

EVALUATION IN NEWFOUNDLAND: THEN WAS THEN AND NOW IS NOW

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Abstract: Interviews with people involved in program evaluation in Newfoundland reveal that there is no provincial policy on program evaluation. However, the future for program evaluation in the province is positive. The auditor general is recommending a policy on accountability, and the new Strategic Social Plan includes a requirement for measuring change that occurs as a result of the plan.

Résumé: L'entrevue d'intervenants dans l'évaluation de programme à Terre Neuve ne révèle aucune politique d'évaluation de programme au niveau provincial. Cependant, l'avenir de l'évaluation de programme dans cette province s'avère positif. L'AG recommande une politique de responsabilité, et le nouveau plan social stratégique comprend l'exigence de la mesure des changements qui pourraient résulter de ce plan.

Information for this study was collected primarily through unstructured personal interviews. The information collected was guided by the questions the Canadian Evaluation Society supplied to all of the contributors to this issue (see Appendix 1). People in the local chapter of the Canadian Evaluation Society who were employed by the provincial government and who have been involved in evaluation in the province for many years were contacted and asked to suggest key informants who would be knowledgeable about evaluation policy and practice in the provincial government. These key informants were then contacted. All who were contacted agreed to be interviewed. Each person interviewed received a written copy of the questions a few days before the interview. After the interview they were asked to suggest other people who might be able to answer some of the questions. Thus, the interviewees were selected using a "snowball sample." In total, four personal interviews and one e-mail interview were conducted, all with people from diverse government departments. The e-mail interview was more structured, as the questions were responded to exactly as written, which did

not allow for probes. The answers from all of the interviews were consistent, indicating that there was no further information to be gained by conducting more interviews.

THEN WAS THEN

Until recently, there has been no official policy in Newfoundland on evaluation of projects not done in partnership with the federal government. (Partnership programs, such as the Labour Market Development Agreement between Human Resources Development Canada and Newfoundland's Human Resources and Employment, usually require a program evaluation.) Some respondents recalled that a Division of "Economic Research and Analysis" existed in the early 1980s.¹ More recently, a policy of "program review" was introduced. Departments reviewed their programs to determine whether their offerings were still relevant and if there were new programs they should be offering. For several years departments had to provide this information to the executive. To some extent, one person who had an interest in this type of review drove this process. When that person moved, program review did not continue. There is now a "department planning process." As part of this process, departments consider matters similar to those in program review, but they are not doing "program evaluation."

One official indicated that, from the provincial government's perspective, evaluation is only one aspect of accountability, which also encompasses goal and objective setting, measurement identification, tracking and evaluation, and communication of results. This official also stated that the province has taken an approach that encompasses the broader focus of accountability. This includes various types of performance measurement techniques, including "financial, efficiency, effectiveness, and satisfaction," all of which are being assessed and utilized as part of a more formal accountability initiative.

As well, the respondent said that even without a formalized structure, the provincial government has always measured and evaluated its results internally and externally through various reports (i.e., educational indicators report). It was explained that government is undertaking a more formal review of performance measures as part of its internal departmental planning process, and that departments will increasingly work with its public bodies to develop appropriate measures.

Finally, I was told that the province has embarked on a more formalized approach to accountability processes with respect to departments and public bodies over the past couple of years. The process will be an iterative one and will take longer to implement in the more complex public sectors than in simpler sectors.

Role of the Auditor General

The primary focus of the auditor general is to determine whether (1) financial statements are in accord with accounting policy and (2) expenditures are made in compliance with legislation. I was told that the auditor general has not undertaken program evaluation for two reasons: it might be beyond the mandate of that office, and it might be beyond the skills therein available. The Auditor General Act (Chapter 22) states:

Paragraph (2)(f) shall not be construed as entitling the auditor general to question the merits of policy objectives of the government. (section 12, paragraph 3)

The auditor general's office is concerned that program evaluation might be construed as "questioning the merits of policy objectives of the government." Additionally, auditors may not have the skills necessary to do program evaluation. For instance, they do not have expertise in health care, so they could not evaluate the quality of service delivered by a health care project.

