

Collaborative Ongoing Formative Evaluation Workshop Process (COFE)¹ for Implementing Change

Dr Paul Duignan

(Evaluation Strategist, Parker Duignan Ltd and Senior Research Fellow Centre for Social and Health Outcomes Research and Evaluation (SHORE) Massey University)

Professor Sally Casswell

(Director, Centre for Social and Health Outcomes Research and Evaluation (SHORE) Massey University)

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www.parkerduignan.com
www.strategievaluation.info
www.shore.ac.nz

¹ This process is also known as CO-EVAL and COFS. This paper was originally posted on the Strategic Evaluation Web Site with the title: *Formative Evaluation Collaborative Workshop Process (CO-EVAL) for Implementing Change*.

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Introduction

The Collaborative Ongoing Formative Evaluation Workshop Process (COFE) is an evidence-based formative evaluation/change implementation method that is well suited to centrally funded or initiated programmes that rely on implementation by a number of (totally or partially) autonomous groups. For instance:

- groups from different sectors or communities
- departments, sub-agencies, or organisations that are autonomous or semi-autonomous
- individual workers employed by different organisations who are interested in pursuing a common agenda being promoted by a central agency.

The current public administration and policy climate in New Zealand, as elsewhere, has seen a progressive move over more than a decade towards increasing devolution in decision making. The 1988 New Zealand Royal Commission on Social Policy foreshadowed this trend when it called for changes to the way the state carries out its responsibility. One of the Commission's recommended changes was that the state:

“Devolve power, responsibility and resources in partnership and according to the principle of subsidiarity (nothing should be done by a larger and higher social unit that can be done effectively by a smaller and lower unit).”¹

This trend has been reflected both at the level of the relationship between government and communities, at the level of departments and agencies within government, and between government and private and non-profit organisations in a range of sectors.

Relationship between government, other sectors and the community

For many areas of policy, using a devolved, partnership or, as it is often called “community”, strategy has now become a preferred approach for attempting to work with a range of social issues. Programmes funded or promoted through such initiatives tend to:

- have much of their implementation taking place out in different communities and sectors
- be implemented by either totally or partially autonomous organisations or groups operating in different communities and sectors
- have objectives and strategies which can evolve over time and which need to be able to be influenced by the sectors and communities in which they are located.

At the same time, where government or other agencies centrally fund such programmes they work under the following constraints:

- funding is usually allocated by the government or central agency from a “Vote” or fund for a specific purpose
- despite such programmes being implemented out in sectors and communities those implementing cannot have total discretion as to the objectives of such programmes
- the central agency wants the programmes to work from the existing evidence-base regarding what types of strategies are effective
- the central agency is accountable for how funding is used
- there is a legitimate demand from the central agency or government for monitoring and evaluation of such programmes.

There is the potential for considerable tension between these two sets of needs - those of the organisations or individuals implementing the programmes out in the community or sector, and the central funding agency. The Collaborative Ongoing Formative Evaluation Workshop Process (COFE) is designed to provide a framework through which to work creatively with both the tensions and synergies which come out of this sort of funding mechanism. It allows for a measure of autonomy and central coordination within a framework of evidence-based practice and peer review.

Government administration

In parallel with these developments in government’s relationship in sector organisations and community programmes, there have been changes in the structure of government administration. In particular, there has been an increase in some aspects of the autonomy of individual government agencies. In New Zealand this has been reflected in a range of changes to the relationship between the centre and individual agencies within the public service implemented during the late 1980s and 1990s. In addition, there is the long-standing tradition of considerable autonomy in particular sectors, one example being the health sector where local medical officers of health and local health services have traditionally had a fair degree of autonomy. A second example is autonomy in the relationship between central and local government. This situation, of government agencies with considerable levels of autonomy, even though inside the public service, also raises similar tensions between autonomy versus central coordination when it comes to implementing centrally sponsored change processes.

