Are complex programs the best response to complex policy issues?

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Abstract

International examples of recent housing and urban renewal policy, and programs developed to deliver on those policies, appear to have become a lot more complicated – or at least the articulation of policy aims, objectives and expected outcomes has. This is a good thing: it reflects the integral role housing plays within wider discussions of social disadvantage and equity, urban regeneration and economic development. It recognises that in order to address issues effectively requires root causes to be tackled rather than simply responding to consequences, and it is long-term outcomes that matter. It also reflects recognition that joined up policy and cross-Government responses are required.

Actual programs developed to help deliver those policies reflect these complex aspirations, advocating partnership approaches to addressing social disadvantage, reconnecting neighbourhoods and building ‘sustainable communities’. However, the funding, delivery vehicles and governance arrangements within which those programs are required to deliver on the ground make their role in meeting those complex policy aspirations hard to fulfil.

This issues paper draws upon recent international and Australian examples of housing and urban renewal policy development, delivery and subsequent attempts to evaluate the success of resulting programs. It considers whether the framing of certain housing programs has become too complex: to difficult to explain its key objectives in tangible terms, too amorphous to deliver, and too difficult to meaningfully evaluate. While certainly not seeking to unravel the considerable debate that has both called for and welcomed more holistic, intelligent responses to complex issues, it argues that there is a need for a more detailed and pragmatic consideration of the implications arising for those delivering and assessing the impacts of these programs.
Introduction

Housing policy and programs often fail to live up to expectations, or to deliver the initially intended outcomes, for myriad reasons. Difficulties in the translation of ideas and initiatives and putting them into practice on the ground can undermine even good policy making and political intention. Indeed as argued in this paper, it is often ‘evidence-based’ policies, demonstrating new ways of thinking and demanding new ways of delivery, which suffer the most in moving from theory into practice.

This discussion is framed by the author’s recent transition from a research and policy analyst environment in the UK, where urban and housing issues have returned to a more centre-stage position on central, regional and local Government radars, to an Australian context characterised by comparatively limited Federal engagement and partial and often poorly-funded State responses. As such, much of the discussion may initially appear removed from the Australian policy environment: far from having to worry about overly ambitious policy and program development, the issue is one of getting such ideas addressed in a more integrated, holistic and joined-up way. Nevertheless, there are significant aspects in policy discourse and delivery that are pertinent and comparable. Similar approaches are advocated, similar outcomes are expected, even if the political impetus and available funding is less well defined.

The aim of this issues paper is not to detract from calls promoting more joined-up responses and intelligent policy making. Difficulties and challenges for policy makers, practitioners and researchers involved in policy development, delivery and evaluation are preferable to disjointed, poorly co-ordinated, and sometimes contradictory activity which fails to understand the complexity of the underlying causes to the issues of concern. However, there is valid debate regarding whether complex policy issues are always best approached with a commensurate complexity in the programs developed to address those concerns. There is also an important role for housing researchers and policy advisors in seeking a more pragmatic framework for policy and program expectations, including the extent to which any monitoring and evaluation activity can effectively support and demonstrate change. The paper seeks to highlight three interconnected ways in which the challenge of complexity arises:

- the challenge to delivery;
- the challenge of ‘selling’ and ensuring the continued support of initiatives; and
- the difficulties and expectations of the housing researcher to understand and evaluate such complex programs

What do I mean by complexity?

Learning lessons from previous initiatives, there has rightly been an impetus to avoid increasingly understood pitfalls and recognition of the need to articulate new policy development in ways that obviates those limitations. There has been increased recognition that the complex and interrelated nature of social disadvantage and exclusion requires integrated ‘joined-up’ strategy-led solutions to appropriately address those challenges. Policy makers have responded to this need with policy initiatives which are
equally comprehensive and joined up, justified through a well researched evidence base rather than political whim, and have outcomes tied to encompassing visions. In turn, those policies and their resulting programs are then assessed and judged on outcomes understood in terms of its contribution to tackling those complex issues.

It is this complexity, and the translation of complexity through stages of the development-delivery-evaluation cycle, which is of key interest. It is not the focus of this paper to engage in detail with complex systems theory per se (see for example Capra, 1996), although a number of its concepts are pertinent in understanding why the translation process is in itself complex and provide some pointers as to how the outcomes of complex programs might be better understood (or at least identified and followed).

