

The integration of evaluation and implementation

Case: Evaluating a national action plan to combat homelessness in Finland

Juha Kaakinen

Managing Director

Social Development Co, Finland

juha.kaakinen@sosiaalikehitys.com

Abstract

The Finnish Ministry of Environment commissioned in 2006 a post-evaluation of the National action plan to combat homelessness (2001 – 2005). The evaluation was carried out by Social Development Ltd. The evaluation comprised of a large number of interviews and a comprehensive statistical analysis. Based on the results of the evaluation the evaluator proposed a number of recommendations for future actions. The main recommendation argued for a need of a new national action plan targeted to abolish long-term homelessness.

Two years later, in February 2008, Finnish Government decided to implement a new national action plan to reduce long-term homelessness. In broad outline the new action plan corresponds to the action plan recommended in the evaluation report. The new action plan was drawn up by two working groups appointed by the Ministry of Environment. The evaluator of the former national action plan was appointed as a secretary in both these working groups.

The presentation analyses the different roles of an evaluator and possibilities for an evaluator to participate in the administrative implementation of his recommendations. The integration of evaluation in the community of practice, the role and possibilities of evaluation in strengthening confidence and social capital are discussed.

The main argument of the presentation crystallizes in the question of the credibility. An important part of the credibility and coherence of the evaluation is related to the recommendations. Making recommendations is not a simple process of deduction. It is a critical but also a creative moment in evaluation that calls for a certain kind of know-how from the evaluator where a practical knowledge of the evaluation subject and relevant administrative processes are valuable. This kind of practical knowledge can give evaluator a significant role also as an active builder of common understanding between different stake-holders.

Key words: currency of meaning, implementation, credibility.

The integration of evaluation and implementation

Case: Evaluating a national action plan to combat homelessness in Finland

Juha Kaakinen

Managing Director

Social Development Co, Finland

juha.kaakinen@sosiaalikehitys.com

In 2006 The Finnish Ministry of Environment commissioned a comprehensive post-evaluation of the National action plan to combat homelessness (2001 – 2005). A large number of both national and local organizations and actors were involved in implementing the action plan. The evaluation was carried out by Social Development Ltd. The evaluation comprised of a large number of interviews of national, regional and local stake-holders and a statistical analysis. Based on the results of the evaluation the evaluator proposed a number of recommendations for future actions. The main recommendation argued for a need of a new national action plan targeted to abolish long-term homelessness. In the recommendation both the focus of the action plan and its main targets were identified.

Two years later, in February 2008, Finnish Government decided to implement a new national action plan to reduce long-term homelessness for the years 2008 – 2011. In its broad outline the new action plan corresponds to the action plan recommended in the evaluation report. In the preparatory process of the new action plan the need for this kind of action plan was justified by the results of the evaluation. The new action plan was drawn up during the Autumn of 2007 by two working groups appointed by the Ministry of Environment. The evaluator of the former national action plan was appointed as a secretary in both of these working groups. In August 2008 state authorities and ten major cities undersigned contracts including local action plans based on the new national action plan.

The evaluation described above can be seen as a rare example and exemption of the integration of evaluation into administrative processes related to implementation also on a personal level. But this case raises also many interesting questions about the role of evaluation and of its significance in society. The societal significance of evaluation is crystallized in the question of its usefulness. To be socially significant also evaluation must produce added-value, it must have practical and measurable effect.

It's not seldom that we come up with the conclusion that an evaluation report is scientifically valid and well-executed and its results are interesting and important. Still it seems that the evaluation has had practically no impact on the object of evaluation. Evaluators are eager to point out that evaluation in itself was good and its results interesting but the leaders and decision-makers responsible for the activity under evaluation didn't like it and passed it with a shrug of shoulders. This may be true, but

quite often it is also related to the fact that an evaluation report seems to lack the currency of meaning, to use a phrase coined by Stanley Fish. It means that evaluation is lacking relevance and doesn't appear to be applicable in practice for the key stakeholders whose action is decisive for the recommendations to be realized.

For example, the evaluation of the homelessness programmes is directed to the actual stakeholders and decision makers both on local and national levels —not other evaluators. This is a fact that should be taken into account when executing the evaluation and especially when reporting the evaluation findings. Unfortunately the model most commonly used in evaluation reports seems to be based essentially on the model used in reporting the results of academic scientific research which employs a mode of presentation and a language the majority of the potential readers of the report are not familiar with.

It goes without saying that the standards for the execution, methodological sustainability and coherence of evaluation should remain of high quality. What can be changed on the contrary, is where, how and to whom the results of the evaluation are presented.

How well the evaluation can be made use of, its currency of meaning, will be tested in the recommendations presented by the evaluator.

Making recommendations is not a simple process of deduction: the results of the evaluation don't automatically produce relevant recommendations. Presenting recommendations is a critical but also a creative moment in evaluation. To produce realistic and credible recommendations calls for a certain kind of know-how from the evaluator where a practical knowledge of the evaluation subject and relevant administrative processes is valuable.

Evaluating homelessness programmes requires adequate foreknowledge of homelessness as a phenomenon, as well as of those administrative and decision-making processes on the local and national levels which are essential for the realization of the homelessness programmes.

Evaluation can have different positions with regard to the subject of evaluation and its associated processes. Perhaps a more traditional view emphasizes the significance of the objectivity and impartiality of the evaluation. In this paradigm evaluation appears as a somewhat detached and external intervention into the process. A typical case is the evaluation of a project or a programme, where the evaluator does his or her work and exits without giving much after- thought to the impact and consequences caused by the evaluation itself and the evaluation report. Technical or technological interest of knowledge, in the sense Habermas uses the term, is a common characteristic of this kind of evaluation.

Evaluation can also have a more active role in the post-evaluation life. At his/her best the evaluator is an integrated and essential actor in the administrative processes entailed by the recommendations presented in the evaluation. A typical feature of this kind of evaluation is an emancipatory interest of knowledge as well as conceiving the societal significance of the evaluation in an ethical context. The evaluator strives to promote social progress and the associated issues he/she regards as valuable. The evaluation consequently always has a political dimension to which the evaluator does not take a completely impartial stance.

A situation where an evaluator has a post-evaluation official status in the administrative processes connected to the implementation of the recommendations is no doubt exceptional, but evaluation can have also other active roles as well. With regard to implementation it is essential to understand that projects and programmes have a different lifespan compared to many other administrative processes. Understanding this diversity and administrative continuity is crucial for the impact of evaluation. Even good evaluation reports and recommendations are not useful unless they indicate a clear understanding of those administrative and decision-making processes crucial to the realization of the recommendations.