EVALUATION IN CANADA’S SOCIAL SERVICES: PROGRESS, RIFTS, AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract: This article provides a brief retrospective on three major developments in evaluation within the social services sector over the last decade. These developments include the development of a performance measurement orientation in social service organizations, the growth of empowerment evaluation, and emerging capacity challenges that threaten the use of evaluation within the sector. The author argues that performance measurement has been a positive and necessary development for these organizations, but a new level of outcomes conceptualization is required. This new level is based upon creating community-level outcomes that aggregate data into a more systematic picture of social well-being in communities. Empowerment evaluation and investment in the organizational learning capacity of social service organizations are seen as complementary strategies that can help to further the growth of evaluation within social services.

Résumé: Cet article présente une courte rétrospective de trois développements importants dans le domaine de l’évaluation dans le secteur des services sociaux au cours de la dernière décennie. Ces percées comprennent le développement d’une orientation de mesure du rendement dans les organismes de services sociaux, la croissance de l’évaluation d’habilitation, et les défis de la capacité émergente qui menacent l’utilisation de l’évaluation à l’intérieur du secteur. On explique que la mesure du rendement s’est avérée une initiative positive et nécessaire pour ces agences; cependant, un niveau nouveau de conceptualisation des résultats est nécessaire. Ce niveau se base sur la création de résultats au niveau des communautés qui regroupent les données en créant une image plus systématique du bien-être social dans les collectivités. L’évaluation d’habilitation et l’investissement dans la capacité d’apprentissage organisationnel des organismes de...
The last decade has been a challenging one for Canada’s social service organizations. The volume and complexity of service demands have increased steadily, in the midst of ongoing government restructuring, financial instability, emerging workforce shortages, and amplified expectations held by service consumers (Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work [CASW], 2000; Orr, 1999; Scott, 2003; Statistics Canada, 2005). In this sense the environment for Canada’s social service organizations reflects that experienced by the broader nonprofit sector. It is a highly competitive environment, one that requires organizations to be nimble in juggling the diverse needs of multiple stakeholders (Orr, 1999, Scott, 2003).

Already challenged by this chaotic environment, social service organizations have also experienced consistent pressures to demonstrate their accountability (Fine, Thayer, & Coghlan, 2000; Thayer & Fine, 2001). These pressures come from government, private funders, the public, and even from within the organizations themselves (Bozzo, 2002). The demands for accountability have taken a number of forms related to evaluation, such as enhanced auditing procedures, logic modelling, performance measurement, and program evaluations.

This article focuses on key developments related to evaluation of social services in Canada over the last decade. Rather than describe specific evaluation studies, however, it will examine three central themes that stand out when examining the development of evaluation of social services. These themes were generated by a review of all articles published in the Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation since 1990, as well as reviews of publicly available reports from varying levels of government. The themes are (a) developing a performance measurement orientation, (b) shared ownership of evaluation processes, and (c) capacity challenges for social service organizations. The first theme — developing a performance measurement orientation — is becoming firmly entrenched as a core principle in social services, though the sector has far to go in developing sophisticated mechanisms to fully realize this principle. The latter two themes — shared ownership of evaluation and capacity challenges — have also been prominent over the last decade. However, they represent developments that create points of tension with the manner in which accountability has been framed within social services. This article will describe how each theme has played out in social services over the last decade, and pose...
particular questions and challenges that have emerged for social service organizations. It will also discuss how shared ownership of evaluation processes and renewed attention to evaluation capacity building represent key opportunities to facilitate the use of evaluation in Canada’s social services. The paper will conclude with comments about the future of evaluation in social service organizations.

THE CHANGING CONTEXT FOR EVALUATION OF SOCIAL SERVICES

To say that social service organizations exist within a significantly different environment than a decade ago is a marked understatement. The 1990s saw a fundamental shift in the way that social services were structured in Canada (Graham, Swift, & Delaney, 2003). Since the 1960s Canadian governments had been instrumental in the development of Canada’s welfare state. This state was characterized by a sense of collective responsibility for social welfare, and by highly developed social services. In Canada, this was accompanied by a strong centralization of fiscal and decision-making responsibility for social programs. Government in general, and the federal government in particular, emerged during this period as the cornerstone of the “social safety net” in our country.

