POLITICAL CONTEXT AND PROGRAM EVALUATION: THE INEXTRICABLE LINK

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Abstract: Program evaluations have assumed a much greater importance as pressure on public expenditure increases. This article eschews evaluation designs that are politically vacuous by drawing attention to the importance of contextual variables in a case study of a community relations program based in Northern Ireland. The research illustrates the dilemma now faced by evaluators in the United Kingdom. The demands of short-term, context-stripped, value-for-money evaluations are often in conflict with context-bound qualitative enquiries that can uncover the unique mix of social, political, and cultural influences on program delivery. The dominance of macro-political variables are illustrated as one example of a unique mix within this program.

Résumé: Les évaluations de programmes ont pris une plus grande importance à cause de l'augmentation de la pression exercée sur la dépense publique. Cet article rejette les conceptions d'évaluation qui sont dénuées de tout sens politique en attirant l'attention sur l'importance des variables contextuelles dans une étude de cas d'un programme de relations communautaires basé en Irlande du Nord. La recherche illustre le dilemme auquel les évaluateurs du Royaume Uni doivent maintenant faire face. Les demandes pour des évaluations à court-terme, dépouillées de tout contexte, et ayant un bon rapport qualité-prix entrent souvent en conflit avec des demandes qualitatives pleines de contexte qui dévoilent un mélange unique d'influences culturelles, politiques et sociales dans un programme. La prépondérance de variables macro-politiques est illustrée en tant qu'exemple du mélange unique contenu dans ce programme.

INTRODUCTION

The inexorable increase in the size of public expenditure budgets and the insatiable demand for more and better government-financed programs have contributed to a heightened

political significance in the evaluation of those programs. Although, at a general level, there has been a growing recognition that program evaluation is not a politically vacuous activity (Fisher, 1980; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Palumbo, 1987), the specific and changing circumstances within which programs are implemented serve to remind evaluators of the increasing influence of politics as a contextual variable. Weiss (1975), for example, first drew attention to the fact that evaluation is a rational enterprise taking place in a political context that impinges upon the process in three ways. First, the policies and programs that form the basis of evaluation studies are products of political decisions. Second, because evaluation is an aid to decision making, its findings constitute part of a debate within the political arena. And third, evaluations, by their nature, endorse or reject a particular political stance. Evaluations make statements that challenge the legitimacy of programs and strategies that, in themselves, are implicitly political.

Considerations of evaluation design, implementation, and dissemination of results formulated in an abstract sense, therefore, while methodologically important, may distort the balance in favour of technical application but away from political reality. This serves only to discredit evaluation as a process destined to make little contribution to a review of public policies. In describing how evaluation research in the United States during the 1970s went largely unused, Booth (1988) quotes Laurence Lynn (the Secretary for Planning and Evaluation in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare 1971–73), who describes evaluators as indulging in the "worst form of arrogance" by assuming their evaluations should be acted upon and "lacking a sophisticated sense of what the political process was all about" (p. 151). Political context mattered then, but has become much more important, not least because of ideological divergence on the extent of government involvement in social programs and its consequences for public expenditure. As Palumbo suggests, "the political dilemma facing evaluators is to steer a course between recognising the political reality of evaluation and retaining the symbolism of neutrality . . . politics and evaluation are intricately intertwined" (Palumbo, 1987, pp. 20, 43).

As an illustration of achieving a balance between the realities of political context and undertaking an objective evaluation, this paper describes a case study of a major public program in Northern Ireland with particular reference to those political variables that were influential during the course of its evaluation. The paper begins by locating the study within a framework of evaluation devel-

opments in the United Kingdom generally and provides a short overview of the program, evaluation design, and findings. The research then highlights the overwhelming importance of politics as a contextual variable that pervaded the program from conception to evaluation. In so doing, the paper outlines the dilemma now facing evaluators in the United Kingdom. A trade-off exists between short-term, context-stripped, value-for-money evaluations and long-term, context-bound programs whose unique social, political, and cultural locations defy generalization. The program evaluation described is illustrative of the marked influence of political variables on a community relations program.

