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AUTHOR Wetherill, G. Richard
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INSTITUTION Southern Rural Development Center, State College, Miss.; Texas A and M Univ., College Station. Texas Agricultural Experiment Station.
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ABSTRACT

Program evaluation can be used for both program improvement and program justification, and it can aid in program planning and policy making. In evaluation, we must be concerned with the components which not only make up the program but also the evaluation such as program objectives or goals, program personnel interaction, program processes, resources, intended audiences, evaluation objectives, types and levels of evaluation data, judgment-making processes, evaluator roles and responsibilities, etc. The process of evaluation has no single set of procedures, but the similarities among evaluation models can be identified as: program description; criteria formulation; evidence gathering; judgment making; and dissemination. Established and potential rural development evaluators must be aware of the pitfalls inherent in the evaluation process; the following are some of the evaluator's concerns: irreproachable ethics; program evaluation responsibility vested in a single person; communication of all evaluation plans to the total program staff; data derived from many rather than one source; sensitivity to the necessity of diplomacy; areas of negotiation by program staff and evaluator; flexibility; spelling out program options rather than making actual decisions; commitment to evaluation; evaluation feedback to the proper personnel; and solicitation of feedback prior to implementation. (JC)

THE PROCESS OF EVALUATION IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT*

by

G. Richard Wetherill**

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** Research Associate, Department of Rural Sociology, Texas A&M University, and Co-Leader of the Evaluation and Rural Development Project.

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Preface

This manuscript was prepared as a response to the rural development practicioner's need for knowledge on the subject of evaluative research. However, this paper may best be viewed as just the tip of the evaluation iceberg. Hopefully, I have included most of the relevant concerns for evaluation from the practicioner's standpoint. In my range of exposure to rural development and evaluation, and most notably, the some 18 months of involvement as Co-Leader of this "Synthesis" Project, I have come into contact with some of the most interesting and knowledgeable persons in the areas of rural development and evaluation. The administrators, researchers, practicioners, educators and "Functional Network" members who supplied inputs to this project will probably find their ideas and/or philosophies co-opted for this docume t. This, I believe, is good since the purpose of this paper and of the Project as a whole is synthesis.

G. Richard Wetherill
August, 1976

Evaluation and Rural Development

Network Members

Mr. Dean E. Barrett
Oklahoma State University

Dr. Lawrence Clinton
East Texas State University

Dr. Arthur G. Cosby, Center Associate
Texas A&M University

Dr. Harold B. Crawford
Program Evaluator at Large

Mr. Howard Ladewig
North Carolina State University

Dr. Freddie Richards
Prairie View A&M University

Dr. Andres Steinmetz
University of Virginia

Mr. G. Richard Wetherill
Texas A&M University

Dr. Gerald C. Wheelock
Alabama A&M University

THE PROCESS OF EVALUATION IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Introduction

The rather brief history of evaluation in rural development has been characterized by an attitude of foreboding. This seems to be one of the most prevalent problems in this area at the present time. Such an attitude appears to stem mainly from a lack of information regarding what principles of evaluation are applicable to rural development. The undergirding purpose of this paper is that of providing rural development practitioners with a brief sketch of the tools necessary to conduct an evaluation of rural development programs. Four key issues will be dealt with in this paper: (1) the purpose of evaluation, (2) what we evaluate, (3) the evaluation process, and (4) the problems and pitfalls in evaluation. Although these four key issues cannot by any stretch of the imagination be considered as the total range of the evaluation process, they may be viewed as four issues which any potential evaluator must address before getting started in evaluative research.

There are many definitions of evaluation. Much of the controversy in the field today concerns the development of an adequate definition for evaluation (Ladewig, 1976). Many of these controversies spring from definitions of evaluation which lend a threatening connotation to evaluation. Perhaps what would be most beneficial for the evaluation of rural development programs, would be a definition of evaluation which is non-threatening in nature. One frame in which such an evaluation definition could be couched is one which results from the definition dichotomy of "evaluation for program improvement" versus "evaluation for program justification." The most non-threatening definitions of evaluation tend to come from those who define evaluation as being for the primary purpose of program improvement, while the more threatening definitions relate directly to justification of programs. Therefore, for our purposes here, evaluation may be defined as the systematic examination of a program in operation for the purpose of improvement (Wetherill and Buttram, 1976). This process takes the form of assessing a program in terms of its stated goals and objectives. Such evaluative information is then used in order to make decisions concerning program improvement. Although such a definition may be limited and rather elementary, it can serve as a useful starting point for beginning an evaluation.