This social safety net, though, was partially dismantled during the 1990s, a process continued in the first few years of this century. The result is what might be called Canada’s “welfare society” (Siepbert, 1997). This new environment for social services features the decentralization of both decision-making and the provision of social services. Governments have assumed a more restricted role in social programs, shifting service provision increasingly to nonprofit social service organizations. Strong emphasis is placed on the role of individuals, families, and communities in the role of social care, and universal comprehensive services are increasingly questioned about the extent to which they foster dependency on service providers.

Evidence of this shift can be seen in a number of places. Looking back 10 years, for example, the 1995 Federal Budget outlined a new role for government in social service provision. This role was based on reduced social program spending, and the termination of the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP), which had provided the structure for shared federal-provincial cost sharing of social services funding. As part of that same budget, the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST) was introduced in 1996 as a block funding arrangement for federal transfer payments to the provinces for health, post-secondary educa-
tion, welfare, and social services. The CHST has since granted each province increased flexibility to allocate resources to social program to meet diverse local needs. Indeed, the federal shift toward reduced social program spending and restructuring of funding mechanisms reflects similar restructuring pursued by provincial governments (Orr, 1999; Vojnovic & Poel, 2000). Examples of such restructuring at provincial levels is seen in provinces such as Alberta and Ontario in the 1990s and British Columbia after 2001.

This new environment for social service organizations has permeated every dimension of their functioning. With the shift of delivery of services from government to nonprofit social service organizations came increasing scrutiny of these organizations’ operations. This scrutiny comes from funders at every level, who demand that social service organizations demonstrate effectiveness of their programs. The resulting shift has moved social service organizations away from measuring and reporting program activities and resource allocation, which they have long done. Instead, these organizations have been asked to develop specific sets of outcomes, and then begin measuring how well these outcomes are being achieved. Funders now regularly require logic models as a component of funding applications, and routinely offer training to develop these models (Alter & Egan, 1997; Savaya & Waysman, 2005; United Way of America, 1999). At this point a number of umbrella projects have also been developed to assist these organizations in becoming more outcomes-focused. Canada’s funders have in fact directed tremendous resources to promoting the use of outcome models and training social service organizations to develop solid outcomes and indicators of success.

As governments restructured, the financial resources available to programs for service delivery stagnated or declined in the 1990s (Orr, 1999). Only recently, in the first few years of this decade, have funding levels achieved stability or slight increases (Statistics Canada, 2005). At the same time, through the 1990s funding mechanisms became increasingly competitive, resulting in many social service organizations juggling grants and reporting requirements from several funders at once (Scott, 2003). Expectations to partner across organizations within particular program areas have increased (Panel on Accountability and Governance in the Voluntary Sector, 1999). Most recently, scandals regarding public expenditures have served to increase public examination of the ways in which tax dollars are spent, renewing calls for social service organizations to adopt business-oriented financial practices.
The resulting fiscal and operational environment for most social service organizations is therefore much more complex, dynamic, and demanding than was the case a decade ago. Social service organizations have assumed many of the roles formerly assumed by government departments (Brock & Banting, 2001). Many have done so on tightly restricted budgets, with a workforce that is aging quickly (CASW, 2000), and without the training and background to easily adopt new models of practice (Hoefer, 2000). In short, the environment experienced by social service organizations has required a significant shift in the organizational culture surrounding service delivery and evaluation.

DEVELOPING A PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT ORIENTATION

The environmental shifts experienced by social service agencies have contributed to a much stronger focus on accountability in recent years. This focus has taken many forms, from improved auditing regulations and procedures that better trace use of financial resources, to enhanced performance measurement frameworks created by government and private funders, to the routine incorporation of evaluation methods that examine the benefits a social service program will provide to its clients. The common thread among these approaches is the demand for more accurate and timely information regarding the effectiveness and efficiency of programs. Many stakeholders — government, funders, clients, and the general public — demand information that will allow assessment of program impacts across organizations within a particular substantive area.

The most prevalent example of progress toward an accountability framework for social services can be found in the use of logic models to develop specific outcomes and indicators of service effectiveness. Many social service organizations have now spent years to develop models that detail their goals, activities, outputs, short- and long-term outcomes, and specific indicators of program success. Armed with these conceptual models, many are now trying to operationalize the logic model by collecting relevant, valid data to provide evidence of their effectiveness.

