PUBLIC POLICY EVALUATION: AN INTRODUCTION

Public Policy is a broad and nebulous subject and, as a result, so is evaluation of public policy (Smith & Latimer, 2009; Mark, Henry, & Julnes, 2000). According to Birkland (2001), as cited in Smith and Latimer (2009), there is no universal definition of public policy.

> Instead, there is general agreement that public policy includes the process of making choices and the outcomes or actions of particular decisions; that what makes public policy "public" is that these choices or actions are backed by the coercive powers of the state; and that, at its core, public policy is a response to a perceived problem (p. 4).

Why conduct evaluations of public policy?

According to the Fisheries and Oceans Internal Audit and Evaluation Policy (http://www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/ae-ve/policies-politiques/pdf/policy_e.pdf, accessed June 15, 2010), government departments must have:

> …timely, strategically-focused, objective and evidence-based information on the performance of their policies, programs and initiatives, together with independent and objective assessments of the design and operation of management practices, control systems and information. This is in keeping with modern comptrollership principles and thus is contributing to the government's commitment to continuous management improvement, to produce better results for Canadians and to be accountable for those results (p. 1).

The purpose of evaluation is social betterment (Mark, Henry, & Julnes, 2000), which, in the Canadian context, could be viewed as betterment of Canadian society. Essentially, evaluation asks the question: What have we done? More narrowly, evaluation is concerned with assessing the merit or worth of a particular policy (Mark, Henry, & Julnes, 2000). According to Treasury Board Secretariat, evaluation is defined in the Government of Canada as:

> …the systematic collection and analysis of evidence on the outcomes of programs to make judgements about their relevance, performance and alternative ways to deliver them or to achieve the same results (http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/pol/doc-eng.aspx?id_15024&section=HTML, accessed June 15, 2010, pp. 1-2).

Furthermore, "[evaluation] provides Canadians, Parliamentarians, Ministers, central agencies and deputy heads an evidence based, neutral assessment of the value for money" (p. 2). Evaluation supports accountability, informs decisions on allocation of resources, assists senior management in managing for results, and support improvements to policies through the development of best practices (http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/pol/doc-eng.aspx?id_15024&section=HTML).

In addition, Mark, Henry, and Julnes (2000) focus on evaluation as a process of assisted sense making and state that there are four reasons to conduct an evaluation:

1. Assessment of merit and worth;

2. Improvement of the program and, by extension, the organization;
3. Oversight and compliance; and
4. Development of knowledge.

When should public policy evaluations be conducted?

Evaluation can take place at any stage in the life of a public policy, and can have a broad or narrow scope. Furthermore, evaluations range from *ex ante* (evaluation done prior to policy development and implementation) to *ex post* (evaluation done after policy development and implementation) (Smith & Latimer, 2009).

What forms do public policy evaluations take?

According to Smith and Latimer (2009), there are two primary types of evaluation: formative and summative. Formative evaluations are done in the early stages of policy development and are intended to inform the policy. In other words, some operationalization or implementation of the policy has occurred, but changes or amendments can still be made. Summative evaluations are done when a policy is fairly mature, and are intended to determine whether to end, amend, or extend the policy.

Formative and summative evaluations can then be broken down further into process and outcome evaluations (Smith & Latimer, 2009). Process evaluations, as the name suggests, focus on the process in place to implement or operationalize the policy. According to Smith and Latimer (2009), process evaluations ask questions such as:

- Is the policy operating according to the relevant rules / laws / obligations?
- Is the target population being served by the policy?
- Does the process match the goals of the policy?

