

Evaluation in reinforcing and resisting hierarchical relations between state and civil society

Sioned Pearce | Helen Blakely | David Frayne | Ian Rees Jones

Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research and Data

pearces11@cardiff.ac.uk

@sionedpearce

Content of the talk

- Background to the study
- Framing the study (the literature)
- The study
- Programme Evaluations (internal and external)
- Fieldwork
- Findings
 - (Re)defining and diminishing value through evaluation
 - Vertical accountability and ‘distancing’
 - Evaluation as a lost saviour
- Thoughts for discussion

Background to the study

Three different research projects with Communities First as a focus, all leading to evaluations (2009; 2012; 2019)

Discussions within WISERD about evaluation arising, sometimes unprompted, in research looking at labour and welfare (Elliott et al 2020; Frayne 2015; Blakely 2011)

Decision made to conduct a metanalysis using data the three projects shortly before the end of the programme in April 2018.

Framing the study (the literature)

- Origins rooted in Michele Lamont (2012) critiques evaluation as a concept
- B. Guy Peters' (2018) 'Policy Problems and Policy Design' sees it as 'the best of times and the worst of times for policy design' (pp 3)
- The New Public Management (Power 1997; Osborne 2006; Bevir, Needham & Waring 2019; Lowe & Wilson 2015)
- Going beyond an understanding of 'what works (for whom and in what circumstances) towards addressing the question of 'knowledge for whom and for what?' (Burawoy, 2004, 2012)

The Case Study

- Communities First ran from 2001 to 2018 across Wales under a Labour-led, devolved Welsh Government. Implemented at ward, sub-ward and lower super out area level, each of the 150 odd CF partnership boards were made up of community, voluntary and public sector representatives.
- The programme had its roots in civic activism and participatory democracy and was originally designed to empower living in the most deprived area of Wales and was, very importantly, meant as a grass roots upwards approach to tackling issues generated by poverty and NOT to address the structural issues driving poverty itself (Adamson, Dearden and Castle 2001).
- The termination of Communities First was announced in 2017 on the basis that ‘... poverty remains a stubborn and persistent challenge’ (Carl Sargeant, 14th February 2017). Project funding ended in April 2018

Programme Evaluations

External Evaluations

- Characterised by being periodical or one-off and externally commissioned on the whole.
- Taken as a whole they reveal a shift in the underpinning principles surrounding the programme (Adamson & Bromilley, 2008; Cambridge Policy Consultants, 2006; Coleman, 2009; Hincks & Robson, 2010; Ipsos MORI and Wavehill Consulting, 2015; National Assembly for Wales, 2003; National Assembly for Wales, 2017; Scorrer & Adamson, 2007; Wavehill Consulting, 2007; Welsh Government 2006).
- External evaluations consistently identified the impossibility of quantifying the impact of community development work.

Internal Evaluation (or monitoring)

- Characterised by its long-term nature, led from within the Welsh Government
- From 2001 to 2007 reports were written and submitted on Word documents with open text sections.
- In 2008 the reporting structure became metric templates with more focus on numerical records.
- In terms of community influence over what was perceived as valuable within the programme, this was reduced.
- Despite this the programme was criticised in the National Assembly's 'Communities First lessons learned' report (2017) for insufficient performance management and failure to collect comparable data on a pan-wales basis.

Fieldwork

- Fieldwork took place in 2009 / 10 – during the first evaluation transition in a move from Word based documents to excel spreadsheets – and in 2017 / 18 shortly before the end of the programme.
- 55 qualitative, semi-structured interviews with community development workers, policy actors, statutory sector workers, civil society representatives, volunteers, residents and academics.
- Data from 25 of the interviews with community development workers and volunteers is presented here; other interviews have been used as valuable points of contextualisation.
- Because the interviews originated from three different studies, many did not set out with the purpose of exploring evaluation and many were open ended. What was striking therefore was the proportion of time and energy dedicated to discussing the internal evaluation across the board.

Findings

- 1.(Re)defining and diminishing value
- 2.Vertical accountability and 'distancing'
- 3.Evaluation as a Lost Saviour?

(Re)defining and diminishing value through evaluation

...but you can't put numbers on it you can't evaluate ... that woman from [X area] ... the way that she changed and her life, was more fulfilled and she knew about her options rather than just accepting things that were thrown her way, she could take charge of her own life, she got educated, she got the skills for a job, how on earth do you put a numerical figure on that? Let's just give her a twelve is it? It's meaningless. (Community development worker 3: February 2009)

...you're measuring the wrong things for an anti-poverty programme, you know. You're measuring spend ... and, you know, you should be measuring social value ... you know. (Community development worker 7: May 2017)

Vertical accountability and 'distancing'

They say, "still send us the case studies", the difficulty is ... we don't hear anything back. (Community development worker 7, May 2017)

Evaluation as a lost saviour?

*...in those days it wasn't, we weren't so clever about outcomes and what had we achieved ... if only I had had the benefit of hindsight I would've made sure that we documented things better ... an awful lot of money was invested in those communities and people are bound to ask well what difference does it make and I think that's the mistake I might've made ... and I think if we'd put more effort into finding out the impact of what we were doing and measuring that impact we would've been in a much better position when people wanted to make changes to the programme....
(Community development worker 10: October 2017)*

Thoughts for discussion

- Evaluation simultaneously reinforcing hierarchical power dynamics and providing a point of engagement with wider pressures and changes
- The work perceived as most valuable operates outside the official categorisation and legitimisation processes, and precisely because it is excluded, it is not held to account by a set of opposing principles
- The importance of considering practitioner knowledge in terms of outcomes and in terms of what is perceived as valuable and how it is measured is prevalent throughout the data.
- Co-production and collaborative evaluation would be a natural match for a programme rooted in empowerment and capacity building. This is the conclusion of the paper.
- Case study synthesis

Key References

Blakely, H. (2011) "A second chance at life": labour, love and welfare on a South Wales estate. PhD Thesis, Cardiff University.

Elliott, E., Cohen, S. and Frayne, D. (2020) The Role of Community Anchor organisations in regulating for engagement in a devolved government setting. In: McDermont, M., Cole, T., Newman, J. and Piccini, A. (eds.) *Imagining Regulation Differently: Co-Creating Regulation for Engagement*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Frayne, D. (2015) *The Refusal of Work: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Work*, Zed Books.

Pearce, S., Frayne, D. Blakely, H. and Jones, I.R. (2020) Evaluation in reinforcing and resisting hierarchical relations between state and civil society in the field of social policy. *Social Policy and Administration*.

Pearce, S., Sophocleous, C., Blakely, H., & Elliott, E. (2020). Moments of alignment between devolved political ideology and policy design: The case of Wales. *People, Place and Policy*, 14(1), 6–23.

Sophocleous, C. (2009) *Exploring Discourses of Partnership Among Regeneration Policy Elites: A Case Study From Wales*, MSc Dissertation: Cardiff University.

South, J and Bagnall, A-M and Southby, K and Freeman, C and Pennington, A and Corcoran, R(2020) *Community Wellbeing Case study synthesis: study protocol*. Leeds Beckett University, Leeds. (Unpublished)