Perhaps the best example of this evolution is from Alberta, where the Canadian Outcomes Research Institute (CORI) has been very successful in promoting the development of outcome models based on a logic modelling process (<www.hmrp.net/CanadianOutcomeInstitute/>). The institute’s mandate is to increase the effectiveness of social
service organizations to meet the needs of clients by providing education, research, training, and services regarding outcomes and evidence-based practice. For a number of years CORI trained and assisted a diverse range of social service organizations to develop comprehensive logic models. These organizations cover a wide range of social services, such as counselling agencies, crisis services, and contracted child welfare agencies.

In recent years CORI developed an Internet-based software called the Hull Outcomes Monitoring and Evaluation System (HOMES). This software provides an integrated outcome and case management system. Social service organizations can develop their logic models and outcomes on this system, with the assistance of CORI staff. They can then use the system to store, manipulate, and report these outcome data. It is a sophisticated system that allows organizations to routinely monitor their declared indicators of success, and obtain reports that summarize achievement of these outcome standard statements. Moreover, information from multiple agencies is stored within one common database. This provides the opportunity to conduct multi-organization comparisons, best practice reporting, and longitudinal analyses.

The HOMES database is but one example of performance measurement systems being implemented across Canada. These systems provide a powerful tool to monitor data on specific organizational outcomes. As such, they have been a welcome addition to the social services sector. They create a clear focus for organizations and their staff (United Way of America, 1996), and can be used to identify areas for staff development. Evidence of effectiveness can be used to help identify the need for new or alternate services, and make decisions regarding which alternatives will be implemented. They can be instrumental in securing new funding, and can strengthen the role of the organization in its community.

The recent success of performance measurement systems does pose some potential difficulties, though. Reliance on these performance measures alone can create what might be called an “outcomes myopia.” This might be considered an undue reliance on a few basic performance measures at the expense of other information regarding service effectiveness. Doing so can have a number of negative impacts. By their nature, measurable outcomes developed by social service organizations tend to be short-term in nature, and ignore progress that can take years to develop. This may disadvantage some programs,
such as those that focus upon preventive services (Plantz, Greenway, & Hendricks, 1997). It is also possible that a narrow outcomes focus will pressure organizations to respond to funders’ expectations for success, thereby focusing on organizational positioning rather than real client needs for service programming (Gauthier et al., 2004). Perhaps most importantly, developing a narrow focus on outcomes alone can focus social service organizations only on the goals that they can easily measure. Doing so can lead them to ignore essential process issues and goals, alternate forms of data such as those found in qualitative studies, and goals that may be abstract enough to elude uncomplicated measurement (Baum, 2001; Kaplan, 2001; Sawhill & Williamson, 2001).

In addition, developing specific outcome measures is only one small component of an evaluation framework. Having a logic model and specific outcomes in place does not guarantee that the resources, skills, methods, ethics, or other key evaluation components are in place (Cooper, 1999). There are also concrete logistical and methodological issues that make performance measurement an ongoing challenge within social services. Many of the smaller organizations find the process of developing and monitoring outcomes overwhelming and intimidating, and argue that scarce resources are being used to support a process that makes little sense to them. Their staff often lack the knowledge and skills to successfully conceptualize and implement performance measurement systems (Bozzo, 2002; Hoefer, 2000; Treasury Board of Canada, 2004). From a methodological perspective there is a risk that these organizations will develop and rely solely on simple routines to measure basic outcomes. This would only serve to reinforce the lack of methodologically rigorous evaluation studies in the social services sector.

Logic models are an early and necessary first step in developing a performance measurement system. Organizations must be more comprehensive in their perspectives to both develop a sustainable and effective performance measurement system and then integrate this into an ongoing evaluation strategy. For example, they should delineate not just the outcomes being pursued, but also the programmatic mechanisms that underlie the effects of intervention (Mark, 2001). This requires concrete, operational links among a program’s goals, inputs, activities, and outcomes. In effect, the causal factors and mediators that underly social service interventions need to be understood. Within social services this dimension of an effective evaluation system is rarely examined in sufficient detail. It is this
link between performance measures and a more detailed program theory that is often lacking.

With all of these risks in mind, I would argue that one of the greatest risks of outcomes myopia is that we might fail to address other important questions that cut across multiple organizations. These other questions are often community-focused, with complex answers that cannot be identified by monitoring parsimonious outcome variables within organizations. For example, how effective are social services in meeting the needs of abused children? To what extent are community resources effective in reducing family violence? To what extent are social services within a community overlapping, conflicting, or absent? These are questions that ask about the progress Canadian society is making toward serving segments or even entire populations of clients — for example, children, the addicted, or those in our correctional systems.