Calls for greater alignment and co-ordination have been prominent in a broad range of recent policy development. ‘Joining up’ has been enabled through a variety of mechanisms, for example through the creation of central strategy units within Government, Cabinet Committees with defined remits and reporting expectations, and taskforces (the latter not only working across Government but also seeking to integrate external expertise and interests into the agenda). The Social Exclusion Unit in the UK was established in the early stages of the New Labour Government to underpin the cross-government approach to improving the life chances of the most disadvantaged in society. Structures with similar objectives albeit on different scales and in terms of remit can be seen in the Australian context, for example through the Housing and Human Services Accord in NSW, the whole-of-Government objectives of Growing Victoria together, and work of the Social Inclusion Unit in South Australia.

Such trends are typically recognised as a good thing. Certainly at the whole-of-Government level, if policy fails to make such connections and clarify objectives within broader strategic agendas, then it is highly unlikely that effective delivery of those policies and programs on the ground will be enabled. Long-term ‘outcomes based’ policy also provides a common language which can be shared both within Departments and across Government, helping establish consistent objectives, ownership and commitment to those goals across a range of stakeholders.

While difficult to argue against the merits of joint working and co-ordination, it can be argued that the growing emphasis on the complexity of issues to be addressed, and the use of complexity and the challenge of process, can act to deflect Government responsibility towards addressing some of the fundamentals which play a key role in shaping the social and economic outcomes: focusing on the complexity of co-ordination and shared responsibility helps offset difficult decisions. A certain degree of cynicism may also be expressed in that Governments, while advocating evidence-based policymaking followed up by evaluation based on results-based accountability, may draw comfort from inherent difficulties in demonstrating causality and attribution: the complexity of untangling which party is responsible for joined-up outcomes arising from joined-up approaches can mean that accountability becomes equally complex.

While such arguments do not provide the basis on which to critique complex responses in policy development and program delivery, they do help to raise a number of challenges faced by those involved in the implementation of those programs. This is true for both
practitioners and researchers as well as the policy makers and politicians themselves. Although we increasingly understand the complexity of the issues to be tackled through housing and regeneration policy, the route maps and techniques available to reach the long-term outcomes desired takes longer to progress.

Indeed, arguably more and more is expected from policy and program outcomes at a time when the frameworks within which those policies operate mean that they have less influence on shaping those outcomes than they may have had in the past. Thus, for example, we no longer need to build more houses to meet the needs of an increasing population, we need to understand the dynamics of housing markets in the context of social and economic trends and build ‘sustainable communities’. It is as much about Government facilitating improved ‘quality of life’ and creating places where people would chose to live and work and stay, as it is about increasing housing provision.

Inherent in whole-of-Government approaches, policy seeks to achieve or at least have an influence on objectives that require success not only in areas where that policy may have a direct role, but also across portfolios where its potential reach is substantially less. In effect, complex policy sets itself up to deliver broad long-term outcomes, many of which it may have little change of influencing; and even where it does, it is difficult to determine precisely how.

**Delivering complex programs**

Getting the policy right, and ensuring that it does not succumb to the usual weaknesses of previous activity demands consideration of the tools and frameworks available to deliver more intelligent policy in more effective ways. In many regards, the recent history of urban policy can be seen as the disparity between better strategic thinking and the need for ways in which to deliver that thinking to catch up. The intentions are good: encouraging partnership working and development of coherent strategies as a basis for joined-up delivery, and promoting greater flexibility at the local level to enable process and solutions appropriate to context: those living in the ‘complex’ world are often best placed to clearly identify what the issues are and what needs to happen. The approach is also supportive of the ongoing value of research and intelligence gathering, and provides a mechanism whereby limited resources can be most effectively targeted. The benefits are clear, not least where previously there was fragmentation of funding, or limited or no engagement.

The social/spatial manifestations of one of the key foci of complexity within housing and urban renewal policy reflects the geographical concentration of disadvantage and the program response, through placed- or area-based initiatives (ABIs). They represent logical joined-up approaches, at a spatial scale where activities can be reflective of context and community involvement enabled in shaping approaches to tackle multiple, inter-related issues. ABIs are certainly not new. In the UK, there has been a rich tradition of neighbourhood level housing renewal initiatives since the late 1960s which has spawned an equally strong legacy of acronyms: HIA (Housing Improvement Areas); HAA (Housing Action Areas), GIA (General Improvement Areas), Housing Renewal Areas (HRA) and NRA (Neighbourhood Renewal Areas). These initiatives show common threads, and while it would be incorrect to suggest that earlier incarnations were
primarily ‘physical condition/housing only’ focused (they were not), as neighbourhood renewal approaches have progressed, there has been a continual shift to increasingly holistic approaches which tackle broader social and ‘community’ issues as much as simply housing.

