

EPILOGUE

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The articles in this issue reflect the diversity of evaluation practice at the provincial and territorial level in Canada. It is difficult to generalize about provincial evaluation practice. However, we can identify areas of concern as well as potential in this review of provincial practice.

Although Canada's provinces understand the need to assess policy or program activity, we see considerable variation in the uses and perceptions of evaluation across provinces and, indeed, across administrative units within individual provincial governments (e.g., P.E.I.). The political realities, administrative structures and culture, and resource issues are unique to each province. Some provinces have a considerable history of, and experience with, evaluation methods. However, in these provinces evaluation methods are not used with the frequency they once were. For other provinces, evaluation has been a hit-and-miss proposition, either not practised at all or carried out in an ad hoc, piecemeal manner.

Ironically, the federal government plays an important role as an advocate of evaluation at the provincial level. Programs that are co-funded — for example, by Human Resources and Development Canada — require conventional evaluations involving the provinces. McDavid suggests that if partnerships with the federal government increase in importance, there will be more evaluations and they will be conventional. Ross notes that until recently there was no official policy in Newfoundland on evaluation of projects that had not been done in partnership with the federal government.

The articles tell us that the familiar, comprehensive approach to evaluation is rarely carried out in most provinces. Instead, we see the emergence of performance measurement and related methods, which are perceived as more cost-efficient, timely, and less resource intensive than evaluations. According to Cabatoff, this is certainly the case in Quebec, where program evaluation is perceived as too

complex and time consuming. Segsworth reports a similar situation in Ontario, where evaluation has been undermined by a greater dependence on performance measures that are, “at least superficially, easier to establish and understand.” The purpose and application of program evaluation in British Columbia is, according to McDavid, well understood, yet narrow: the reduction of program costs.

In part, this shift has occurred because “the ‘promise’ of program evaluation has not lived up to its performance” (McDavid). This is also a reflection of the provinces’ preoccupation with financial management and accountability — certainly the driving force in every province, as Segsworth, Ross, and Warrack note in their articles. In the N.W.T., Hicks explains that because performance measurement has been centrally directed, it has had more political support and therefore more clout than evaluation; however, “evaluation was being incorporated into program design and project negotiations and had more support from line managers.”

The articles have identified several drawbacks associated with this performance measurement culture. In Alberta and other provinces, managers are rewarded on the basis of performance. As a result, administrators involved in public-sector programs and services have changed their decision-making and managerial behaviour to ensure target numbers are achieved. This has consequences. As Segsworth notes, “very few [administrators] think in terms other than activities. The notions of outputs and intermediate and ultimate outcomes are foreign to their thinking.” As outcomes are elusive and difficult to articulate, managers will opt for results that are tangible, manageable, and easily calibrated. This trend is understandable, yet worrisome, because it undermines evaluation practice.

The focus is clearly on the future in most provinces. There is a common demand for action and for the short-term, tangible results that forward planning is seen to provide. As a result, Canada’s provincial governments seem more interested in strategic planning and forward planning than in conducting evaluations of past program activity. In some provinces, such as Alberta, there is a perception that evaluation cannot position governments to address current and future challenges — the “big questions” that perplex government. An optimistic note is sounded by Hicks, who suggests that evaluation in the N.W.T. has been complemented, not replaced, by planning. However, this seems the exception to what most provinces are experiencing.

The nature of evaluations seems to be formative, with fewer summative evaluations produced. In British Columbia, McDavid explains that the objective is to improve the management of existing programs without raising questions about their fundamentals. In Alberta, something similar is occurring. The underlying assumption is that “not offering programs and services was often not an option” (Bradley); hence the emphasis on formative evaluations. There is also a tendency to avoid intensive summative evaluations because of potentially “embarrassing findings.” There is nothing new about this reaction to evaluations.

The importance and profile of evaluation in provinces is linked to the existence, or absence, of a high-level champion who can advocate on its behalf. As McDavid notes, turnovers of senior staff and changes in leadership at the deputy minister level, as well as provincial elections, are reflected in changing perceptions of the role and profile of evaluation. This pattern affects many government programs and projects. However, Segsworth comments that evaluation tends to survive changes in leadership where program review is a well-established aspect of organizational culture and tradition.

Each of the provinces — in particular the smaller provinces, such as P.E.I. and Newfoundland — struggles with continued fiscal constraints. As a result, the preference is to fund program delivery, not program evaluation. Evaluation activities are not only subject to these across-the-board resource cuts; they must compete with a relative newcomer — performance measurement — for budget. A common situation involves increasing demands for evaluation and performance measurement activities combined with an existing or reduced resource base. Most provinces must cope with the loss of evaluation capacity. McDavid offers this rather sobering assessment of the situation in British Columbia: “only a fraction of the capacity that existed earlier remains.” The same is true in Ontario, which has experienced the departure of skilled evaluators in the aftermath of budget cuts, reorganization, and downsizing of the provincial government. Warrack notes a similar trend in Manitoba.

IMPLICATIONS

In general, conventional evaluation is experiencing significant challenges in provincial governments. Although there are situations in which evaluation is flourishing, these seem the exception. It appears that evaluation is evolving into something less comprehensive than

it has been, or has been replaced by different means of assessing program activity — for example, performance measurement, the “new kid on the block,” as Bradley suggests.

Clearly, Canada’s provincial governments understand the principles and general merits of assessment of policy and program performance. This is not surprising, given the provinces’ experiences with debt management, downsizing, demands for accountability, the adoption of private-sector (business) models, and organizational restructuring, among many other phenomena. Less clear is whether conventional approaches to evaluation can deliver the results these governments seek. Cabatoff points out that it is not certain that performance measurement and other approaches, such as accreditation processes in Quebec, will provide the legitimacy sought by provincial governments.

These articles suggest that evaluation is interpreted broadly in most jurisdictions. Evaluation occurs, but it is often called something else. As Segsworth notes, provincial administrators are sometimes vague about the concepts associated with evaluation. For example, Ross explains that, even without a formalized structure, the Newfoundland government has always measured and evaluated its results internally and externally through various government reports (e.g., educational indicators report). Perhaps the function, defined broadly, is more important than the definition.

The message is clear: evaluation is evolving at the provincial level. As Bradley argues, evaluation practice will survive where it is perceived to add value to public-sector management and enhances a learning environment. Further, evaluation must adapt to the prevailing political and administrative culture if it is to survive. This does not mean compromising the fundamentals of evaluation practice. Rather, evaluation requires modification of practice to be more time- and cost-effective. It may be time to be strategic, and work with this constrained reality. Indeed, it appears that the provinces feel some evaluation is better than no evaluation; this presents opportunities for evaluation practice.