The product of a narrow outcomes myopia is perhaps a clear image of a social service program, one organization at a time. Funders who must then aggregate these data, however, then face a difficult task. How do they best aggregate data that encompass diverse outcomes, data sources, and research methods? Can they answer questions about how effective we are within a particular client group or issue — across social service organizations? The exploding volume of outcome data collected by the thousands of social service organizations in Canada may lead to massive databases consisting of millions of pieces of data. This poses a risk of overwhelming both social services staff and the funders who must make sense of the picture painted by all these data. In particular, funders may be headed toward decision gridlock in the face of these volumes of data.

A necessary next step in the evolution of evaluation within social services is to have stakeholders define what the critical outcomes should be in a community, and to build procedures for examining these larger goals across organizations. A critical stakeholder in this scenario is funders, who can facilitate a dialogue with other stakeholders (e.g., clients, community groups, government, and staff). It is funders who are in a position to act as a catalyst for these discussions, and funders who possess the resources to support the dialogue that needs to happen. This concept is not new. It actually dates back three decades to Riechen & Boruch (1974), who identified potential actors and roles in social experiments. One of these actors is the “initiator-sponsor,” who defines the information needs of a policy planner and/or researcher.
working on a social problem. It is the initiator-sponsor’s role to determine what is known about a particular social issue, what is known about proposed interventions, and what methods are required to determine program effects.

In today’s social service environment, this role can be translated into the role of community advocate. It is the funders of social service organizations who can link performance measurement with broader outcomes, thereby painting a picture of community progress toward important social goals. This is a daunting task, as there are significant conceptual challenges in identifying community-level outcomes, aggregating diverse data across multiple organizations, and isolating causal factors that explain the observed changes. A necessary task for funders, however, is to ensure that Canada’s communities engage in a process to identify key community-focused outcomes. From these mutually developed outcomes, funders can then provide concrete, useful direction and assistance to social service organizations. These funders must also serve as the liaison between social service organizations and the broader public, communicating the value and impacts of these organizations on the clients they serve. This is a basic issue of credibility of the social services sector.

All of this is not to devalue the valuable contributions made by outcome measurement and the emerging systems to document performance measurement. Systematically assessing performance on a community level, however, is an inescapable next step for social services in Canada.

SHARED OWNERSHIP AND EMPOWERMENT

Even though community-level indicators do exist for concepts such as social inclusion and quality of life, similarly broad measures of success are limited within social services. In order to effectively develop community-level indicators within social services, both communities and stakeholders need to become far more integral to evaluation within the sector. Dialogue and vital involvement of these stakeholders is in fact critical to achieve a broader community-level performance orientation in the future. Therefore the inclusion of multiple stakeholders in evaluation processes is a positive development, because within social services the knowledge held by clients, practitioners, and administrators is critical to shape the nature and usefulness of evaluative efforts. In particular, the social work profession emphasizes issues of power, conflict, and the marginalized voices of the
populations served by social service organizations (Gardner, 2003; Kemshall & Littlechild, 2000; Secret, Jordan, & Ford, 1999). Empowering approaches to evaluation are therefore a natural fit with the conceptual foundations of social service organizations and social work professionals.

Empowerment evaluation (and related approaches such as participatory or collaborative evaluation) focuses on the vital involvement of clients, program personnel, volunteers, and administrators in shaping program goals and evaluating progress toward these goals (Fetterman, 2001). It fits within a postmodernist paradigm that stresses the importance of restoring power to marginalized groups, celebrating diversity, emancipation, advocacy, pluralism, and multiculturalism (Bozzo, 2000; Cousins, 2005; House, 2004; Shalock, 2001).

With these foundations, empowerment evaluation has a lot to offer the social service sector. Secret et al. (1999) suggest that empowerment evaluation is both illuminating and liberating to program stakeholders, because it encourages them to examine their programs from differing perspectives. It also helps them to examine and redefine their own roles within the program structure. The authors state that “the process results in stakeholders being better able to document program effectiveness to clients and appropriate policymakers, solve their own management and service problems, secure their own resources, or promote social change on behalf of the population they serve” (p. 121). Cousins (2005) adds that empowerment evaluation’s greatest strength is its “obvious commitment to and power in developing among members of the program community the capacity for self-evaluation” (p. 205). Moreover, research has shown that citizen engagement and stakeholder participation are significant factors in effective utilization of evaluation studies (Thayer & Fine, 2001). This is sorely needed within social services.

