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Five years later: impact after evaluating a program combating homelessness
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Abstract

The variety of how evaluations are put to use has attracted the interest of many scholars. Suggestions are made that usage might be instrumental, for enlightenment, legitimation or something else. In this paper-session the impact of a specific evaluation applying program-theory will be in focus. The evaluation concerned a statutory Swedish program. Aimed at reducing homelessness, an investment of 5 million Euro engaged 23 innovative projects nationwide. Homelessness is a wicked social problem exhibiting great resistance to current solutions while engaging numerous actors, organizations and agencies simultaneously and at various levels within public and civil domains. How does this affect the evaluation of programs and projects aspiring to combat homelessness? And in what way(s) can we speak about evaluation utilization? Findings show that impact takes place in an iterative process where serendipities play an important role.

Background

It was very instructive and good cooperation, I think that if new initiatives about combating homelessness will appear, there are a lot of lessons to be learned from this (evaluation). Official

Those are the words of an official reflecting upon the impact of an evaluation five years after its ending. She seems quite pleased when looking back. How come? Did the valuation change conditions for the poor and homeless? Or did it bring new insights to politicians and officials leading to a new policy? The answer is no. And still the evaluation was quite successful. In this paper I will try to solve this puzzling mystery.

The production of knowledge from evaluation occurs in a natural environment, often together with and under the strong influence of stakeholders. The results are to be applied and practiced within organizations and political areas. The demands of stakeholders on evaluators and the expectations about what an evaluation should result in vary significantly. This also holds true for the opinion of evaluation research concerning the right of stakeholders to be influential. One could believe that the need for and availability of evaluations varies from one political arena to another. Within professionalized fields such as health and medical services, evaluation (evidence-based) is most often a self-evident element. However, it is unclear what influence that demands on performing an evaluation has in the more clearly politicized arenas. The value of an evaluation for concerned public officials and politicians will be in focus in this paper.

Homelessness as a political and social dominion has a number of features that makes it particularly illustrative for a conference focusing the benefit of evaluation. Besides being a wicked problem it offers several different analytical avenues. The homelessness problem will be studied at different levels depending on ontological models; structural and/or individualistic models or, alternatively, a focus on pathways into and out of homelessness. There is a substantial lack of consensus on definitions and the ways in which homelessness should be fought. A polyphony of actors want to
fight homelessness. Complexity, as linked in this example to homelessness, is a well-known phenomenon and presents a great variety of opportunities regarding how to design an evaluation. Recommendations in sorting out complexities suggest concretion, flexibility, and innovation as well as extending an invitation to expertise on the matter in focus (Forss, Marra, & Schwartz, 2011).

These recommendations guided the program-theory evaluation process in this case where different methods were applied under the umbrella of the main model. The case is an evaluation conducted upon a program from the government commission "Homelessness - multiple faces, multiple responsibilities". Author was in charge of this evaluation organized by the School of Social Work at Lund University from 2009 – 2010, final report published in 2011 (Denvall, Granlöf, Knutagård, Nordfeldt, & Swärd, 2011). A group of five researchers from two universities worked part-time during two years. Approximately 5 million euro was allocated to 23 development projects in 16 municipalities. The evaluation aimed at investigating whether this funding had provided the desired effects according to the objectives of a governmental strategy. Results and conclusions from the evaluation were supposed to be used as guidance at national level regarding the future development of work and the organization to combat homelessness and housing exclusion.

**Impact**

Evaluation research does not have a homogenous core, but is rather divided when it comes to theory, choice of criteria, methods, and the significance of the relationship to stakeholders (Alkin, 2012; Shadish, Cook, & Leviton, 1991; Weiss, 1998). Today, evaluations are characterized as being complex and needing to balance many needs concerning control, methods, and theory awareness as well as the involvement of stakeholders (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). It is unclear which theoretical and methodological directions evaluation practice has entered upon and if this can be derived from definite problems or demands of stakeholders, especially in a Swedish context. The discussion about the usefulness of evaluations has been a thriving topic and the need for a common theory about the influence of evaluations within different sectors has been emphasized (Kirkhart, 2000).