PROGRAM EVALUATION IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

Program evaluation in the United Kingdom is rooted in the American historical experiences of expanding social programs and an increasing public sector budget, followed by fiscal retrenchment and concomitant pressures for "value-for-money" assessments of new and ongoing funded public programs (Doig & Littlewood, 1992; H.M. Treasury, 1988). Pollitt describes the emergence of program evaluation in the United Kingdom as a four-phase process (Pollitt, 1993). The first phase, from the mid-1960s until 1973, was much influenced by the American PPBS (Planning, Programming, Budgeting System) approach. This formed the backdrop to the establishment of the Central Policy Review Staff (CPRS) in Whitehall, charged with the task of evaluating major public policies, and the introduction of Program Analysis and Review (PAR). The second phase (mid-1970s) was characterized by the abandonment of the more rational and strategic elements associated with PPBS, CPRS, and PAR in an effort to deal with huge economic problems and cutbacks in public expenditure. The election of the Thatcher Conservative government in 1979 heralded a new era of public management (the third phase), central to which was the pursuit of economy, efficiency, and effectiveness, which led to the final phase (1987 onwards) of deconstructing large elements of the public sector. Privatization, contracting out, decentralization, the creation of more flexible "hived-off" government agencies, and delegated budgeting are typical of this current approach within which "new evaluatory arrangements are supposedly designed to check that service providing organisations are delivering flexible, cost effective services to their citizen-users" (Pollitt, 1993, p. 357).

Despite the links with American evaluation practice, however, Gray and Jenkins (1983) claimed that politicians' and officials' interest

in analysis and evaluation fluctuated widely. They described how progress toward policy analysis and evaluation between different central government departments and over different periods was uneven, and developments in output measurement painfully slow. They noted:

> Critics claim, there can be no compensation between the patchy and often tentative investment in analysis in Britain, and the massive and steadily expanding resources devoted to it in, for example, the United States at both federal and state levels, and in the legislature as well as the executive. (Gray & Jenkins, 1983, pp. 15–16)

Other writers on the evolution of evaluation in the United Kingdom trace its origins to the late 1950s, which witnessed a growing emphasis on cost-benefit analysis as a managerial aid to decision making (Palfrey, Phillips, Thomas, & Edwards, 1992). Following on from this trend, the design and use of performance indicators, most notably in the areas of criminal justice, health and education services, prompted a rash of measurement fervour across government departments and, at the same time, highlighted the deficiencies in such measures to address program outcomes.

Latterly, however, evaluations in the United Kingdom have been influenced by a swing away from the classic research-based quantitative approach, underpinned by experimental methods and design, in favour of pluralistic evaluation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Smith & Cantley, 1985) and the stakeholder or multiple-constituency approach (Tsui, 1990; Vartiainen & Salminen, 1993). Unlike traditional evaluation, this approach acknowledges that consensus is absent and involves incorporating the perspectives of a number of stakeholders directly into the evaluation process. In particular, the incorporation of a program-user perspective has gained much credibility (Barnes, 1993; Knox & McAlister, 1995; Pollitt, 1988; Wistow & Barnes, 1993) within a framework of managerialism that emphasizes the pursuit of quality, a public service orientation, and consumerism (Clarke & Stewart, 1987; Jackson & Palmer, 1992; Rhodes, 1987). All three concepts reflect a growing importance ascribed to the user of public services. Herein there is a political and professional commitment to redefine recipients of public services as customers or consumers. Such nomenclature carries with it the implication that the producer-oriented nature of public service provision must be modified; whatever definition of the amorphous con-

cept "quality" is adopted, it must make some reference to validation by the end user. Hence, effectiveness measurement in program evaluations, much influenced by a private-sector "customer knows best" philosophy and stimulated by a right-wing government, has shifted in emphasis and consumers assigned the role of key stakeholder. It is within this context that we now describe a case study evaluation of a public program in Northern Ireland.

PROGRAM EVALUATION: COMMUNITY RELATIONS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Background

Northern Ireland has, since 1969, been the scene of much grotesque sectarian violence resulting in the death of almost 3,200 people. Recent and much-welcomed political developments include ceasefires announced by both the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in August 1994 followed soon after by a reciprocal gesture from the Loyalist Military Command. Aside from these much publicized political developments, a comprehensive program of equality (of opportunity) and equity (of treatment) initiatives has been devised by the United Kingdom government to tackle the root causes of underlying divisions and tensions between the two communities. Such an approach recognizes that equality and equity issues must be addressed *in parallel with* efforts at the macro level to achieve progress on the political, security, and economic fronts. This policy is operationalized via a number of initiatives that include targeting areas or sections of the community suffering the highest levels of disadvantage and deprivation with priority public funding, referred to as the Targeting Social Need Initiative. Underpinning this approach is the assertion that community differentials, or greater levels of disadvantage among Catholics (unemployment, education, skills), contribute to divisions in the population. These differential experiences sustain feelings of disadvantage, discrimination, and alienation, which in turn influence Catholic attitudes to political and security issues. The high level of Catholic unemployment and job discrimination, a source of much inequality, has also been addressed through legislative changes requiring firms to monitor the composition of their workforce and take affirmative action where necessary (Fair Employment [Northern Ireland] Act 1989). A cross-community contact scheme, administered by the Department of Education for Northern Ireland, was introduced to establish and develop contact between Catholic and Protestant schools, youth, and community groups. This