There are a number of factors contributing to a positive environment for empowerment evaluation in social services. These include, for example, the growth of citizen engagement and advocacy related to issues such as poverty, mental health, family violence, child abuse and neglect, justice, and homelessness. Over the last decade social service programs have responded by finding ways of incorporating stakeholder participation to develop and evaluate programs in these areas. Perhaps the best example of the way that community ownership and stakeholder participation is shaping the evaluation process in social services, however, is that seen in Aboriginal communities.
Movement toward Aboriginal self-governance has accelerated in the last two decades (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1993a, 1993b). In the health sector, for example, the federal First Nations and Inuit Health Branch of Health Canada and Aboriginal nations have struck a number of agreements to develop local, Aboriginal control of health programs (O’Neil, Lemchuk-Favel, Allard, & Postl, 1999). In the child welfare system, a number of Aboriginal communities have negotiated self-government agreements with provinces and the Government of Canada that give them the power to legislate and deliver child welfare services that are culturally appropriate and compatible with existing provincial legislation (Wherrett, 1999). The importance of this shift must be emphasized, as the agreements provide the mechanism for ownership, authority, and responsibility for design and delivery of services to Aboriginal populations.

Along with these shifts have come shifts in research and evaluation approaches deemed appropriate for examining Aboriginal issues. For decades, any research concerning Aboriginal peoples was initiated outside of Aboriginal communities, designed and implemented by non-Aboriginal researchers, and simply reported back to the Aboriginal peoples involved. In recent years, however, Aboriginal peoples have increasingly been seen as both researchers and active partners in the research process (Meadows, Lagendyk, Thurston, & Eisener, 2003; Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2003). Emerging frameworks to guide evaluation and research in Aboriginal communities focus on principles such as ensuring that Aboriginal communities benefit from research, moving away from negatively framed research topics and questions, Aboriginal ownership of research processes, and respect for the Aboriginal ways of knowing. Researchers and evaluators must also recognize the traditions, values, and beliefs of Aboriginal peoples, the importance of narratives and stories, Aboriginal cognitive and spiritual maps, the role of elders, and Aboriginal methodologies.

A concrete example of how this shift is influencing evaluation in Canada’s social services can be found in work that examines Aboriginal Head Start (AHS). This is an early childhood development program for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children aged 6 and under and their families living off reserve (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2004). The program is based on six core components: health promotion, nutrition, education and school readiness, culture and language, parental involvement, and social support. To address these areas, AHS services normally provide half-day preschool programs that are meant
to support children’s spiritual, intellectual, physical, and emotional growth. This is seen as a fundamental foundation for adequately preparing young Aboriginal children for healthy development during their school years. The program began in 1996, and since that time the number of project sites has grown to 114, with more than 3,500 children enrolled at urban and northern sites in eight provinces and three territories.

Ongoing evaluation has been conducted on the AHS program since 2002, and consists of two types of evaluation. First, a national Process and Administrative Survey collects information on activities and participation in the program. Second, a national Impact Evaluation examines the impacts that AHS has on children, their parents, and their communities (Health Canada, 2000; Hubka, 2003).

What makes this evaluation effort participatory is that local communities control program development, and therefore collaborate with Health Canada throughout the evaluation process. In turn, Health Canada provides training to local sites to participate in these evaluations. All of the key stakeholders, such as parents, sponsors, and site teams, are involved in the design of evaluation tools, selection of indicators, and a process for data collection. This makes the evaluation design process more complex and time-consuming, and requires a long-term perspective to allow for enough time to adequately measure the impacts of AHS. These are common characteristics of participatory evaluation studies.

In evaluating AHS, therefore, the participation of sponsoring communities in this evaluation process is considered vital to improving program effectiveness and ensuring that the knowledge gained is relevant both culturally and on a local community basis. Moreover, the capacity created by training AHS staff and participating families promises to enhance the quality of these evaluations and contribute to a more positive climate for evaluation in the future.