Research knowledge and surely even evaluation knowledge was for a long time regarded as useful if it could support administrative and political decision-making, thereby contributing to problem-solving (Vedung, 2010; Weiss, 1980). At that time this form of knowledge constituted a natural and desirable foundation for decision-making. Clearly, researchers should be involved to connect the goal to the means. Research could even be used to understand the results and effects of an activity. Through this perspective, research enriches the political work as well as it increases the level of professionalism by adding expert knowledge.

Since the 1950s, international social science research in a majority of disciplines has condemned this optimistic picture of research and science as engineering and *instrumental use* of knowledge from evaluations (Lindblom, 1959; Simon, 1947; Weiss & Bucuvalas, 1977; Wildavsky, 1979). The interest has been aimed at discerning whether alternative types of use are available. A large number of models for actual application have thus been suggested. *Impact* is recommended and addresses to what degree knowledge from evaluations influences policy (Henry & Mark, 2003; Kirkhart, 2000). Evaluations are expected not only to deliver knowledge to the decision-maker about the results of the activities, but also in some way influence the reality that they assess. Evaluation as a practical activity can be described as an issue of *legitimacy* where the value of rationalized investigation methods and carefully formulated decisions are assessed in a political context. According to Carol Weiss research an evaluator should not expect an immediate use, however evaluation does support policy together with other suitable kinds of information (Weiss, 1990).
Research about knowledge use often addresses questions about instrumentalism and rational decision-making. It is not the possible value of the research results per se (for example, topicality, news value, scientific support, and reporting style) that decides if they are to be used or not. Use, however, can have its origin in clashes of interest and changing power relations since investment in knowledge can be a way to support certain interests within an organization or the organization’s relationships to its surroundings (Nilsson, 1993). Likewise, evaluation has a conceptualizing function due to its informative effect: one reconsiders and forms new ideas. The relationship between evaluation and the user is a complicated exchange relationship where advocates for scientific knowledge are subject to the influences of actors on different levels in different structures with varying interests; a complex interaction that might lead to controversies.

But controversies should not be taken for granted. Since the 1970s, international discussions about knowledge use have been strongly affected by Weiss’s research. Her description of how knowledge “creeps” (Weiss, 1980, p. 397) up on the user had a significant influence at first. The image of this passive user who slowly reacts to and takes in research has in recent times been complemented with an image of a user who is active and aware. According to this view, knowledge is used based on fixed points of interest and value-based standpoints. In this case, scientific knowledge constitutes one of many means for influencing an intended development (Patton, 1978).

To sum up: Evaluation shifts from delivering an objective product in the end of a process to being an ongoing activity forming the outcome where evaluation tends to move up-stream in the process (Vedung, 2010). We know that evaluation might affect policy but that it happens in complex iterative processes where starting and ending slides together. Many suggestions have been made in evaluation-research to characterize the eventual impact, from direct use over to enlightenment and legitimating politics.

The evaluation-assignment

In the presented case was the orders of the evaluation the National Board of Health and Social Welfare, a government agency under the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs. They execute political priorities, but are not run by politicians, instead by professional administrators. Four goals were stressed in the government's strategy, they also guided the evaluation:

Objective 1. Everyone shall be guaranteed a roof over one’s head and be offered further co-ordinated support based on individual needs.
Objective 2. The number of women and men who are inmates or are enrolled in a correctional institution or a treatment unit, who are staying at home to care and do not have accommodation arranged before being discharged or should be reduced.
Objective 3. Entry into the ordinary housing market shall be facilitated for women and men who are in housing ladders, training flats or other forms of accommodation provided by social services or other actors.
Objective 4. The number of evictions shall decrease and no children shall be evicted.