paralleled education reforms in schools where two cross-curricular themes, education for mutual understanding (EMU) and cultural heritage, became intrinsic to teaching a range of school subjects under a recently introduced common curriculum. A cultural traditions program was also established to support arts, museums, and Irish language groups in a way that encouraged respect for the richness and diversity of shared cultural heritage.

Alongside these initiatives, the government established, in 1987, the Central Community Relations Unit (CCRU), reporting directly to the Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service on all aspects of relations between the two traditions. The CCRU was charged with "formulating, reviewing and challenging policy throughout the government system with the aim of improving community relations" (Central Community Relations Unit, 1992, p. 2). It was also responsible for developing new ideas to improve relations and supporting ongoing efforts aimed at prejudice reduction. A new independent voluntary body, the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council (CRC), was set up in 1990 to promote better community relations and the recognition of cultural diversity in Northern Ireland. Finally, and the focus of this study, the 26 local authorities in Northern Ireland were invited by CCRU to become involved in community relations programs in their areas. In short, improving community relations became a significant feature in the government's drive toward the attainment of equality of opportunity and equity of treatment.

In 1989 CCRU invited councils to participate in a community relations program whose objectives were to develop cross-community contact and co-operation, to promote greater mutual understanding, and to increase respect for different cultural traditions. CCRU offered 75% grant-aid for the employment of community relations staff by councils, provided financial support for appropriate cross-community activities, and assisted with the development of local heritage and cultural activities. A budget of £1.5 million was allocated to the program in 1990/91 with incremental increases thereafter as more authorities joined the initiative.

The specific conditions laid down for participation were:

- councils had to agree on a cross-party basis to participation in the scheme;
- councils had to draw up a community relations policy statement;

- the policy statement and individual projects undertaken had to be agreed to on a cross-party basis;
- community relations officers had to be appointed to administer the scheme and their posts advertised under this title;
- projects had to include cross-community contact, mutual understanding, or cultural diversity.

The first council (Dungannon) joined the scheme in February 1990, and by the end of that year, 12 councils had entered the program. The remainder joined during the next two years, with all 26 now actively participating.

The Program

As with any new initiative (not least one with such broadly based objectives), implementation issues, the role of executives, and the type of program emerged through a process of trial and error, "ad hockery," opportunism, and incrementalism. Job descriptions for community relations officers varied widely. There was little precedent for this type of work at council level and, as a consequence, the actual definition of the community relations' role was often worked out in practice by the officers themselves. Virtually all officers had to be self-directing, and most worked out a rationale for community relations projects within the context of their own areas and councils. This was easier in those councils with an existing community services function where officers could tap into an established network of community groups and organizations and where there was a previous record of council involvement at the community level.

The launch of the initiative required a great deal of initial promotional work by community relations officers to increase public awareness. This primarily involved supplying information to capture the interest of existing groups and organizations. As the program became established, this role moved more toward supplying advice, guidance, and encouragement. Community relations officers in all councils have been actively involved in the actual organization, provision, and delivery of programs. Most community relations officers emphasized organizing contact programs before developing more focused cultural traditions and mutual understanding work. Thereafter, officers sought out opportunities where a community relations input could be made, usually through the identification of common interests that could be developed between two communities: for example, local history, music, the environment,

and economic development. An emerging role for officers has been to act as enablers rather than project providers. Groups are expected to generate more projects themselves and take ownership of them. This has allowed community relations officers to concentrate on network building, coordination, funding, training, and disseminating models of good practice.

Any attempt at classifying the diverse range of projects undertaken by community relations officers in councils is fraught with difficulties. In general, however, there are five broad types of projects as follows:

1. *High profile community relations*. Projects under this category are generally one-off events aimed at promoting the community relations function through public relations. They tend to attract large numbers but are not part of a long-term developmental strategy. Examples include tea dances, intercommunity "It's a Knockout," and the cavalcade of song: a collection of songs written for and performed by school children.

