

Trying to Measure an Octopus: Formative Evaluation of Science- Policy-Practice Interfaces

Presentation to RGS-IBG conference 26-29th August 2014



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With thanks to Willie Towers, Mags Currie and Carol Kyle for data collection assistance





Centre for Expertise on Water

- New form of funding from Scottish Government –
- *“to connect research and policy, delivering objective and robust research and professional opinion to support the development and implementation of water policy in Scotland”*
- Purpose:
 - deliver timely and accurate advice to the Scottish Government and partners (SEPA, Scottish Water)
 - co-ordinate research, analysis and **interpretation**
 - stimulate innovative thinking
- Boundary organisation – ‘honest broker’
- £1 million a year (2011-2016)

Demand-driven research

- Having an ‘impact’ through research depends on knowledge exchange not knowledge transfer
- Non-linear, cumulative, deliberative exchanges – knowledge as a transient, embedded practice
- Motivations include accountability, improved performance and ensuring value for money (Rymer, 2011, ‘Post-Rothschild’)
- Critique of neoliberal ‘audit culture’ and resistance to co-option of ‘impact’ in academia (e.g. Pain et al, 2011)
- Concerns about managerialism; commercialisation and lack of academic freedom



Research Impact & its evaluation

- Impact defined as ‘results of a programme for the people it was intended to serve’ (Weiss, 1998) ????
- All actors are impacted ... attention to how and why
- Three forms of impact/outcome:
 - Building capability (increased skills etc)
 - Conceptual change (changed world views etc)
 - Instrumental change (new policies and practices etc)
- Occur over different timeframes



Impact evaluation

- Three forms of outcome:
 - Building capability (increased skills etc) **INTERMEDIATE**
 - Conceptual change (changed world views etc) **INTERMEDIATE**
 - Instrumental change (new policies and practices etc) **FINAL**
- Occur over different timeframes
- Forward (track research into impact on policy) or backward (change in policy tracked back to underpinning research)
- Difficult to measure: time lags, many intervening factors etc
- Few examples of impact evaluation in environmental policy

Methodology

- Baseline questionnaires & post-project interviews
- Formative evaluation – 2 cycles done
- Conceptual framework to guide data collection & analysis

Interactive networks
generate
opportunities for
capacity building

Capacity building
leads to mutual
understanding and
changes in
conceptual thinking
and cultures

Changes in
conceptual and
cultural aspects allow
instrumental changes
to policy & delivery

Instrumental changes
to policy and delivery
lead to
environmental
improvements,
societal wellbeing
and economic growth



Influences on Impact



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Influences (ESRC 09)	Findings	Comments
Policy focus & clear objectives	✓	Clear demand but managing multiple 'customers' hard Simple question can be complex
Good relationships and networks	✓	Easiest when building on earlier joint projects – relationships strengthening but different cultures/styles
Ongoing user involvement	✓	Increased impact through understanding why needed and implications of results; challenges with timeframes and timescales for planning & delivery
Reputation for good research	✓	Based on underpinning expertise from other funding sources
Infrastructure and management	✓	Full-time facilitation team and website; problems with tendering process
Knowledge brokers	✓	Assistance with presentation of final results – translating for policy makers difficult; but needs their commitment

• ESPPI Successes

- Results helped illustrate importance of processes as well as outcomes
- Steering Group and Facilitation Team listened and adapted processes
- Established methodology for ongoing evaluation

ESSPI Challenges

- Recruitment & consultation fatigue
- Concerns over self-evaluation
- Opportunity cost of resources (£50k from £1million programme)
- Why not just use metrics already collected





What Octopus?

- Organisation always ‘in-the-making’ e.g. Yr 1 projects involved:
 - Five customer organisations (22 individual PIs)
 - Working with the James Hutton Institute & seven Universities (45 PIs)
- Evolving policy context e.g. new engagement with Drinking Water Quality Regulator
- Learning lessons from formative evaluation means not comparing like with like year to year
- Evolution is an indicator of success yet disrupts cost-effective metrics



What Octopus?

- Intermediate outcomes difficult to define, conceptualise and measure
- Measure processes and contexts to understand why and how outcomes were achieved
- Importance of ‘time’; ‘communication’, ‘cultures’ in results illustrates mixture of inter-personal and institutional influences on outcomes
- Often social capital and social learning can’t be traced post-hoc yet valuable outcomes
- Need specific and situated exploration and can’t be read off from metrics on final outcomes (or outputs)

What have we learnt?

- Tension between showing (positive) impact of CREW and reflexive/critical research on the practices of interfacing
- Move from $KT > KE >$ co- production requires understanding intermediate impacts
- Deliberative conflicts and problem framing not amenable to simple metrics
- Evaluating final impact fraught with difficulties yet most sought after for ‘impact agenda’
- Downplays role of social capital, relationships and practices through time
- Recognise the potential for metrics to produce the behaviours they seek to measure
- Impact evaluation should make boundary work more visible



The XXVI European Society for Rural Sociology Congress

Places of Possibility? Rural Societies in a Neoliberal World

18-21 August 2015, Aberdeen Scotland

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• Themes

- rural economies in neoliberal globalisation, opportunities for innovation;
 - rural social relations and welfare: social impacts and responses to neoliberalism;
 - the neoliberalisation of nature and possibilities for the rural environment;
 - neoliberalism and agriculture: pressures, responses and possibilities.
- Academic field trips: animal/human/environment relations, visual research methods, gentrification, rural governance, multi-disciplinarity in practice, and local sustainability transitions
 - Travel scholarships and awards available
 - Call for working groups now open – closing 6th October 2014
 - See: www.esrs2015.eu