The evaluation found that only few of the 23 projects had built their projects on current knowledge of homelessness research. Instead, there were a large number of local models and solutions, and the projects differed how they tackled homelessness. Some wanted to improve the conditions for working with the homeless, others wanted to prevent people to get into homelessness by avoiding evictions and others wanted to integrate homeless people in the housing market. It proved easier to work for the people still living in their apartments and intervene early, than try to acquire accommodation for those who had been homeless for a long time. The evaluation showed that the objectives had not been reached. The first three goals were met to a limited extent for some single projects only. Work to prevent evictions, had tangible, positive results from several of the projects.
The evictions had generally decreased since the mid-1990s in Sweden. One could assume that the eviction prevention efforts have provided some effects especially when working together with other agencies. However, the evaluation showed the paradox that municipalities that had implemented the projects did not reduce the number of evictions. Rather small projects, results that were expected in a short time together with difficulties in implementing new solutions in municipalities that are stable and difficult to change; the result was no surprise.

Conclusions were in line with what research and national extensive evaluations had pointed out earlier. Several government reports had raised a number of elaborated proposals. The big question was rather how the ideas could be realized. Five of the recommendations from the evaluation are presented below:

1. The overall understanding of the problem of homelessness should adapt the European policy: homelessness is a violation of basic social rights. It was suggested that the state should develop effective national and municipal strategies with explicit goals in line with the guidelines of the Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion adopted in March 2010 and as part of the EU in 2020.

2. The problems of homelessness could not be solved locally. Instead the importance of effective housing policies and well-functioning housing program was pointed out. In addition to building more homes, it was important to create conditions for people who are in a situation of homelessness in order to gain access to housing in the ordinary housing stock with reasonable rents.

3. A joint European typology when assessing the number of homeless people was suggested. Now, there was great confusion and various methods exacerbate this. This recommendation required coordination between countries in Europe.

4. Housing First models to combat homelessness (Tsemberis, 2010) was recommended in order to serve as a national strategy, combined with flexible and personalized assistance. Implementation should be as an experiment accompanied by research. Housing first had been recommended some years earlier by a national commission.¹

5. New government initiatives were welcomed as a way to stimulate development. According to the results from the evaluation it would probably be more effective with fewer well-prepared projects with good potential to create comprehensive and coherent policies at local and national level in order to sustainably reduce the extent of homelessness. Such efforts could also involve support for housing first and forcefully try to reduce shelters and other lodging accommodations.

Five years later only one of the recommendations – Housing First – has been implemented and only to a certain extent. This is not due to the recommendations. Instead it is an effect of opportunities made possible during the process.

**The evaluation-design**

A program theory (program logic) evaluation model was in use, added with analyses of mechanisms that generated outcome in five of the 23 projects. The model is well established internationally since the 1970s and is often used in complex evaluation program where the aim is to find which factors in a program that creates success, for whom, and under what circumstances (Rogers, 2008; Weiss, 1998). The evaluation model is based on the explicit and implicit assumptions that form the basis for

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¹ Housing First has in experiment proved to be effective even for people who because of drug-related problems or mental illness have been far way from the housing-market. A homeless person is offered a contract for an apartment and in addition offers individualized and voluntary support in order to be able to keep the contract. The method is in great contrast with traditional interventions where the homeless person must first show they can handle their accommodation. The method has shown to be cost effective.
a specific program (project) which is expected to contribute to any form of change; they form the logics of the project. Evaluation ambitions were to clarify key stakeholders’ ideas how desired goals should be achieved and what other outcome could be expected, then to investigate the implementation whether the objectives had been achieved.

According to this model of evaluation a program is built around a theory of implementation and of casual elements the evaluation should clarify this hypothesis and test it (Koenig, 2009). The evaluator is initially looking for ideas and logical starting points; what do they want to accomplish and why? This is done together with the evaluands. An evaluand is typically satisfied that a third party reflects upon and clarifies goals and the logic model. By using the program theory-framework the evaluation then explains how and why a program reaches a certain result by illustrating its paths for implementation, and the underlying mechanisms that influenced the program (I). It thus seems important to distinguish between implementation theories that aim to describe the activity itself and how it is implemented and programmatic, conceptual theories, which specify mechanisms for change.