2. *Inter/intra community development*. Projects include both single-identity (Catholic or Protestant, but *not* both) and cross-community development work. Single-identity projects recognize that polarized communities first need to address their own prejudices and misunderstandings prior to engaging in cross-community work. Inter-community development builds upon a network of established groups interested in pursuing common goals that straddle the sectarian divide (e.g., health, housing, roads, or economic development). Good community relations is an important by-product of this process. An example is cross-community economic development committees.

3. *Cultural traditions*. Projects under this heading attempt to capitalize on the cross-community benefits that accrue to groups with a shared cultural interest in sport, music, dancing, drama, and so on. The approach focuses on what binds communities rather than what separates them. Examples of this type of project are cross-community drama groups, inter-district music twinning, and heritage trails.

4. *Focused community relations*. By definition, projects under this heading are much more directed and aim to tackle, head-on, controversial community relations issues. The approach is premised on the idea that people adopt an avoidance strategy and steer clear of politics and religion,

particularly in mixed (Protestant/Catholic) company. This approach suggests that such issues, if left unresolved, compound insidious sectarianism and bigotry. Examples of projects in this category include anti-sectarianism and prejudice-reduction workshops.

5. *Substitute funding*. These are events that were running prior to the appointment of a community relations officer, and projects initiated by other council departments but subsequently funded through the community relations program. The focus and content of these events have changed to include a community relations agenda. Examples of substitute funding are the Lord Mayor's show, Christmas lights, and fireworks displays.

The Evaluation

Given the staggered nature of councils' involvement in the initiative, an opportunity existed to assess whether there was any significant difference in attitudes to community relations between councils participating in the program and those that were not (at the time of the research design in April 1993). Applying an *ideal* experimental design to the program would have entailed randomly assigning local councils, as the unit of analysis, to an experimental and control group. In practice, however, the stringent requirements of this approach ruled it out. Councils could not be randomly assigned, nor did it seem possible, at least initially, to obtain before and after measures, given that the program was already underway. An alternative to this approach, a non-equivalent control group, pretest-posttest design, was adopted for the evaluation, in which "similar" groups were used to compare before (1989) and after (1993) measures.

Applying this design in practice presented a number of problems. First, comparison demands similarities between the two groups of councils. Matching procedures or statistical controls are commonly used to twin the experimental group to the control group on a range of available variables. The problem was, which community relations variables were important in matching? The second difficulty was the issue of self-selection in this type of design. A local council that had opted to join the community relations initiative was likely to be different from one that had decided not to become involved in terms of commitment, motivation, values, and so on. Making policy comparisons between these types of councils was not ideal, but,

accepting the limitations of the design, it did offer one approach to the evaluation. Base case measurements, fortuitously, could be extracted from the annual government-sponsored Social Attitudes Survey that commenced in 1989 and included questions on the state of community relations in Northern Ireland.

The evaluation design involved a simple random survey of the population (n = 1,500) within nine council areas, six of which were involved in the program (and also the subject of in-depth qualitative work described elsewhere [Knox & Hughes, 1994]) and the remaining three that had not joined the scheme at the time of the research design. Both the 1989 and 1993 surveys posed a number of questions aimed at examining current and prospective attitudes to community relations among the respondents. These ranged from questions about prejudice against Catholics or Protestants and the state of relations between the two communities to views on mixed marriages, integrated education, and fair employment issues. Exploratory factor analysis was used to reduce the large number of variables to a smaller set and assess whether, in fact, a pattern existed in the factors that could be compared over time and between councils (participants and non-participants between 1989 and 1993 in an ANOVA 2 x 2 factorial design). The full empirical results are reported elsewhere (Knox, 1994) but, in brief, suggest that there *are* significant differences in attitudes on fair employment, prejudice against Catholics, and tolerance of the other tradition between participating and non-participating councils but the program has *not* had an impact on the sense of alienation felt by Protestants.