At the same time, the auditor general's office is interested in "accountability." The auditor general's report for the year ending March 31, 1999, devoted an entire section to accountability. In it the auditor general said, "The House of Assembly should receive information on how this public money was used and what the funding has achieved" (Office of the Auditor General, p. 16). The clear implication is that this information is not currently being presented. The auditor general also said:

For the few annual reports which are tabled in the House of Assembly most do not provide adequate accountability information. Most provide general information on the entity and statistical information on its operations. The reports do not provide information on the strategic plans and objectives of the entity or information on what was

actually achieved during the year compared with an approved plan. (p. 18)

Again, this does not appear to be being done. Finally, the auditor general expressed concern

that while other provinces have developed and are using performance measurement criteria, the problems in the province are much more basic. We do not even have a requirement for Government, its departments, agencies of the Crown or the University to prepare an annual report and have it tabled in the House of Assembly. (p. 22)

In sum, not only do we not have a policy on program evaluation, we do not even have a requirement that annual reports be tabled in the House of Assembly that include information on what has been accomplished with funds and whether objectives have been achieved.

NOW IS NOW

In 1996 the government released the strategic social plan consultation paper. Following public consultation, they released two reports: *Volume I: What the People Said* and *Volume II: Investing in People and Communities, A Framework for Social Development*. What is particularly notable for evaluators about the strategic social plan is the concept of a “social audit,” which is an integral component of that report. The goal of a social audit is to indicate what is working, why, how, and for whom.

People involved with the strategic social plan believe that the social audit concept will move Newfoundland into the forefront, in Canada, of setting priorities for evaluation of programs and policy. The social audit is envisioned as a framework to measure changes in social indicators resulting from the strategic social plan, for example, changes in general well-being, employment and economic security, and community stability. As well, the social audit includes a commitment to evidence-based policy development. This means developing social and performance indicators associated with the various social, economic, and health programs. It also means demonstrating that the interventions being made by the government and other funding bodies are contributing to the social goals as indicated in the strategic social plan.

In summary, although there is currently no provincial policy on program evaluation in Newfoundland, the future for program evaluation in the province is positive. The auditor general is recommending policies on accountability, and the new strategic social plan includes a requirement for measuring changes that occur as a result of that plan.

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NOTES

A version of this paper was presented at the Canadian Evaluation Society Conference in Montreal, May 15–18, 2000.

- 1 People report that it may have been called “Program Review,” but there is no one presently in government who remembers many details. One difficulty with finding out the way things were previously done is that the “organization memory” is gone from many departments, due to retirements.

REFERENCES

- Government of Newfoundland. (1997, March). *Volume I: What the people said*. St. John's: Queen's Printer.
- Government of Newfoundland. (1997, April). *Volume II: Investing in people and communities: A framework for social development*. St. John's: Queen's Printer.
- Office of the Auditor General, Province of Newfoundland. (1999). *Report of the auditor general to the House of Assembly on reviews of departments and crown agencies*. St. John's: House of Assembly.

Appendix 1

The Policy on Evaluation:

- Does one exist? If not, why not?
- If yes, describe the policy — policy/program coverage, client, planning, other requirements (e.g., central agency role), etc.
- How is evaluation defined — outcome only or the whole evaluation bag of tricks?

Evaluation Practice:

- Historical evolution since policy established
- External review — e.g., Provincial Auditor?
- Staffing — internal evaluation units (size?)
- Consultant-use
- Expenditures on evaluation
- Reporting — to Policy or Finance and Administration
- Management/Policy/Accountability emphasis
- Growing or Declining in importance
- Evaluation requirements for partners/alternative delivery agents, etc.
- Influence of New Public Management on evaluation policy and practice
- Prognostication — the future for/of evaluation in the province