Deliberately was a deselection of pre-post studies or comparative studies focusing effect. Experimental design searching for contrafactual knowledge was not available since no such project was found among the 23 who were granted funds. Instead, the evaluation sought to clarify the effects as far as possible retrospectively through document studies, internal statistics and registry-data and interviews individually and in groups. Evaluation started to identify the program-theory and factors expected to create success and how the goals were to be achieved. The second phase consisted of studies of the project outcomes, ie, the results that projects generated in the light of the expected outcome. Self-assessments were used, interviews individually and in groups were conducted together with contacts with stakeholders and document studies in the form of projects, internal materials such as registry data, project plans and activity reports. All projects were visited, five were selected for special studies of mechanisms that generated the achievement of objectives in relation to the government’s four overarching strategies. Additionally, a forum for reflection and dissemination of knowledge about homelessness was built up along with efforts from the National Board on generating knowledge on homelessness research and implementation of the operational projects. A public website was built up and four joint two-day conferences were arranged.

A parallel track was to design a place for learning about homelessness supporting implementation. Knowledge and experiences generated in the framework of the evaluation was made visible and staff from the projects had the opportunity for learning, dialogue and critical reflection. The hope was to support workplace learning, creating partnerships and networks between the actors, and to contribute to the exchange of knowledge and experiences. Dialog-based conferencing was also a means of promoting evaluation work by developing contacts between evaluators and the evaluated. Within program evaluation it is not perceived as a problem if the evaluator is promoting the program and seeking to provide support for social development (Henry & Mark, 2003; Shadish et al., 1991). Through feedback to the organization, formative change is granted and the evaluator adds a value to the process (House & Howe, 1999). Organizations are assumed to need support to build and organize knowledge and routines in order to improve performance. Evaluation research on "Capacity building" tells us that one can’t expect those who order the evaluation or become its subject to exploit the knowledge produced.

**Analyzes and methods**

Analysis has been inspired by a theoretical framework proposed by Kirkhart (2000), who has developed a model which integrates a timing aspect of intentional/non-intentional influence and a simultaneous product and process perspective. What happens to the evaluation – what makes the evaluation process important? Of crucial interest are the various forms of influence that may impact
outcome both as a product and as a process, making it possible to identify any correlation between problems - design – use in an evaluation (Kirkhart, 2000; Shadish et al., 1991). Carol Weiss suggested some years ago that policy uses knowledge from research and evaluation in four ways: as a warning of problems and trouble; as guidance how to improve existing policies and practices; as enlightenment since a new way of thinking might be offered and finally as mobilizing support for policy proposals. In practice they often blur (Weiss, 1990, p. 109).

This research has been added with insights by Laura Leviton and Patrick Grasso from the special section of AJE 2003 (4) What is useful evaluation? Since unexpected outcome takes places one could speak about “The perverse polymorphism of knowledge use”. Or as they claim; serendipities. Leviton suggest that “…we cannot anticipate completely what the implications of the work will be for various policy and program audiences” (Grasso, 2003; Leviton, 2004, p. 532). A serendipity is when something lucky happens by chance, “the accidental discovery of something that turns out to be valuable” (e Cunha, Clegg, & Mendonça, 2010, p. 320). Columbus discovering America when searching for the Orient, and the discovery of penicillin are two examples from our history. It is suggested to be a vital ingredient in research and development but is more seldom discussed when speaking about evaluation. I suggest serendipities could be looked after when you have unexpected outcomes and when process-use is emphasized and you suspect that it not the specific findings from the evaluation that support change.

When writing this paper I have taken part of official documents published after the evaluation. I was interested in taking part of reflections, citations and references to the evaluation. I have also spoken with members of the evaluation team, made an interview with the former vice-chancellor at Lund university (telephone) and with two officials from the National Board of Health and Social Welfare (recorded and transcribed). The 23 projects (or what have remained of them) have received a survey; results are not included in the findings-section.

Findings

First I will start by presenting the unintended twist that took place short after the evaluation had started. The process was boosted from the outside, this influenced the impact. Then I will discuss how the evaluation affected the orders of the evaluation as well as organizations and politicians at the outside.