This more comprehensive approach was further cemented through first through Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) projects and since the late 1990s New Deal for Communities (NDC) areas. ABIs have also been a longstanding feature of US urban and housing renewal policy through geographically delimited CDCs (Community Development Corporations). Urban Australia has far less of a tradition of such initiatives, although the Whitlam Government sought to promote similar (albeit rather less ambitious objectives) through the Area Improvement Program (AIP) in the early 1970s.

As well as becoming more holistic in approach, recent housing and renewal policy has sought to address and work with the complex drivers and causes of disadvantage as well as consequences in a more effective manner, and added complexity has arguably arisen as policies and programs have becoming more outward looking rather than inward focused (Hall, 1997). Thus issues faced, and the solutions to, neighbourhood disadvantage and weakness, are understood in terms of wider economic and housing market processes.

Considerable expectations are attached to place-based initiatives as a means of providing a focus for joined-up working at the source of the issue to be addressed, but arguably they rarely have the necessary tools, funding and enduring political support to meet highly ambitious goals. ABIs reflect a trend whereby complexities faced by policymakers are transferred into complex programs, with spatial considerations – the ‘neighbourhood’ – expected to provide a pivotal role in addressing and resolving issues. Such alignment can be highly beneficial where areas have faced a history of multiple, contradictory projects and funding streams. It provides a means of unravelling the cocktail of initiatives and refocusing them towards more coherent use, appropriate to context.

However by translating much of the complexity at policy level down to program level, they – and the communities they represent – are expected to join-up activity where arguably central and local Government has thus far failed to do so, and resolve issues of disadvantage which reflect not only national but international outcomes of globalisation and inequality. New Deal for Communities in the UK and Neighbourhood Renewal in Victoria share similar goals articulated in terms of ‘closing the gap’ between disadvantaged communities and the rest. Similarly, HOPE VI (US), Stadtumbau (Germany) and Housing Market Renewal (UK) (Turbov & Piper, 2005; IGA-Buro, 2005; ODPM, 2003; Cole & Nevin, 2004) all seek to restructure local, sub-regional housing markets and revitalise neighbourhoods in the face of macro economic and demographic trends. Given the complex worlds in which these programs operate, such expectations are inevitably very hard to deliver.

Developing integrated, inclusionary approaches focuses substantial challenges on local partnerships and teams: the task of co-ordination and delivery of joined-up outcomes is not easy, especially when it has traditionally eluded others, or indeed where expectations have not been matched with powers required to meet those expectations. Where they are successful, this collaborative approach clearly benefits the communities involved.
However in less successful examples (and with perhaps more objective, challenging evaluations), a criticism has been that the focus of activity becomes getting the partnership to work, with a broad and diverse remit, rather than a clear, coherent and manageable driver and set of objectives.

Two core components of the UK’s neighbourhood renewal agenda – New Deal for Communities (NDCs) and Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) – encapsulate local enabling and decision-making approaches. Critical observations and early evaluations for these programs (see renewal.net; CRESR/NRU, 2004; NRU, 2005; Regeneration & Renewal, 2006; Toynbee, 2003) highlight the difficulties involved in actually translating valid policy aims and aspirations into practice. Toynbee’s raw exposé of the realities of trying to get the structures of an NDC partnership in South London off the ground is instructive. It highlights the tension between ‘best practice’ and good policy intention and difficulties in application, and the challenge of devolving decision-making and power.

Local flexibility requires accountability and bureaucracy, and it is local partnerships and residents that are charged with taking on this burden, developing viable solutions for the delivery of complex programs, and meeting outcome-based targets of a complex policy:

*In theory, it is a fine idea that communities should come together and solve their problems. In practice, the poorest people with the hardest lives are expected to undertake heroic civic duties. Do Mayfair’s denizens feel “involved with their community”? “Community” is only called on when things go wrong - and yet social policy always expects the poorest estates to summon up exceptional community spirit.* (Toynbee, 2003)

Journalistic prose arguably, however more formal evaluation also reflects the difficulties faced not only in the complicated tasks of strategic development and ‘bending’ mainstream funding, but in the simpler ‘process’ tasks of partnership working. The NDC national evaluation cautiously identifies growing ‘stability and consolidation’ amongst NDC partnerships, and acknowledges that basic partnership demands such as the recruitment and retention of key staff is a primary barrier to delivery (CRESR/NRU, 2004). A report on progress towards mainstreaming notes that ‘tensions’ can exist between NDCs and their local authorities, and that while evidence at that time (3-4 years in for many of the partnerships) of greater integration in terms of services spending was limited, there was ‘growing discourse about mainstreaming’ (UWE/NRU, 2004).