As in moving toward a community-level performance orientation, there are significant challenges in fostering effective empowerment evaluation. Despite research that shows evaluators support utilization-focused evaluation, and consider it to maximize responses to stakeholder needs (Cousins, Donahue, & Bloom, 1996), many evaluators are not adequately trained in facilitation methods and principles that promote a collaborative or empowering model of evaluation. This is a different skill set, one that focuses much more on facilitation,
negotiation, dialogue, and mediation than older models of evaluation. There are also enormous challenges for the evaluator in blending multiple perspectives and alternate forms of evaluation data into a coherent plan for evaluation, not to mention interpreting the results of any evaluation process.

In the short term, the best use of empowerment evaluation may be formative, with the intent of using empowerment techniques to foster continual improvement of social service programs. In particular, empowerment evaluation may be useful to help refine processes to define a community’s important outcomes. The broad involvement of multiple stakeholders that is characteristic of empowerment evaluation is consistent with the dialogue required to identify community-focused outcomes for social services. We should be clear, however. Significant growth of empowerment evaluation may create tensions with the whole movement toward outcome-based evaluation. The empowerment model is open to a wide range of methods and data sources, many of which are qualitative or naturalistic in nature. There is also considerable room for the “voice” of stakeholders, which can emerge in many narrative or oral forms. These do not always lend themselves well to the logic model-based, outcome-focused trend in social service organizations.

A CRITICAL NEED FOR CAPACITY BUILDING

The themes of developing a performance orientation and shared ownership of evaluation processes brings up an immediate issue. This is the capacity of social service organizations to successfully conduct and utilize evaluation. By capacity I refer to an organization’s processes and practices that contribute to routine use of evaluation and support evaluation at a high level of quality (Cousins, Goh, Clark, & Lee, 2004). Canada’s recent National Survey of Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations (Statistics Canada, 2005) in fact highlighted a complex array of capacity challenges faced by social service organizations. These include, for example, a lack of administrative and technology infrastructure, difficulty obtaining suitable staff, difficulty providing these staff with training and development, difficulty planning for the future, and difficulty recruiting suitable volunteers. It should therefore be no surprise that social service organizations lack the capacity to engage in effective evaluation of their services.

At this point, many administrators and staff of social service organizations are confused. Some have a logic model in place, but many are
still struggling to develop a logic model that makes sense for them. Moreover, a portion of those organizations that do have a logic model are labouring with the complex task of gathering valid, rigorous data that will provide evidence of effectiveness. Still others have data, but lack the expertise to analyze these data in ways that produce valuable information about their programs. Use of these emerging performance data, therefore, is still limited (Hoefer, 2000). I would argue that this situation starts with a basic lack of understanding of the links between an organization’s logic model, the results they observe, and the evaluation process more generally.

Even those who see the linkages between logic models, performance monitoring, and evaluation are often unable to effectively construct or participate in evaluative efforts. The majority of these professionals do not have the skill set to critically analyze and interpret the data that are being produced (Grinnell & Unrau, 2005). Nor do they have the resources to routinely hire consultants that have the appropriate knowledge and skills. This dilemma leaves many social service organizations in the position of having volumes of relevant data to assess their performance, but limited mechanisms to actually identify patterns and conclusions from these data.

A recent example from my own practice comes to mind. I was asked to consult with a senior professional in a local social service organization. This organization is a well-managed, progressive agency that has been developing a performance measurement system for a number of years. They have a clearly articulated logic model that makes sense and identifies relevant and useful outcomes. The purpose of the consultation? This organization is not clear about the potential uses of data they have collected, lack the appropriate tools to conduct thorough analyses of the data, and do not know how to begin a systematic analysis process of the data.

This experience (and many more like it) identifies capacity problems that closely align with those outlined by Bozzo (2002). She argues that evaluation skills within the nonprofit sector may be weak, and that ongoing training of personnel in these organizations is essential. She also points to the lack of methodological sophistication within nonprofit organizations. Nonprofit organizations face the challenge of managing large amounts of quantitative and qualitative data without the requisite capacity in the organization to actually use such data productively.
The capacity for social service organizations to conduct research has been improved in recent years, as funders have invested in training on topics such as logic modelling. National initiatives such as the Voluntary Sector Initiative <www.vsi-isbc.ca/eng/index.cfm> have also focused considerable attention on capacity-building within the sector. However, there remain emerging ways of conceptualizing capacity-building that need to be explored and acted upon. For example, a very useful “evaluation capacity building” framework is offered by Cousins et al. (2004). The framework focuses on the ability of organizations to become an Organizational Learning System (OLS). It outlines two kinds of capacity necessary to becoming such a system: evaluation capacity and organizational learning capacity. The former consists of those skills and resources that facilitate evaluative inquiry and use of evaluation. The latter involves the extent to which organizations have a clear mission and vision, leadership committed to creating an innovative organization, a strong culture of experimentation, the ability to transfer knowledge within and external to the organization, and a culture that emphasizes teamwork and cooperation. Cousins et al. (2004) suggest that these elements collectively represent an organization’s learning capacity. This, in turn, helps to define the organization’s readiness to effectively conduct and utilize evaluation.