THE IMPORTANCE OF POLITICAL CONTEXT

This brief overview of the evaluation design, however, is a classic description of the scientific paradigm derided by Guba and Lincoln (1989). Therein, the approach attempts to control for confounding variables and, in so doing, "context strips" the program under evaluation. The consequences of this, according to Guba and Lincoln, are an overdependence on quantitative measurement, dubious authoritative claims based on such measurement, and the resulting evaluation being found irrelevant at the local level. Guba and Lincoln posit *responsive constructivist* evaluation (4th generation in their terms) as an alternative approach. While conventional scientific methodology strips a program's context of its contaminating variables to "uncover truth and explain nature as it really is," the constructivist approach involves a "continuing dialectic of iteration,

analysis, critique, reiteration and reanalysis, leading to the emergence of a joint construction of a case" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 84). Herein an understanding of the local social, political and cultural program context are crucial to the success of the evaluation. Guba and Lincoln describe it thus:

> The 4th generation evaluator does not preclude certain claims, causes and issues because, say, they are political in nature and hence beyond the pale of disciplined inquiry. Value issues are as admissible as putatively factual ones. But the social, political and cultural norms, mores, practices and conventions are as much contextually shaped as anything else; they cannot be understood except through intensive involvement with that context. (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, pp. 200–201)

The unique local context for this program clearly demonstrated the overwhelming importance of *politics* as a contextual variable that pervaded its conception, implementation, and evaluation. At a general level the following political factors were considered relevant to an understanding of the program context:

- The inception of the program came as an acrimonious dispute over the Anglo-Irish Agreement (1985) (see note 1) between Unionist-controlled local authorities began to peter out;
- The leader of the mainly Catholic SDLP, John Hume, met with Gerry Adams, Sinn Fein leader (political wing of the IRA), for exploratory talks on political progress;
- A previous similar initiative under a newly established Community Relations Commission (1969–74) had foundered with bitter recriminations on the merits and demerits of this policy approach to improving relationships between Catholics and Protestants.

More specifically political factors dominated the program from conception through to evaluation. The community relations program grew out of political aspirations at both central and local government levels to involve grassroots participation in cross-community projects aimed at encouraging mutual understanding and respect for cultural diversity. The goals of the program were therefore overtly political, which, in turn, provoked a mixed reaction from political parties in terms of endorsing its implementation. The Nationalist (largely Catholic) Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and

Sinn Fein claimed that the program would only be useful if core constitutional deficiencies in Northern Ireland were also addressed. The bipartisan Alliance Party supported the initiative as a constructive way to promote understanding and trust between the two communities. Responses from the two (largely Protestant) Unionist parties, the Ulster Unionists (UUP) and Democratic Unionists (DUP), ranged from qualified support in the case of the former to outright opposition from the latter. While the UUP supported schemes to encourage the affirmation and exploration of local regional identities, it claimed that an undue emphasis on commonalities could be as misleading as the picture of a culturally polarized community. The DUP saw the promotion of good community relations as no more than a political gimmick by government ministers, in which public money was squandered on overrated reconciliation schemes. Good community relations for them was the elimination of terrorism.

The degree of political importance attached to the program is captured by a debate in Westminster in which an Ulster Unionist MP posed the question:

> I pay tribute to the work that the Minister has done on community relations, and it is valuable work but does he agree with me that we must not fall into the trap of thinking that community relations programs can solve the problems in Northern Ireland? . . . Does the Minister agree that the best thing that can be done to improve community relations is to defeat terrorism? (Trimble, 1991)

The Minister responsible responded by agreeing with the premise of the first question:

> There is no sense in which success in community relations terms alone will resolve the fundamental and deepseated problems that affect the community in Northern Ireland. There is also no doubt that the winning of the battle against terrorism will play a significant role in easing community tensions. . . . there is none the less, an important role for a community relations program, and the program is commanding greater and wider support in the Province with every passing year. (Mawhinney, 1991)

The Minister had staked his political reputation on the success of this program and assigned senior civil servants to ensure its effective implementation. Their job became one of cajoling local councils to participate in the voluntary scheme by guaranteeing financial benefits and minor "sweeteners." Therein lay a problem.

Local authorities may, at first sight, have seemed to be the natural location for a function such as community relations with its grass-roots orientation. This assumption was fraught with problems when one considered the record of councils in this area. In 1973 local government in Northern Ireland had been subject to a fundamental review in which councils were stripped of key responsibilities because of their longstanding sectarian abuse of power, particularly in the areas of local government franchise (gerrymandering) and housing allocation practices. Since 1973, with their restricted functional role, local councils still managed to become embroiled in political controversy. Several well-publicized cases of employment discrimination and their involvement in a protest of non-cooperation against the Anglo-Irish Agreement (1985) cast councils as a disreputable tier of government. Why then had the decision been taken to locate community relations as a function within the remit of local councils, given their past record in this regard? Because one prerequisite to joining the program at council level was cross-party agreement, vesting responsibility in councils seemed to be a way of promoting consensus at the political level and in turn, by example, in the community. Moreover, a functional responsibility for community relations put consensus firmly on the policy agenda of councils, which was symbolically important in making progress on the wider political front.