Evaluation research may be considered more applied than "pure." Even with all things considered, the ranges of evaluation are great. In terms of "things" evaluated, the range may run the gamut from classroom/teacher-type evaluations, through detailed program evaluations, all the way up to the evaluation of social subsystems. In terms of the degree of evaluative rigor, the range may run from cerebral type of evaluations through formal evaluations. The techniques of evaluation research also encompass a wide range, including informal techniques (participant observations or other unobtrusive measures) up to and including experimental and quasi-experimental designs. It is usually up to the evaluator and/or program staff and administrators to determine wherein these ranges the evaluation may be specified. Such things must be considered in developing a personal philosophy of evaluation.

Why Evaluate?: The Purpose of Evaluation

Everyone evaluates. Our daily lives are filled with decisions we must make based on the conclusions which we draw from the data that we receive. This informal evaluation, more often than not non-verbalized, is part and parcel of our daily living.

In the case of project or program evaluation, all too often informal evaluation is the only type that has been done. Given the increased national emphasis for requiring program evaluation (Hammil, 1975), what is needed now is a formalization of the ofttimes informal process of evaluation. The benefits of such formalization are potentially tremendous. At the very least, evaluation may be used to provide documentation concerning the history and/or impacts of a program. Better evaluations will provide program decision makers with the necessary evaluation information in order to help them make better decisions toward better programs. In this light, program evaluation can be used for both program improvement and program justification, and provide for program planning and policy making. The fact remains that, like it or not, program evaluation is fast becoming a mandatory part of program operations (Wholey, et. al., 1973).

What Do We Evaluate?

The answer to the question posed by the title of this section is not simply answered by saying, "The program." In evaluation, we must be concerned with the components which not only make up the program, but also make up the evaluation. Here, we mean such things as: program objectives or goals, program personnel interaction, program processes, resources, intended audiences, evaluation objectives, types and levels of evaluation data, judgment-making processes, evaluator roles and responsibilities, and the list could go on. In order for this "primer" to be most effective, it seems that possibly two major issues should be addressed. When the question is asked, "What should we evaluate?", the first answer should probably be "the objectives." Being the logical starting point for an evaluation, the objectives of a program should be adequate descriptors of what the program is all about. Generally, the jargon of evaluation labels program objectives as criteria for evaluation (Steele, 1970). In many evaluation designs, criteria become the starting point for delineating what data is to be collected for the evaluation effort.

A major evaluation data concern which we have identified in the realm of social program evaluation is that relating especially to those non-economic variables which have a bearing on social programs. Part of the legacy of social program evaluation, and evaluation research in general, has been the concern for cost-benefit analysis. Needless to say, the knowledge, attitudes, skills, and aspirations of program target audiences are very difficult to operationalize in terms of cost-benefit analyses (Rothenberg, 1975). Dollars-and-cents figures do not necessarily apply to important program considerations such as staff interaction. There is an increasing emphasis in social program evaluation toward the measurement of non-economic variables. This issue is exemplified through such considerations as using attitudes of program recipients as a measure of program effectiveness.

What this all seems to point to is an expanded "bag of tricks" for the program evaluator. The evaluator must be aware of any type of data collection device, no matter what the source, which can aid him in more effectively evaluating a program. The evaluator must learn to rely not only on data gathered from detailed survey designs, but must also to be able to apply more informal techniques such as participant observation (Fry, 1973). Although evaluation data coming from many sources may tend to get involved, the chances become greater that fewer important aspects of the program will be neglected in the examination (Webb, et. al., 1966; and Moursund, 1973). In short, the social program evaluator must be flexible, and always innovative, in conducting an evaluation of a social program (Weiss and Rein, 1969; Rippey, 1973; Deutscher, 1974; Deutscher, 1975; Talmage, 1975; and Ball, 1975).

The Evaluation Process

Just as there is no single, accepted outline for the procedure known as "the scientific method," the process of evaluation also has no single set of steps or procedures which to follow in conducting an evaluation. In the jargon of evaluation, such processes may be called various names. In the literature, "the process of evaluation" may be subsumed under such labels as models, frameworks, or approaches to evaluation (Steele, 1973). Generally, all these terms refer to the same thing, the evaluation process. Rather than to advocate any one particular model over another, we have found that there are similarities among the models (Wetherill and Buttram, 1976). As such, we have identified that the evaluation process encompasses several separate steps.