Outcome evaluations, on the other hand, assess the achievements (outcomes) of a policy. Smith and Latimer (2009) state that outcome evaluations may include the following questions:

- Is the policy having an impact?
- If so, how much of an impact is the policy having?
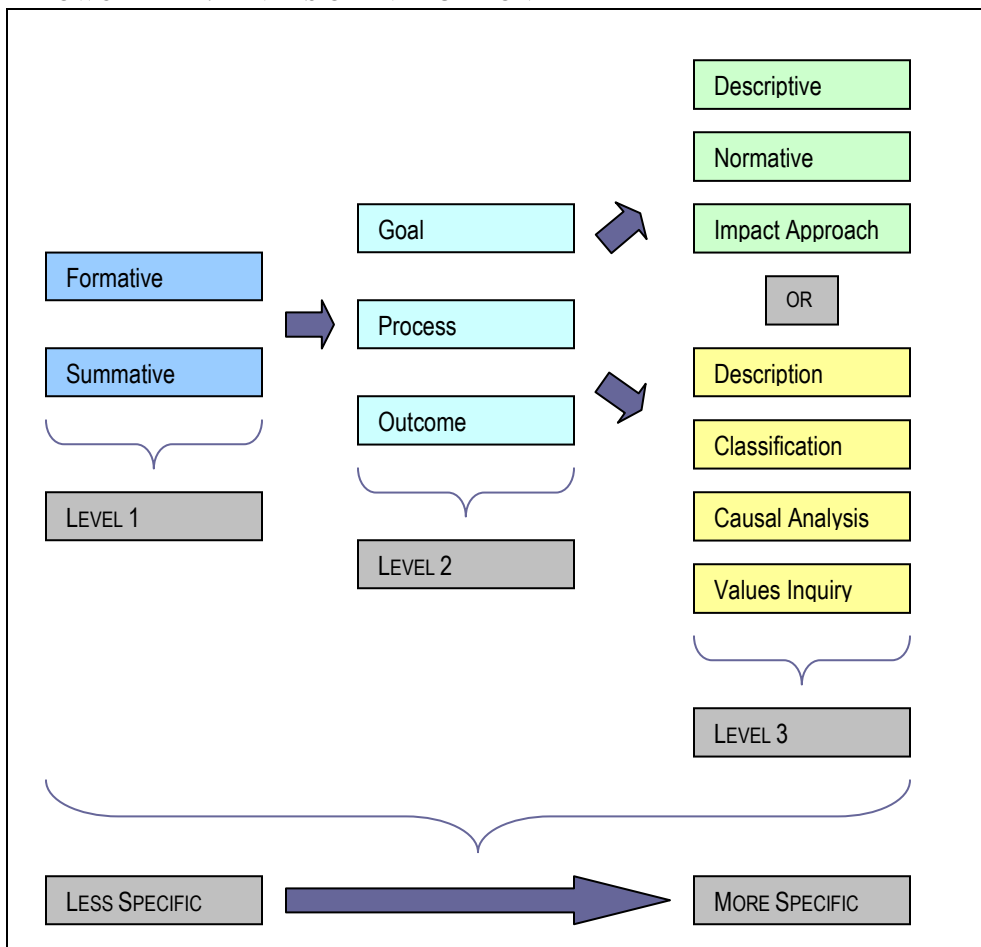- If not, why is the policy failing to have an impact?

McNamara (www.managementhelp.org/evaluatn/fnl_eval.htm, accessed June 17, 2010) also provides information about process and outcome evaluations, but he adds an additional type of evaluation: goal evaluation. According to McNamara, policy development often entails describing specific goals in policy plans. Goal evaluation, then, assesses whether or not a policy meets goals, and to what extent.

Finally, process, outcome, and goal evaluations can be broken down again. According to Smith and Latimer (2009), the next level of evaluations include descriptive evaluations, normative evaluations, and impact approaches (Smith & Larimer, 2009). Descriptive

evaluations, as the name suggests, describe goals, outcomes, and processes, but do not form judgments (Example: Are goals clearly articulate?). Normative evaluations assess the worth of a policy (Example: Are the policy's goals realistic?) Impact approaches focus on the outcomes of the policy (Example: Did the policy achieve its goals?). Mark, Henry, and Julnes (2000), characterize this level of evaluation differently, and include description (measurement of events), classification (grouping and investigating issues, occurrences, structures), causal analysis (if X then Y), and values inquiry (assessing values and value positions).