Given the program's political conception it was inevitable that political factors would also feature during its implementation. Indeed, the extent to which the program received support within individual local authorities was contingent upon the political complexion of the council. Because of the program's potential for confronting emotive political issues, community relations officers, in highly political councils, were sometimes delegated "non-threatening duties" such as community arts or innocuous events—the Mayor's show or Christmas festival. The contentious nature of the program in some authorities left community relations officers feeling particularly vulnerable. Two officials expressed the views:

> It only takes one politician somewhere along the hierarchical line to object and the whole thing collapses. (Interview with community relations officer, 1993)

> Community relations is like a disaster waiting to happen in this council. (Interview with community relations officer, 1993)

These fears were heightened by incidents in which inexperienced officers, who inadvertently strayed from "acceptable" community relations, incurred the vitriol of angry elected members at council meetings. A community relations officer described one such experience:

> Councillors were really angry because I was asking people their religion so that I could fill in my monitoring forms. They were worried that information like that could be used against people. Now I just make guesstimates. (Interview with community relations officer, 1993)

As a result of such incidents, community relations officers now claim to be more astute in the art of achieving a delicate balance between the promotion and development of community relations, and accommodating political sensitivities within councils. As one officer put it:

> You swim with the tide and when no one's looking you jump out and do something and then jump back in again quickly. (Interview with community relations officer, 1993)

The reaction of the public to the program, as gauged by the community relations officers, produces some insights. In their experience most people in Northern Ireland attribute the perpetuation of the conflict to a minority of extremists in both communities who support violence as a legitimate means to an end. Few people see the relevance of a program aimed at addressing a problem that is perceived to exist *only* in those areas where levels of violence have been consistently high. An attitude prevails, most frequently encountered by community relations officers in mixed communities, that Protestants and Catholics have co-existed for years without any problems. In segregated communities it is also argued that lack of contact means community relations has never been an issue—people from opposite religions don't have to meet! These views have led oppo-

nents of the initiative to question community relations officers on the merits of their programs, when funds could be more usefully spent on pressing community services priorities.

In light of the above attitudes, most community relations officers have found the public to be more accepting of approaches that aim to increase contact through activities that also provide an entertainment or mutual-interest value. They have found that more focused projects—intended to address prejudiced, sectarian attitudes, and other divisive issues—tend to appeal more to a minority of sympathetic and interested individuals. An awareness of implementation issues at both council and community level, therefore, influenced the nature of projects promoted by community relations officers.

How then did those political factors associated with the program's conception and implementation influence its evaluation? First, at the level of the program's objectives, it was clear that these were formulated more for their political appeal than for operational feasibility. Furthermore, two of the three objectives referred to changes in attitudes and behaviour among the population, an unattainable short-term target and unlikely to have been achieved within the time frame of the evaluation. Much more realistic operational objectives were therefore agreed by the evaluators in consultation with program officials, civil servants, and those well experienced (experts) in this policy area. This was simply an exercise that acknowledged the politically sensitive nature of much of this work and accepted the fact that progress had to be made in a cautious but incremental manner, building on successes and learning from failures. The reformulated operational objectives reflected this, by refocusing work more toward projects involving contact work in areas of mutual interest (sports, arts, culture) rather than politically charged prejudice reduction work.

Second, a "good-will" factor was evident in this type of program. Each project attracted a cohort of people very supportive of the rationale underpinning the initiative. While their enthusiasm had a cumulative effect for the less committed, this had the potential for a self-selection problem; only through qualitative data gathering (participant observation, interviews with program participants) could evaluators judge how representative groups were.