Trends in evaluation theory

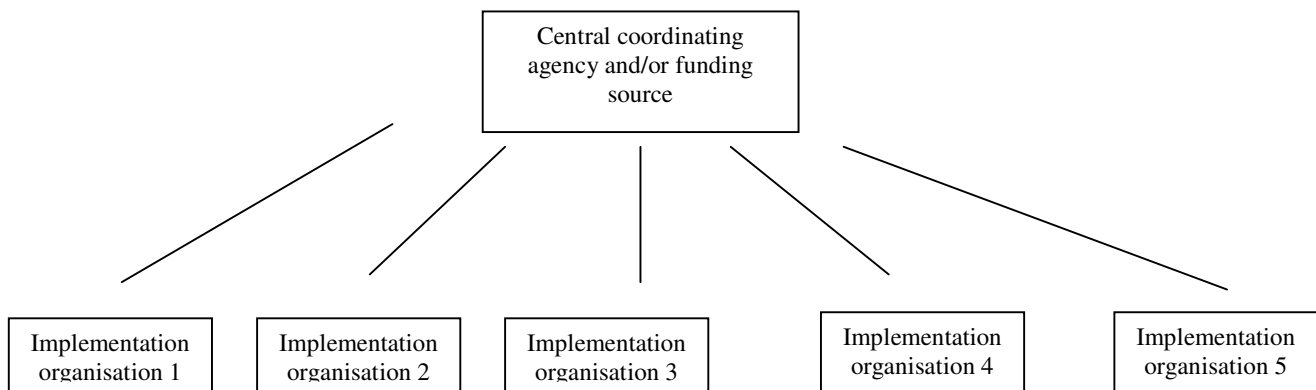
At the same time as these changes have been taking place in public administration, a shift has occurred in the way in which programme evaluation is conceptualised. In the past, evaluation was seen as something that only took place at the end of a programme. The purpose of such evaluation was to measure a programme’s outcomes. Evaluation is now seen as something that should occur right across a programme’s lifecycle. *Formative* evaluation should be undertaken at the start of a programme to ensure that a programme is developed and implemented in the best possible way. *Process* evaluation occurs during a programme to document and

describe the context and course of a programme. *Outcome* evaluation at the end of a programme is used to measure the outcomes of a programme.² With the new emphasis on formative evaluation, effort has been put into developing models that can assist in improving programmes in their implementation phase. Programmes which are operating in the newly devolved environment described above, present an interesting further layer of complexity in designing formative evaluation models. In such environments a central agency cannot just prescribe what should happen in the development and implementation of a programme as this would violate the autonomy of those who are implementing the programme. In response to this, various *participative* or *collaborative* approaches to formative evaluation have been developed. The COFE workshop process is one of these.

The Collaborative Ongoing Formative Evaluation Workshop Process (COFE)

The Collaborative Ongoing Formative Evaluation Workshop Process (COFE) has been designed to deal with the complexity of funding, promoting, coordinating, monitoring and evaluating programmes in a heavily devolved environment. Diagram One illustrates Model A, which is a model of the current way many central agencies attempt to coordinate programmes implemented by a number of autonomous or semi-autonomous organisations.

Diagram One: Model A One Possibility for Central Agency/Funder Relationship



In Model A, the central agency negotiates separately with each of the implementation organisation about all aspects of the programme it is funding or attempting to coordinate. This includes what the implementation organisation's programme's

