over a period of three years with all the stakeholders both at times separately and together. These steps, as described by Stringer, were:
- Framing and focusing of the issue,
- Identification of stakeholders having an impact on the issue,
- Gathering information from stakeholders and other relevant sources,
- Distilling the information to identify key issue, ideas and elements

- Reporting on what has been discovered, and
- Formulating next steps (planning the next research cycle)

The last phase of the process was to train people to continue the process.

There were four different groupings of stakeholders, the government officials, the funding agency of UNICEF, principals and teachers, and parents and community leaders.

Conclusion

The processes of AR as practice and evaluation involve **Time**, so too do the principles of community development and community capacity building upon which CFC is envisaged. In the E. Timor example outlined here, the process of AR working across four identifiable stakeholder groups took over three years from the start of the concept of Parent Teacher Associations to the handing over to the participants. It also involved a **Vision** which began from that originally conceptualised by policy makers. It may well have been because they realised they did not have the resources to do something about the schools – but also acknowledged research indicating community based practice is effective. We might also be somewhat sceptical in considering that a New Public Management ideology suggests funding for such programmes with the aim of shifting responsibility to individuals and communities. Even if this is the case, these processes can harness strengths and abilities to work towards a win-win situation for both local and national groups. However, even though the vision started at the macro, the implementation very quickly moved to the **Micro,** where the local people were involved in the discussions and planning from the beginning, so the projects, while they had the main general aim, took on specific processes, or adapting the Universal idea to targeted application.

We make three conclusions from this example: AR can result in effective government programmes and services and demonstrate transparency; staged or phased implementation accommodates local needs and conditions in a form of targeted universalism; and the strengths and abilities of local people enrich the services of government policies/services.

The possibilities for Action Research as an evaluative bridge between the National and Local policy areas:-

Identify groupings, in E. Timor four distinct groups were identified, and at various times they came together but a lot of the work was done within the separate groups as well as across the groups.

This requires a great deal of **Trust,** which is necessary as all groups had to have faith that they would be heard, their suggestions acted on etc. For example in E. Timor, work was done to encourage parents to realise that 'contribution' meant participation not money; this commitment had then to be kept.

Civil society as mediator, the recognition that there is an important role as mediator between the individual and the state, which relies on a level of cooperation, collaboration and organisation which individuals can't do on their own, neither can governments fully carry out innovative, developmental and sustainable programmes on their own. This co-dependency requires a process that will provide avenues for communication of the various needs, wants, values through which negotiation and action are then decided.

Values, these direct activities and represent deeply held beliefs. This is where there needs to be a willingness to negotiate, listen to others and accommodate others' value bases. In his description, Stringer notes 'It was evident, however, that all stakeholders would need to acquire a new way of thinking …' (Stringer 2008) p.552 and in the running of the workshops which 'ran against the grain of traditional authoritarian styles of operation' (Stringer 2008) p. 555, or expecting to be passive recipients who were told what to do (p. 556). It should not be underestimated how important or challenging this can be, for people's values that are often deeply and firmly held, and their change all the more difficult for often these are subconsciously entrenched.

Conclusion

We have arrived at the end of this presentation but we hope to have shown how indeed it is possible that the use of AR as both a practice for generating and implementing programmes has within it the evaluative processes which enable these programmes to develop according to the joint wishes of the various stakeholders, despite the possibilities of competing needs and expectations. The National body responsible for CfC is now requiring evaluations of the past four or so years. Many of the funded programmes will be feeding back to that body suggestions for the future as well as stating how they plan to continue, albeit in different forms. The models that emerge have the potential to embed AR as a highly effective tool at the local level, which is supported by the evaluation reports of another Federal programme which has used AR extensively (Ryan 2002; Ryan 2003; Ryan 2003), Reconnect. What the E. Timor example shows us is that the National level and the intermediary stakeholders can also effectively use AR and thus contribute to a truly National-Local policy programme.

This, though, is only the beginning … of us Looking again together!

Rather than seeking conclusion we now consider ourselves at the beginning: the beginning of dialogue alongside other people involved in finding processes that work towards closing the gap between centralised policy making and local implementation!

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