A frequent observation where complex governance and decision-making structures are in place is that such mechanisms are slow to get off the ground and slow to make an impact. The clarion call is typically that more needs to be done; it needs to be more effective, and structures to facilitate this need to be encouraged. Regeneration practitioners are required to think differently, think across a range of sectors, and are the translators of well-intentioned complex policy into meaningful outputs (and even more tricky) outcomes. The industry calls for the need for improved skills in the regeneration sector, the return of ‘thinkers and doers’ who can operate across diverse fields and understand the different languages and contexts of housing and urban renewal (CABE, 2003; Kearns & Turok, 2003; Neighbourhood Renewal Unit, 2002; ODPM, 2004). Following a report of the skills needs required to deliver the ‘Sustainable Communities’ agenda (The Egan Review, 2004), the UK Government established the Academy for Sustainable Communities (ASC)
in 2005 which aims to provide a centre of excellence focus on integrated learning to build
the skills and knowledge base in order for Government to meet those aims.

However, while involvement of each and every relevant stakeholder in the process is
important, often the processes whereby specific elements of programs get delivered
inevitably reduce to more simplified structures. Somewhat across the grain of current best
practice, it may be that sometimes ‘silo’ approaches are reverted to, and might actually
prove more effective. A more ‘structured’ approach, that reflects that programs
necessarily have to be broken down into more manageable constituent parts in order to be
delivered, can be seen as restrictive and bounded by existing practices that are ill suited to
meeting the challenges of complex inter-related issues. Alternatively in some cases it can
be regarded as a valid, pragmatic response to the need to deliver, the need to progress,
and the need to spend money.

In the case of the UK’s Housing Market Renewal program, comprehensive sub-regional
strategies and cross-local authority partnerships seek to restructure housing markets and
build sustainable communities. While operating at the sub-regional scale, the focus of
implementation and delivery of particular interventions is necessarily at a more local
level: the delivery of intelligent policy on the ground often constitutes a more mundane
response reflecting the realities and boundaries of what actually can be enacted. Thus
restructuring markets may translate to reducing levels of unfit stock or dwellings no
longer in demand, and creating sustainable communities to building a new range and
diversity of housing types. Although there are examples of innovative practice in terms of
housing refurbishment, certainly in the early years of the program it has been commented
that there has been a reliance on ‘off-the-shelf’ solutions and more tried-and-tested
approaches (Audit Commission, 2005). This is because ultimately strategic sub-regional
thinking has to be translated into actions at the local level, by local delivery agencies, to
tight timeframes, and introducing new ways of thinking takes time.

It is also important to reflect that all policy and programs have the potential to lead to
unexpected or perverse outcomes: their translation on the ground can lead to benefits, or
negative externalities, that were not considered at the time of policy design and
development. It may be the case that the desired results are achieved, but not in the ways
which had been anticipated. While joined up and complex programs might provide a
better framework for tackling root causes and achieving desired long-term outcomes,
arguably such structures – shaped by many interdependencies and contingencies – also
have the potential to lead to complex, unintended outcomes. As such, the greater the
complexity of a program, the greater the need for flexible structures that can respond and
adapt.

**Selling complex policy**

Complex policy also demands pragmatic mechanisms for supporting programs expected
to deliver. Policy ‘spin’ and promotion are of course integral to the process; however,
overselling the potential of individual programs makes it difficult for those programs to
deliver against expectations. Broad vision messages appear logical, and for policymakers,
set an agenda to both shape debate and focus spending priorities. However, without
clarity in translation between policy and the programs developed to enable such aims to be met, those long-term and somewhat intangible aims can act to make program delivery difficult.

Emphasis on joined-up strategies and long-term outcomes of policy to a certain extent signifies the success of evidence-based and iterative approaches: policy has become more intelligent and reflective of the issues it seeks to address. However, this success can be seen as having mixed implications. ‘Sustainability’, ‘liveability’, ‘quality of life’, and ‘stronger communities’ are at the same time both easy and difficult terms to articulate. On the one hand, such terms identify outcomes which residents and communities may identify with and consider important, but on the other, may find them rather amorphous and difficult to relate these long term-outcomes to immediate, local issues that may be front-of-mind. Cleaning up streets, putting investment into public space and removing graffiti help provide good routes into ‘liveability’, but the pathways to ‘building strong and sustainable communities’ are complex for the policymakers and practitioners involved, let alone for general public debate and consultation with communities.