Logically, any process, especially the evaluation process, must have both a starting point and an ending point. The starting point of the evaluation process was identified as beginning somewhere prior to the actual implementation of an evaluation design. The ending point was identified as falling soon after the evaluation exercise was completed. These two points in the process of evaluation were considered important enough to be phases in and of themselves. Between these two starting and ending phases in the process, we identified three basic phases which, totaled, represent a five-phase process of evaluation. Overall, the process of evaluation as presented in Figure 1 lists the five elements which are more or less common to all the evaluation designs which we examined.

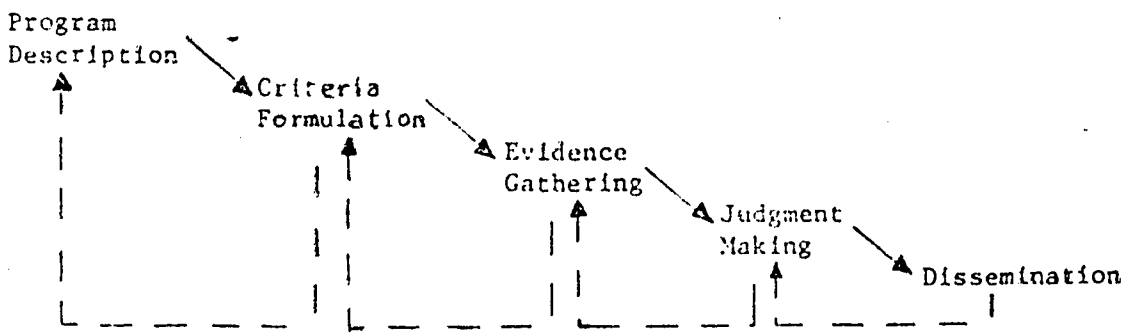

Figure 1.

This process of evaluation is of course very general in appearance. The benefits of this generalized procedure are found mostly in its flexibility. With a general framework such as this, an evaluator may specify within each of the basic phases the process of evaluation which is most applicable to the social program being evaluated. The details are left up to the evaluator or the evaluation team.

The program description phase is the beginning phase of the evaluation process. During this phase the evaluator describes the program. This documentation is an attempt to put down on paper what the program is all about. This serves to direct the evaluator, program staff, and appropriate audiences as to the program's primary goals and what its courses of action have been. Generally, this first phase consists of a written description of the program which serves as a documentation of the goals and operations of the program.

The criteria formulation phase focuses the evaluation on specific aspects of the program. While it is important to consider the objectives of the program in setting up these criteria, it is almost impossible to systematically examine all aspects of the program. What is helpful here is to identify the most critical areas of the program's operation. These critical areas then become the focus of the evaluation. Standards, or acceptable levels of performance, must be developed for each of these criteria. Again, the objectives of the program cannot be ignored in the establishment of evaluation criteria.

The evidence gathering phase concerns itself with the gathering of evaluative data. This phase in the process of evaluation specifies the data to be collected for evaluation evidence. Evidence is gathered concerning the performance or operation of the program according to the evaluation criteria formulated and established in the preceding phase. Data is collected during this phase on each of the specified evaluation criteria. Construction of instruments and appropriate statistical analyses of collected data occur during this phase. At this point the evaluation is probably more similar to the traditional research investigation than at any other phase in the evaluation process. The skills and knowledge required of the evaluator relate to the principles and mechanics of research design, methodology, and analysis.

The judgment-making phase is the most important phase in the whole evaluation process. Without judgment-making there would be no evaluation. The process of making judgments is usually left up to the evaluator. As a starting point for making judgments on the program, the process of evaluation requires that the data collected for evaluation be compared to the criteria established for evaluation and judgments be made on this information regarding the performance of the program. Such judgments are usually based on the discrepancy between the ideal conditions presented in the criteria and the real conditions a indicated by the data collection effort. Judgments and/or program alternatives are based upon the recognition and identifications of such discrepancies.

The dissemination phase is the last phase of the evaluation process. Very few guidelines or procedures for reporting evaluation results have been set down. However, such findings are usually reported back to clients. Sometimes special contractual arrangements are made to include wider audiences. The use of the evaluative findings depends upon the status of the program operation. However, it is very important to remember that evaluation results must be fed back into the program. Only through such feedback can an evaluation make an impact upon future programming and program decisions.