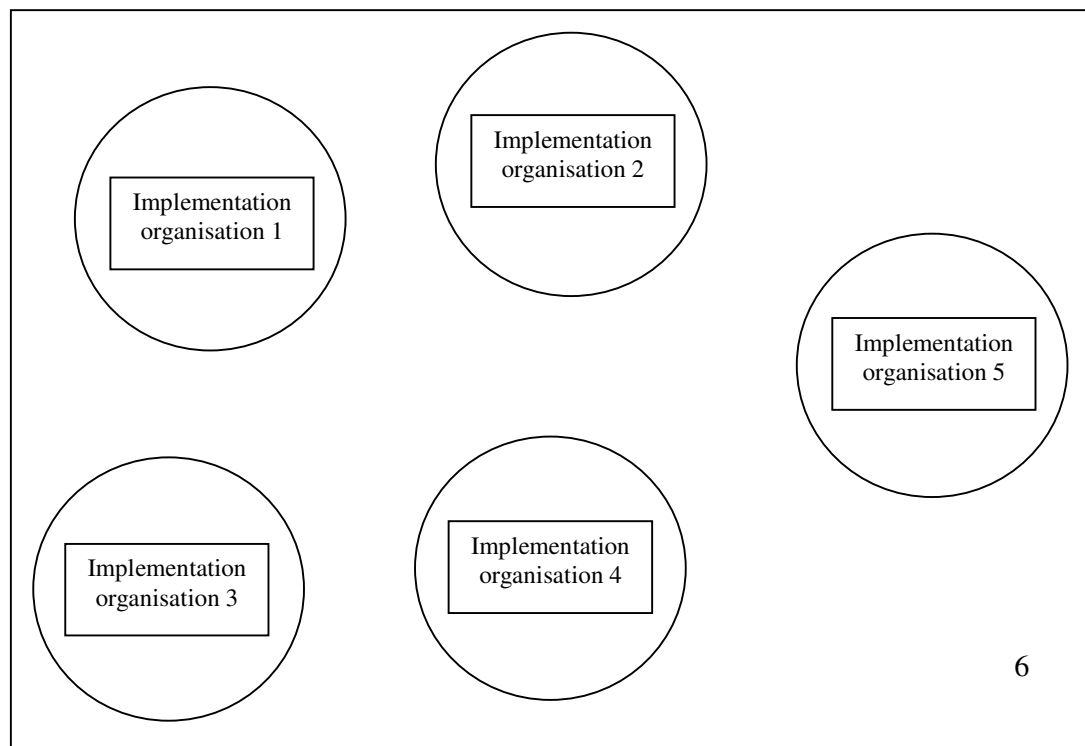
objectives, how it will be carried, on going monitoring and evaluation etc. The positive aspects of this model are:

- The central agency has a “hands on” relationship with each implementation organisation throughout the implementation process
- The central agency can attempt to ensure that the objectives of the overall programme are reflected in the objectives of the programme in each implementation organisation’s area.

The negative aspects of this model are:

- All learnings from the individual programmes have to come through the central agency
- An adversarial relationship can develop between the central agency and the implementation organisation with the central agency seeing the implementer as being too autonomous and the implementation organisation seeing the central agency as being too autocratic
- It can be difficult for the central agency to push for evidence-based practice without it looking like they are attempting to limit the implementation agency’s autonomy
- There is much duplication in the use of the central agency’s time in communicating with the implementation organisations individually.
- Individual implementation organisations can suggest policy or national initiatives that could assist them in their local implementation process. However they do not have: access to an overview to identify trends common to all implementers; they have limited bargaining power in relation to the central agency when negotiating for the central agency to change its policy or practices; and limited bargaining power to get a central agency to lobby to change the policy or practices of other stakeholders.