Third, and in many ways the converse of the previous point, those participants who were willing, but nonetheless skeptical program attenders, had some difficultly expressing a view on the cross-

community benefits of the projects and activities they engaged in. Politics as a topic for discussion in an open mixed (Catholic and Protestant) forum in Northern Ireland is a taboo subject. People are reluctant to express honest opinions outside the safe confines of single identity groups, as such views could earmark one as a bigot or, worse still, leave one vulnerable to intimidation or paramilitary threats. This influenced the evaluation in two ways. The programs spent a lot of time in confidence building within groups and creating an environment congenial to open and frank discussions of differences that divided the two communities, as a necessary prerequisite to achieving measurable outputs. Generating interest and then participation in the program was more difficult in some areas of Northern Ireland than others. Clearly the single community ghettos, many of which had suffered the ravishes of violence, murders, intimidation, and bombings, were difficult areas to convince of the merits of such a program. A measure of progress here was the mere *acceptance* of a project under the initiative. The evaluation had therefore to be cognizant of varied levels of achievement and flexible in devising output measures.

Finally, the degree of political commitment from each local authority to the program had consequences for the evaluation. Those councils who were less supportive could, and in some cases did, restrain the program officials in the degree of innovation exercised in pursuance of their goals. Moreover, a minority of councils, while ideologically opposed to the program, were happy to accept the financial inducements central government offered for its implementation. Funds, when received, were then redirected to other policy areas under the guise of community relations. The best intentioned program officials could, therefore, be thwarted in their efforts to achieve their objectives. The evaluation had to be aware, therefore, of the political parameters within which officials operated.

CONCLUSIONS

This study endorses Guba and Lincoln's criticism of the scientific paradigm applied to program evaluation and used in isolation, devoid of social, political, and cultural context. Specifically, when political factors dominate, as described in this study, a slavish adherence to quantitative methodologies can render the evaluation at best vacuous and at worst irrelevant to policy practitioners and funders. Context stripping to address the question of significant differences in community relations attitudes between those councils

participating or not in the program would have failed to uncover factors most relevant to the program's "success." The role of council officers, for example, in delicately handling, or in some cases manipulating, the political agenda to win the support of wayward councillors was crucial to delivering program objectives. The process of converting politically derived and unattainable (in the short-term) program aims to politically feasible and operational objectives, through negotiations with politicians and community groups, was integral to its delivery.

An understanding of this context is more important, given the political location of the program in Northern Ireland. This is a program that not only has explicit political aims but is operating in a volatile political milieu with consequences for its pace of delivery. Sporadic atrocities (the Shankill bombing and Greysteel massacre in 1993, for example) had an adverse affect on reconciliation work central to the program. Equally, the ceasefires of 1994 created a political context more receptive to the aims of the initiative. This evaluation therefore illustrates the unique mix of contextual variables, with a specific political bias so important to an understanding of the program. Quantification, with the aim of generalization, is futile given the nature of the political circumstances.

Despite some evidence of a shifting emphasis toward pluralistic evaluation described earlier, the demands of value-for-money audit are still evident in the United Kingdom. The requirement to demonstrate economy, efficiency, and effectiveness in program evaluation invariably results in an emphasis on quantitative process and output indicators. To some extent, evaluators have had to revert to their role of measurement technicians (described as 1st generation by Guba and Lincoln) set alongside research methods that aim to generalize from experimental or random designs. This evaluation format eschews political, social, and cultural context in preference to the demands of accountability for public funds or probity of spending. A dilemma therefore exists for evaluators pressed to comply with funders' requirements to follow a quantitative format. Context stripping, the application of performance indicators, and generalizability of policy findings are pitted against context-dependence programs, the use of qualitative methods (e.g., participant observation), and case-specific findings. When the political nature of both program context and substance is so distinct, as is the case here, the short-term interests of funders to claim a "value-for-money" program is in danger of ignoring key influences upon its delivery. Chief among these are both macro political developments or the

changing political context and micro political influences at the organizational and community levels. An understanding and appreciation of political context was therefore crucial in undertaking this evaluation.

NOTES

1.   The British and Irish governments signed the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985. It contained four main elements. The constitutional status of Northern Ireland would not change without the consent of a majority of its inhabitants. An Intergovernmental Conference was established as a forum within which the Irish Republic could forward views on a wide range of political, security, and legal matters, reflective of the Nationalist perspective in the North. Increased cooperation between Northern Ireland and the Republic was promised in the fight against terrorism. Finally, the Agreement offered the prospect of a political settlement among parties within Northern Ireland through devolved administration that was acceptable to both sides of the community. Unionists were incensed that the Agreement incorporated an Irish dimension and had the status of international law. It had been negotiated without consulting the Unionist majority, and their response was a campaign of political disruption and demonstrations.

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