These then are the five basic phases to the evaluation process. Although these five phases are necessary in any evaluation, additional specifications may easily be made within the phases in order to customize the process to any rural development program under examination. It must also be noted, that these phases, or any specification thereof, do not necessarily have to be in a straight linear sequence. In other words, the process of evaluation is not locked into a 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 sequence. Re-specifications may have to be made during the process of evaluation. When such becomes the case, it is necessary to retreat back to an earlier phase in the development of the evaluation (dotted arrows, Figure 1.) so that the program may be adequately evaluated. Re-documentation of the program, or respecification of the criteria, may have to be done, especially due to the often dynamic nature of development projects.

Problems and Pitfalls

Needless to say, program evaluation is a dangerous thing. Evaluation has in its power the fate of the program. Misunderstandings as to the conduct of evaluation may often lead to splits in program staff sometimes going in as many as three directions, including administrators, evaluators, and field workers, all on different sides of the issue (Glennan, 1972; Suchman, 1971; and Wright and Hyman, 1964). Until such a time as the process of evaluation is more completely understood by all rural development personnel, any evaluator or potential evaluator of a rural development project must be aware of the problems and pitfalls inherent in the evaluation research enterprise. A brief list of some of the things an evaluator should be concerned with in order to avoid problems might look something like this:

(1) The ethical responsibilities of an evaluator should be beyond reproach (Clinton, 1976).

(2) The responsibility for program evaluation should be delegated to one person. This would include the commensurate authority to best be able to implement evaluation plans (Bernstein and Freeman, 1975; and Cosby, et. al., 1976).

(3) The total staff of the program should be informed about what is going on in an evaluation. Evaluation plans must be communicated to all relevant program personnel, so there are no surprises with respect to what is going to happen for the evaluation (Stufflebeam, et. al., 1971; and Moursund, 1973).

(4) Reliance on a single source of data as evidence for evaluation should be scrutinized most closely. Data from many different sources usually lends more validity to evaluation evidence (Webb, et. al., 1966; and Moursund, 1973).

(5) The evaluator is usually treated as in intruder into the program. As such, he must be aware of the pressures and constraints on the program being

evaluated. The evaluator must be a diplomat (Longood and Simmel, 1972; Weiss, 1972; and Bogdon, 1975).

(6) The evaluator along with program staff, must get together early in the process of evaluation in order to negotiate the terms of evaluation. Areas of such negotiation include: ways and means of dissemination, access to project personnel and records, audiences for the evaluation results, roles and responsibilities of the evaluator, etc. (Benedict, 1973; Burton, 1976; Provus, 1971; and United Nations, 1962).

(7) The evaluator, as well as the evaluation, must be flexible. Usually, the dynamic nature of rural development programs precludes a strict reliance on detailed evaluation schedules. To a certain degree, evaluation plans should not act as a straight-jacket to evaluation (Suchman, 1967).

(8) Under most circumstances, evaluators ought not to get embroiled with actual decision-making functions in a program. The typical role of the evaluator might be that of spelling out options for program alternatives but not that of making actual decisions exclusive of program staff (Moursund, 1973).

(9) The evaluator should be committed to evaluation. His attitude toward the evaluation process should be positive. This is in contrast to his attitude toward the program which should be unbiased (Bogdon, 1975; and Suchman, 1967).

(10) Evaluation feedback should be given to appropriate program personnel as the evaluation progresses. This does not mean, however, that evaluation results should be given out prematurely (Stufflebeam, et. al., 1971; and Moursund, 1973).

(11) If possible, get someone to react to your evaluation plans before implementing the plans. But know when to stop asking for advice (Benedict, 1973; Burton, 1976; and Weiss, 1972).

The program evaluator is a potentially powerful yet potentially dangerous role. An evaluator must be a specialized generalist. The evaluator must have a knowledge of basic research methods and statistics, techniques of evaluation (the evaluator's bag of tricks), a knowledge of program development techniques (including proposal writing, budgeting, staffing, program planning, program implementation, and above all, the ability to define goals and objectives), and knowledge of both the social system in which the program is operating as well as interpersonal dynamics internal to the program.

In sum, a program evaluator, as well as program evaluation, is in a unique position to aid rural development. Rural development programs which have evaluation built into the program not only have a higher likelihood of success, but are also good examples for subsequent development programs. There is no magic formula for evaluation, nor is any program evaluator a magician. The fact remains, however, that program evaluation has become almost mandatory not only for rural development programs, but also for social action programs in general. The more that is known about the evaluative research enterprise, the better it will be for the acceptance of evaluative results, hence program improvement. When this occurs, evaluative research will not be the "shady" enterprise which many people suggest that it is.

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