Diagram Two: Model B Implementation Organisations Working in Isolation



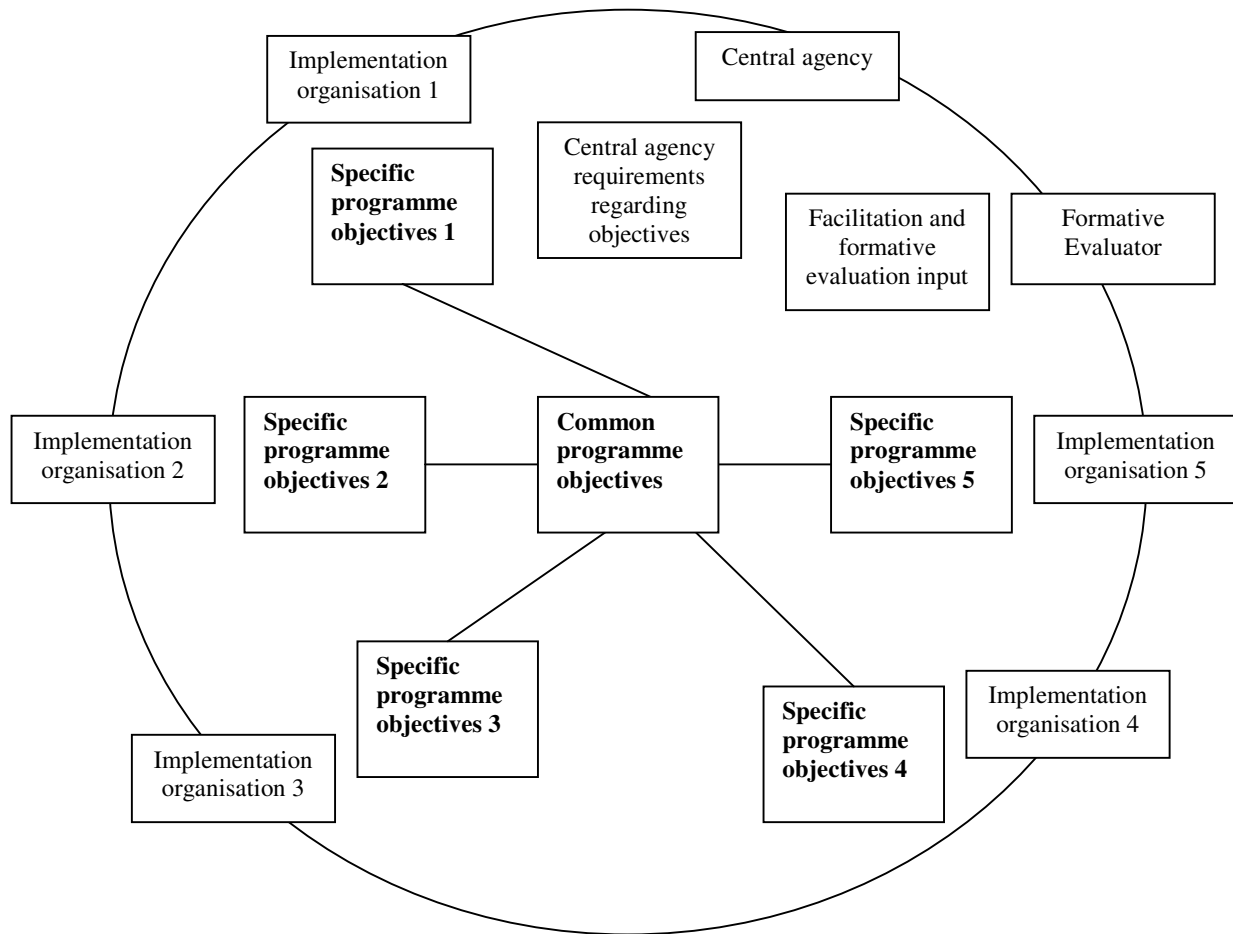
In Diagram Two, Model B illustrates one reaction to the difficulties presented in trying to work with Model A. In this scenario, the central agency gives up the attempt to provide any serious coordination or input. The implementation organisations are seen as totally autonomous organisations which are basically left to get on with their implementation in isolation. The central agency may provide funding, but it does so without any “strings attached”. The rhetoric of “community autonomy” is often used to advance this model. The positive aspects of this model are:

- Implementation organisations get to do what they like with the funding they obtain
- The central agency does not have to negotiate with the individual implementation organisations about the objectives of the programme
- The central agency does not have to have any “hands on” monitoring of the programme’s implementation by the implementers.

The negative aspects of this model are:

- The central agency has no way of ensuring that funding is spent on what it was allocated for
- There is no formal mechanism for sharing evidence-based and emerging best practice
- There is no opportunity for implementation organisations to have input into policy and national initiatives which could assist their work.

