Evaluating participatory projects

Professor Marilyn Taylor

Institute for Voluntary Action Research

Who am I?

- 40 years working in community development field

- Evaluations of community development and participation projects

- Ranging from £multi-million programmes to working with small projects to help them evaluate themselves

- Using participatory approaches

What am I talking about?

- Evaluating participatory projects

- Participatory evaluation

- Why evaluate?

- What are the challenges

- How to approach evaluation

- A theory of change approach

- Methods etc.

- What have we found out from previous evaluations?

Why it is important to evaluate

- To find out whether you have achieved your objectives

- To improve effectiveness, to find out what works, what doesn't in what circumstances

- To be accountable

- To provide evidence for, and promote the benefits of, participation

- To make a case to future funders

Different stakeholders will have different reasons

Why use participatory methods?

- Ethics
  - To reflect the principles of participation in your programme

- Empowerment
  - It builds confidence and capacity in the community

- To benefit from the knowledge of local people

- To build understanding and ownership among and between all stakeholders

Involving the community can help you...

- Understand the problems being addressed and how they are experienced on the ground

- Identify meaningful measures of success

- Access the people and information you need

- Bring in new knowledge

- Validate the findings – a reality check

Realistic expectations of evaluation

- Attribution – determining causality

- Timescales for change

- What is measurable
  - *"Everything that can be counted does not necessarily count; everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted"*, Albert Einstein

- Time and resources

- Will anyone listen?

Additional challenges of participatory evaluation

- Demystifying evaluation

- Objectivity

- Familiar challenges of any participation (e.g. reach)

- Reconciling conflicting pressures and expectations among stakeholders

How to approach evaluation I

- What do we want from the evaluation?

- Who is the target audience for our findings?

- Types of evaluation
  - Confirmatory/legitimising and largely symbolic
  - Audit/target driven
    - Criteria externally driven
    - Often focused on cost-effectiveness
  - Pluralist – involving all stakeholders
  - Democratic – social justice

Sam Aaronovitch

How to approach evaluation II

- Who needs to be involved?

- Who can help us?

- What time and resources do we need to allow?

The theory of change approach

- A theory of change approach specifies:
    - the assumptions about the process through which the process of change will occur
    - The ways in which all of the the required..outcomes related to achieving the desired long-term change will be brought about and documented as they occur

- It is an on-going process – learning in real time and involving all stakeholders

A theory of change framework I

1. What is the nature of the problem we are trying to address?	3. What needs to happen to achieve change? How do we plan to make a difference	4. How will we know if we have made a difference?	5. How will we measure this? And when?	2. Where do we want to get to; what will be different in x years time?
Rationale	Inputs and outputs; A pathway of change: now, soon, later	Indicators	Measures: Simple, reliable, relevant and measurable	Outcomes; goals

Pathways of change I

Building individual and organisational capacity and identifying local needs

Developing ways forward based on local solutions

Resident led change making a difference to local communities

Pathways of change II

Local networks and activities

Bonding social capital

Linking groups together to have more impact

Bridging social capital

Developing partnerships with the municipality

Linking social capital

A theory of change framework II

Indicator/ measure	What do we already know? (Existing information)	What more do we need to know?	Method for gathering information	Who will gather/ analyse the information	Timescale: when will we gather this information
		Need to focus		Including comm'ty members	

Methodology

- Scoping interviews with all stakeholders

- An initial workshop to establish the framework

- Data collection

- Interim and closing workshops to test out findings, encourage application in real time

Methods for gathering data

- Existing records

- Evaluation sheets at events

- Surveys, questionnaires

- Interviews

BUT also

- Visual techniques, film and video

- Workshop exercises – timelines; snakes and ladders; power maps

- Social media

- Action learning sets

- Peer-to-peer evaluation

Assessing the findings

- When it is realistic to expect change

- What got in the way (context)

- Were our initial assumptions right - did we understand the problem correctly? And how change might be achieved?

- Did we do what we set out to do?

- How are we going to apply what we found out?

- How are we going to disseminate what we have found out? And to whom?

Honesty: We learn from what we don't get right as well as what we do get right

Some key principles

- Inclusive

- Reliable (would someone else come up with the same findings?)

- Valid (does it match our experience?)

- Relevant (is it useful to us?)

- Worthwhile (did we learn?)

And finally…

- A dearth of research evaluating participation

- Incredibly difficult to tease out causality

- Easier to demonstrate benefits to those involved than to the wider community

BUT

- The benefits outweigh the costs

- The weight of evidence points in a positive direction

Does it work?

- World Bank: Participation by beneficiaries was 'the single most important factor in determining overall quality of implementation, and made a significant contribution to project effectiveness including resulting in lower operational costs'

- Health surveys suggest that those who feel they have a say and are engaged in community activities are more healthy

Some resources

- Fair Shares
  - http://fstimpact.org.uk/
  - http://www.fst-impact.org.uk

- Benchmarking Community Participation
  - http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/1859351026.pdf

- Anderson, A. A. (undated), The community builder's approach to theory of change: a practical guide to theory development, Queenstown: The Aspen Institute.

- Connell, J. P & Kubisch, A. C. (1998), 'Applying a theory of change approach to the evaluation of comprehensive community initiatives: progress, prospects and problems', in K. Fulbright-Anderson, A. C. Kubisch & J. P Connell (eds) *New approaches to evaluating community initiatives: Volume 2 Theory, measurement and analysis*, Queenstown: The Aspen Institute.