It can be argued that the future of evaluation capacity-building in social service organizations lies in creating organizations that possess organizational learning capacity. To date, efforts to build evaluation capacity have focused on building evaluation skills and knowledge. This is of course critically important but may be premature, or at least ineffective, without the parallel elements of organizational learning in place. Social service organizations require assistance in more clearly articulating a mission, not just as an isolated service provider, but as part of a larger service delivery system. We must also respond to demographic realities that point to the retirement of many senior leaders within social service organizations over the next decade (CASW, 2000). This reality will require educating a new generation of social service leaders who understand and are supportive of evaluation processes. This must be accompanied by system-wide financial, conceptual, and moral support for experimentation and innovation within social services. In essence, social service organizations require a concerted investment in the components that contribute to a learning organization. From here they will be in a much improved position to understand and utilize evaluation of their services.
CONCLUSION

The three related themes that dominated evaluation trends in social services over the last decade are inevitably related. The first — developing a performance measurement orientation — represents the area of most progress within the sector. Models of performance measurement are now ubiquitous in social service organizations across the country. Many organizations now possess logic models, along with their discrete outcome variables and indicators of success. This is largely the product of requirements established by Canada’s funders of social service programs. The systematic collection and utilization of outcome data, however, has not yet been incorporated into the daily functioning of many social service organizations. This situation arises because these organizations lack the capacity to understand, interpret, and fully utilize the logic models with which they are equipped. These logic models are far too often developed and forgotten on an executive director’s shelf until year-end reports to funders are due.

There is a pressing need to develop a broader, community-level perspective on outcomes and evaluation processes. This will require a reconceptualization of outcomes within the sector. This article has argued that such a new conceptualization will develop only as the result of focused community discussion. This discussion should be sparked by funders and directly involve a broad range of stakeholders. These stakeholders include not only social service programs and clients, but also groups such as government representatives, district health councils, community advisory boards, and Aboriginal nations. Together these groups are in a position to identify society’s most important social goals, the outcomes associated with those goals, and the ways in which multiple organizations contribute to these goals. It is funders, however, who most frequently receive evaluation results from Canada’s social service organizations, and who are in the best position to make direct use of evaluation results across multiple organizations. This creates an obligation to act as a catalyst for dialogue about community-focused outcomes.

The other two trends identified in this article — empowerment evaluation and organizational capacity-building — may be critical supports that need to be in place as we develop a community perspective on outcomes and evaluation. Empowerment or participatory evaluation offers the opportunity to engage community stakeholders in a dialogue to identify the most important outcomes we should be striving
to achieve with particular populations or substantive issues. It will also serve to broaden and enrich the range of measures and data considered useful for assessing program performance.

There will be conflicts that emerge as we move forward. For example, there will likely be contradictions between performance measurement systems and the implementation of empowerment evaluation. The former relies heavily on quantitative measures and rigorous data collection methods, while the latter is more open to narratives and voices of marginalized populations. Those who favour a more business-oriented approach to performance measurement will at times disagree with the proponents of empowerment evaluation, who are often more tolerant of ambiguity and imperfect causal relationships. There could therefore be a short-term struggle to blend very distinct and different approaches to identifying and collecting useful evaluative information.

The issue of capacity-building is also a point of tension. This article has argued that in addition to building the evaluation capacity of social service organizations, we must invest in a parallel set of organizational capacities. Enhancing organizational factors such as leadership, teamwork structures, reward systems, staff development, and a culture of innovation require strategic investments into social service organizations. This is not a call for massive blind injections of cash into the sector. Rather, it is a recognition that through the last decade of retrenchment the capacity of social service organizations has been depleted. Carefully planned and implemented investments by coalitions of funders would contribute significantly to the overall readiness of social service organizations to effectively participate in and utilize evaluations of their programs.

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