Serendipities

The Vice-Chancellor of the university at that time drew attention of the evaluation when the contract between the University and the National Board was to be signed by him. At the same time, he happened to meet two colleagues to the evaluation-team when having a kebab for lunch. He already knew that they were working with social issues and they came to discuss the problems of homelessness and how they could be handled. Shortly thereafter, he contacted the evaluation-team. In parallel with the evaluation, on his initiative, a number of activities run by the university started. Above all, the focus was on advancing the model of Housing First. This is an evidence-based model that had been discussed in one of the previous national evaluations conducted in Sweden. However none of the 23 projects worked with it and it had never been tried before in Sweden. The vice-chancellor is a person dedicated to solving social issues and providing social betterment and he wanted add value by the universities involvement.

I am ashamed that such a rich country such as Sweden has been homeless ... Would not it be fun if we can pull together to eradicate homelessness? The Vice-Chancellor, brochure 2010.
In order to change the current homelessness policy a broad cooperation between researchers, policy makers, various government agencies, building-industry, interest groups and housing associations was required. Autumn -09 an initial meeting was arranged at the university and the idea of Housing First was presented and questions were asked if there was any interest to take part of an implementation. There was. Several local authorities wanted to venture and the School of Social Work started getting daily calls from officials and politicians who wanted to know more.

That was the starting point of continued involvement of researchers from the university, conferences, opinion articles as the launching of housing first went on. The university created some seed-money for the internal process, and Housing First began to be tested in some municipalities. November 2016 it is in use in about 30 Swedish municipalities (oral source, researcher at Lund University). Fidelity is low though (Knutagård & Kristiansen, 2013).

All this is due to two coinciding events. The Vice-Chancellor noticed the question of homelessness when he was to sign an agreement together with accidently running into two dedicated researchers when having lunch.

**Affecting oneself**

Yes, you get another way of looking at it. Official A

This quotation shows what is referred to as enlightenment. The official is clear that the evaluation process provides an opportunity to learn, but it is not decided when knowledge can be used explicitly. It facilitates learning though. This is in line with Carol Weiss research showing that administrators might welcome research since it offers new ways of thinking and might improve their current policy (Weiss, 1977).

*Similar missions in the future or similar efforts may have the help of one of these evaluations actually. I'm being completely honest when I say that if, say we would get a number of money and allocate them, I would definitely read about it... just to see, how to regard these projects. That I would do.* Official A

The evaluation provides greater security to work, thus becoming a safety-enhancing activity. Evaluations might be stored for the future, they provides some kind of security.

*Tracking, municipalities tend to do the same thing all over... lack of long-term thinking, lack of anchoring, and so. But, I think it (the evaluation) is instructive and provides learning.* Official A

Here we see an example of how the same official embraced the new knowledge from evaluation and thus may be critical and reflective over the current status in how practice implements good examples and new methods. The evaluation provides learning and thus enhances the professional eye. In the nest quote this is even more obvious, evaluation can also be perceived as a way to assert their professionalism.

*In any sense it brings an input and an ambition for the future and the evaluation shows that this is precisely what is so difficult. And you highlight this now. It is a kind of an impact since you bring in a skill that adds to the next job, like this long-term perspective, how do we stick to it and support sustainability.* Official A
Affecting others

The following two quotes show administrators reasoning when asked about how evaluation affected politicians. They are quite skeptical that impact will show directly, on the other hand they put homelessness on the agenda:

*Unfortunately it is difficult to achieve lasting change through projects. But if we see it from a different direction ... it will still, it will be many conversations about homelessness here.* Official A

*... a question (homelessness) that lives within a lot of different groups in society. And one might be interested in the issue with this kind of approach, and from one of these projects you can somehow get to be on the political agenda that we talk about homelessness, that they expect action.* Official B

Strategic choices can thus be accomplished by officials trying to influence policy. This evaluation may have emerged as a control mechanism, albeit invisible in the background. The evaluation brings certain legitimacy to the issue.

*And then I was thinking that it’s hard to determine what comes first, but during the evaluation, this whole discussion of housing first as an option that you should arrange accommodation and having people try things out first, you should have a different way of looking at it. I also think it is very difficult to make an impact if there is no program behind connected to the political context. Then it is much easier to diffuse new ideas and make them survive.* Official A

Evaluation certainly is a way to gain support for ideas and to have an impact. Then the evaluation will be an element in a process that opens the door to new possibilities.