Even comprehensive and evidence-based urban programs will struggle to meet the objectives of policies framed in broad aspirations. In the context of the UK’s Sustainable Communities Plan (ODPM, 2003), the policy case is made for increasing the rate of house construction in SE England (facing high housing demand and affordability concerns) and restructuring housing markets in parts of the north and Midlands (where low housing demand affects some of the country’s most disadvantaged neighbourhoods). While this twin-track approach responds to different housing policy challenges in different parts of the country, they are both underpinned by the need to address failure in the operation of the market (Bramley et al, 2004), and share long-term outcomes in terms of creating vibrant communities.

However, disparities between the language of policy and its translation on the ground undermine the ability of individual programs to articulate their own purpose, scope and achievements. Political jostling aside, issues are likely to become most readily evident where policies are delivered i.e. at the program level. ‘Restructuring housing markets’ clearly has policy relevance, but less easy to talk through when the more immediate experience of communities may focus on clearance and the loss of one’s home. Difficulties in translation between complex policy and realities in delivery make Government liable to accusations of spin (when they lead) or exposed to attack (when on the defence).

Media shorthand that the UK Government is ‘concreting over the Southeast’ and ‘bulldozing the North’ is more accessible to the public than the language of ‘reconnecting neighbourhoods’ and building ‘sustainable communities’. The disparity between long-term aspiration and on the ground experience exposes Government to debates framed in such a way that leaves complex programs, and the policy that sits behind them, struggling. For example, in the case of Housing Market Renewal, the Government has been forced to defend its policies and actions against simplistic, yet easier to grasp assertions, whether from TV makeover shows (ODPM, 2006b) or from pressure groups that have the luxury of an arguably more single-minded, less holistic agenda (SAVE, 2006; ODPM, 2006a).
As such, policy not only needs to be responsive to the issues and concerns it seeks to address, it needs to reflect that it needs to be sold politically, to practitioners and to the wider general public. Where public funding is to be allocated, a case clearly has to be made justifying the level and nature of that expenditure. It requires policy to be understood and accessible so that stakeholders and the public can engage with the rationale for intervention and expenditure. This is not to argue that policy should be ‘dumbed down’ to ignore the complexities any comprehensive response would need to work with, however it does point to the central importance of being able to articulate both the aims of policy and the processes whereby those aims are going to be achieved.

Challenges of maintaining support and justifying policy and program activity also relate to the fact that complex housing and urban regeneration takes a long time: it certainly demands commitment over a number of Treasury spending cycles, typically electoral cycles, and indeed transfers of power between political parties. Indeed, the rise of PFI and new forms of private-funding models rest on frameworks and business planning models tied to 25-30 year trajectories. Complex policy also tends to require making difficult and often unpopular decisions. Even in Government with robust majorities, the timetable of renewal, the vagaries of political pressure, and the costs associated with such activity ensures that this commitment gets tested. This is especially so where program actions often lead to even greater flux and disconnection to neighbourhoods at the early stages of intervention where the very aims of policy in the mid- to long- term are to reduce such tendencies: things often get worse before they get better.

**Evaluating complex programs**

It typically falls to the research community to make sense of complex programs and link outputs and achievements to broader policy aims. However, the tools with which we have to do this do not hold the magic formula Government and the policy community may wish for. How do you establish appropriate evaluation frameworks for complex policy and programs with ambitious objectives? How can housing researchers best demonstrate how programs such as housing market renewal in the UK, Stadtumbau in Germany, or Bonnyrigg Living Communities in Australia meet the broad and often highly aspirational aims and objectives as stated in policy terms? As previously discussed, the language of policy greatly adds to this challenge: how do we measure ‘restructured housing markets’, improved ‘liveability’, ‘connected neighbourhoods’, or ‘safe and strong communities’? Ironically, it can be seen as the success of evidence-based, or at least ‘research informed’ policy that the evaluator’s task has become as complex as the actual programs he/she is tasked with assessing.