The flowchart, below, summarizes the options or levels for evaluation, based upon the literature reviewed. As levels progress from left to right, they become more focused or specific. You could select one from each level and have, for example, a formative evaluation, focusing on process, using a descriptive approach. If your evaluation is broader in scope, you could select more than one from each level; however, it is important to have a clear evaluation plan and to clearly define what you are wishing to evaluate.

FLOWCHART 1: LEVELS OF EVALUATION

What are the key components of public policy evaluation?

Based upon the literature, it is clear that there is flexibility in developing an evaluation; however, there are several key components. With public policy evaluation, like any project, it makes sense to proceed logically and systematically. According to Paquette (2002), evaluation is a six step, cylindrical process, which includes:

1. Defining terms;
2. Brainstorming;
3. Distilling statements;
4. Ordering statements;
5. Testing for internal consistency; and
6. Operationalizing.

Evaluation could also be summarized as follows:

1. Research (gather information from internal and external sources, develop a literature review, define terms);
2. Develop an evaluation plan (Formative or summative? Goal, process, or outcome? Descriptive, normative, impact approach? Or, if you prefer, description, classification, causal analysis, or values inquiry?);
3. Define research questions (determine what you want to know and what questions you need to ask);
4. Determine how best to answer your research questions (Analysis of statistics / database? Questionnaire / survey?);
5. Test your evaluation tools (do a small pilot, if possible, to confirm that the questions you are asking will result in the answers you need); and
6. Conduct the evaluation and write up results and, if appropriate, recommendations regarding ending, amending, or extending the policy.

Conclusion

Public policy evaluations can happen at any time in the lifecycle of a policy, and can be broad or narrow in scope. An evaluator must determine where a policy is in its lifecycle, in order to decide whether to complete a formative or summative evaluation. Once that decision is made, the evaluator can determine whether the evaluation should focus on goals, processes, or outcomes, or a combination, and what approach or approaches should be taken (descriptive, normative, impact approach, or description, classification, causal analysis, values inquiry).

Whatever the focus or process that an evaluator chooses, it is important to take the time, up front, to define terms, clearly articulate what is being measured or assessed, and to do the background research necessary to inform the evaluation plan. Finally, it is essential that the evaluation plan be systematic and logical, and, if possible, subject to a pre-test prior to a full evaluation commencing.

Once an evaluation is complete, a final report, which follows in the same systematic, logical format as the evaluation itself, will provide a valuable resource for determining the future of the policy under assessment.

REFERENCES

McNamara, C. (accessed July 15, 2010). Basic Guide to Program Evaluation –
http://www.managementhelp.org/evaluatn/fnl_eval.htm.

Mark, M., Henry, G., & Julnes, G. (2000). Evaluation: An integrated framework for
understanding, guiding, and improving public and non profit policies and programs. San
Francisco, California – Jossey – Baso Inc.

Paquette, L. (2002). Handbook of Public Policy Evaluation: Chapter 21 – Building
frameworks for policy analysis, pp. 145-151. Nagel, S. (Ed.). Thousand Oaks,
California – Sage Publications.

Smith, K., & Larimer, C. (2009). The Public Policy Theory Primer. Boulder, Colorado
– Westview Press.

----. (accessed July 15, 2010). Fisheries and Oceans Canada Internal Audit and
Evaluation Policy. http://www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/ae-ve/policies-politiques/pdf/policy_e.pdf.
Fisheries and Oceans Canada.

----. (2009). Policy on Evaluation. http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/pol/doc-
eng.aspx?id=15024&section=HTML. Treasury Board Secretariat - Government of
Canada.

----. (2009). Policy on Internal Audit. http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/pol/doc-
eng.aspx?id_16484&section=HTML. Treasury Board Secretariat - Government of
Canada.

----. (2005). Pacific Salmon Selective Fishing Program Evaluation – http://www.dfo-
mpo.gc.ca/ae-ve/evaluations/04-05/salmon-saumon-eng.htm. Fisheries and Oceans
Canada.