*The message of an evaluation is really important together with all sorts of other messages that go in the same direction so why not try these ... why stick to the old ideas of shelters we know are humiliating people. To once again point out there is other ways to work with this. But you need long periods across of time, and well in that way I think that evaluations gains their place in a big discussion about how to work with the question of homelessness.* Official B

According to this opinion evaluation is part of a larger conversation. It is a piece in a new story of alternative ways to combat homelessness formed during the evaluation. There is also a combination of ways to gain impact and affect others. The evaluation brings an opportunity to learn and improve for the individual, but also a chance to make new demands, it might bring ammunition and people involved find arguments for their policy. They stay as a guarantee for future actions:

*If we are to allocate resources some more time, then it should not be unique to read an evaluation, then you have to go back and check what you have learned from previous programs.* Official A

Discussion

This study corroborates other research saying that evaluation-use is multidimensional, that you should consider context and take into consideration that an evaluation originates processes hard to plan in advance. What claims to be the results could depend on either the product (often text) or the process or a combination of both. They exist intertwined, and apparently take no linear course.
When adding multiple users this process of evaluation opened possibilities (windows of opportunities according to Kingdon) for action (Kingdon, 1984). In this case action was taken by the vice-chancellor, researchers and other stake-holders like politicians, user-organizations and national agencies, where the evaluation opened for the implementation of a new evidence-based method. Or perhaps we should say, by coincidence it did. Cause, if the vice-chancellor didn’t have met those two researchers when having lunch – well then maybe nothing would have happened.

Kirkhart suggested using an integrated theory that conceptualizes influence in the three dimensions source, intention and time (Kirkhart, 2000). I will discuss the findings using her typology. Regarding the sources of influence the evaluation report showed limited effect. When tracing it in official documents and in research you find almost nothing, only five citations in five years (Google scholar) signal limited results-based influence. Process-influence in the other hand is more visible. I would claim that an evaluation opens up the floor for diverse stake-holders to take initiatives and facilitates innovations. The one from the vice-chancellor was a product of serendipity and a skillful use of the resources of a university to create a platform for initiatives. Homelessness has not been exterminated in Sweden (more people are homeless today than when the government’s program started (Socialstyrelsen, 2012) but the concentration on Housing First brings hope. Its implementation is a consequence of the involvement of the university that has provided expert knowledge and power to the process. Kirkhart identifies this as a political dimension of process influence (Kirkhart, 2000, p. 10).

Intentions are according to Kirkhart connected to “the extent which evaluation influence is purposefully directed, consciously recognized, and planfully anticipated.” (Kirkhart, 2000, p. 11). Supporting social betterment has been a main object for both the evaluators and the orders of the evaluation. This was realized through the program-evaluation integrated with process-support to the 23 projects and building good relations between the national agency and the evaluation-team. The surprising involvement of the vice-chancellor provided possibilities to combine the evaluation with activities to implement a model to combat homelessness. Contrary to the recommendations in the report implementation has not been a statutory work. The scope of the initiative is limited to the interest of other parties like local social services and user-organizations.

Time is the third aspect of the typology. Results may show later on, that is true. One of the officials says she will look back to the evaluation in the future, this may indicate a long-term influence. Housing First now captures a slow and incremental pace in the implementation in spite of the immediate and forceful influence from the vice-chancellor in the beginning of the evaluation. End-of-cycle influence could not be discovered. None of the recommendations have been fulfilled. However, the evaluation contributes to another story about possibilities when combating homelessness and also highlighted severe challenges. According to the administrators those signals are important since an evaluation stresses a social problem, indicating it is a matter for politics. In times of non-evaluation the activities and the attention might fade.

According to Carol Weiss leading research on knowledge-utilization policy-shaping is an iterative process with the involvement of many stakeholders and processes that are impossible to foresee. They seem to look like balls of yarn. I argue that it is wise to pay attention to serendipity. It might be the tipping point that boosts the process of evaluation.

References