Diagram Three: Model C The Collaborative Outcomes-Focused Stakeholder Workshop Process (COFE)



In Diagram Three, Model C is illustrated. This is the Collaborative Ongoing Formative Evaluation Workshop Process (COFE). The COFE process takes place separately from the normal contracting process between the individual implementation organisations and the central funder. The process consists of the following elements:

- Regular meetings of representatives from the central agency and the implementation organisations, facilitated by a formative evaluator. Typically in a multiyear project these would occur every six months. Ideally, the same personnel would attend all workshop, selected for their enthusiasm for the

programme rather than just their figurehead position in the implementation organisation.

- Regular electronic networking between meetings either by email lists or specially constructed web distributed work environments.
- The process facilitated by an independent formative evaluator. This changes the dynamic between the central agency and the implementation organisations.
- The task of the workshops is framed up at the first Workshop as follows: *“We have a shared issue here which we are going to work on collectively. Our task is to develop our common objectives, and then to define some specific objectives for each implementation agency in addition to these common objectives. We then need to consider the evidence and best-practice base regarding what strategies we can design in order to achieve our collective and individual objectives.”*
- Input from evidence or research based knowledge. Input from the formative evaluation team regarding effective strategies for achieving the objectives which have been developed.
- Sharing of best practice between implementation organisations.
- The formation of ad hoc, mini-projects. These are sub-groups within the COFE workshop (consisting of implementers and in some cases central agency representatives) which go away between workshops and solve common problems or develop resources and bring back the solution for all implementers to share.
- Advice on, and coordination of, evaluation plans between the implementers. Use of formative evaluation techniques such as intervention logic, pretesting and piloting.
- The opportunity for implementers to reflect on what changes should take place in the central agency and other stakeholders’ policies and practices which would support the implementation work being undertaken by the implementers.
- Clear definition of tasks which implementers will undertake prior to the next workshop and reporting back on these tasks at subsequent workshop.
- Documenting the content of the workshops as part of process evaluation and monitoring of the project.

The positives of this model are:

- A shared sense of ownership of the programme by the implementers and the central agency.
- A change in the dynamic between the central agency and the implementers due to the shared sense of ownership.
- A mechanism for accountability for centrally-provided funds due to the involvement of the central agency in the setting of shared objectives.
- Input of evidence-based practice in an environment where innovation and experimentation is supported.
- Clarity about shared objectives with the opportunity for individual implementation organisations to also have their own objectives.
- Best practice sharing and peer review between implementation organisations.

- Pressure for implementers to commit to, and publicly report back on, progress to the group.
- Efficient documentation of progress regarding the programme simply by making a record of the proceedings of the COFE workshops.
- Ability for implementers to negotiate for changes in the central agency's policies and practices, or for its support in negotiating regarding the policies and practices of other stakeholders that affect implementation by the implementation organisations.
- Potential to attract additional outside resources for implementers from other central agencies and stakeholders due to opportunity for implementers and the central agency to collectively reflect on need for, and sources for, funding.

The negatives aspects of the model are:

- The central agency does not have the same level of control as it appears to have in Model One.
- The implementation organisations do not have the same level of autonomy as they appear to have in Model Two.
- The possibility that really innovative approaches will not take place due to "group think" in the Workshops.

Utilisation

The Collaborative Outcomes-Focused Stakeholder Workshop Process (COFE) provides an innovative way of working with the coordinated implementation of programmes in a heavily devolved environment. Elements of this approach are already being used in various implementation situations; for instance, where community providers are brought together at the start of a programme, or where workshops are provided for implementers on various topics relevant to the implementation of a programme. However, there is merit in formalising such contact within the framework of a formative evaluation model such the COFE model. Formalising the process changes the dynamic of such meetings, creates a sense of shared ownership, and emphasises a commitment to a "learning organisation" approach being taken to the implementation. Such an approach values innovation while also achieving autonomy and accountability for the programme being implemented.

For further information or comments on this paper please contact:

Dr Paul Duignan
paul@strategievaluation.info

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- ¹ Royal Commission on Social Policy (1988) *Towards a fair and just society*. Wellington, author. p. 6
- ² Duignan, P. (2002). Building Social Policy Evaluation Capacity. *Social Policy Journal of New Zealand*, 19, 179-194. URL www.strategievaluation.info/se/documents/100f.html.