More traditional techniques for identifying cause and attribution are inevitably going to be seriously muddied where joined-up, whole-of-Government approaches are advocated. One response has been to be pragmatic and realistic about what evaluation can achieve in the context of such environments. It is recognised that both policy and programs are dynamic, can change direction over time, involve actors with different ideas and perspectives, and often have no obvious right answer in terms of the solution. It involves accepting that many factors may influence the change sought, and indeed it might not be
the policy and program that was intended to bring about the change that actually did so. As Mann & Schorr (1998) point out:

Both social scientists and practitioners involved with comprehensive community initiatives and other complex interventions may be well advised to avoid claiming ‘we know what works!’ Rather, they should aspire to gathering and analysing the information that would enable them to say ‘We now have strong support for a number of informed hypotheses about what may work, which cumulatively, over time, can produce sturdy knowledge about what does work’.

In this regard, there has been significant interest in recent years in the use of ‘theories of change’ as a means of assessing complex interventions. ‘Theories of change’ emerged in the late 1990s as a response to complex public policy interventions prevalent in the US at the time (Aspen Institute, 1997), and identify ‘a systematic and cumulative study of the links between activities, outcomes and contexts of the initiative’ (Connell & Kubisch, 1998). More simply, it captures ‘a theory of how and why an initiative works’ (DCLG, 2006). Theory-based evaluation methods aim to provide a means to unravel the causal mechanisms that make programs effective in the contexts in which they unfold. The approach requires the research team (evaluators) and stakeholders (delivery agents, practitioners) to identify and agree on these causal mechanisms to provide shared understanding of what should happen given a particular intervention if the assumptions behind the policy are correct. Theories of change provide a means of identifying how activity translates through each level from strategy to program level.

As such, it is arguably an evaluation of theory and assumptions as much as outcomes in context. Advocates argue that the rigor and stakeholder engagement fostered by the approach helps identify core measures on which to build evidence of change as well as providing a means to addressing attribution dilemma in complex environments (Connell & Kubisch, 1998). Recent urban policy and program evaluations in the UK have increasingly accommodated theory-based evaluation methods either implicitly or explicitly. The Neighbourhood Renewal Unit in particular has utilised such frameworks through the extensive New Deal for Communities (NDC) and Local Strategic Partnerships (LSP) evaluations (DCLG, 2006; Sullivan & Stewart, 2006). More generally, ‘process-outcome’ (Robson, 1993) and ‘realistic’ (Pawson & Tilley, 1997) approaches have influenced the development of evaluation frameworks for complex programs such as Housing Market Renewal.

Although theory-based approaches clearly provide a route map for evaluating complex policy, they inevitably have their limitations. While providing a framework for identifying outcomes and mitigating attribution dilemma, challenges are largely transferred to the process of identifying, articulating and developing appropriate indicators for assumptions and hypotheses (Weiss, 1995). Furthermore, the intensive and complex nature of the engagement process has often acted to limit the use of theories of change in practice. Consensus building required in drawing out assumptions may indeed be problematic in the context of working within the dynamics of complex environments – certainly given the long-term nature of regeneration. Here complex-systems theory points to the inherent difficulties in process-outcome approaches to evaluation. The processes of
understanding and assessment require attribution and order, and in effect require some linear thinking imposed on that complexity.

Conclusion

This paper is not a call for a return to simplistic thinking and fragmented, disjointed programs demonstrating little in the way of co-ordination: the old adage ‘there are many simple solutions to complex programs. Problem is that none of them work’ is apt. The rise of complexity is appropriate and is in many ways inevitable. While presenting significant challenges to policymakers, practitioners and researchers alike, it is a necessary reality if we are to respond effectively to the issues faced. However, there are valid questions to be asked about the current nexus of complex policy-complex program-complex evaluation beyond the observation that this is a complex world and thus our approaches need to reflect this.

Complexity can present potential risks as much as simplification does: policymakers express broad aims and objectives in language that at the same time can be seen as both accessible and obtuse. Programs can become overwhelmed by process, networks and the task of joining-up; and those evaluating such policies and programs either revel in the complexity of it all or end up evaluating assumptions and theorised causality to help understand the real world. In the case of the latter, practitioners will tell you that theory rarely translates as expected on the ground; and more candid policymakers will acknowledge that the policy environment is a dynamic one which cannot always be evidence based.

Of particular interest is whether complexity needs to channel through the whole process of policy development, program delivery, and assessment. Complexity at the broad policy level is justified: it is required to appropriately understand the interconnected nature of a broad range of policy issues and ensure that at the ‘whole of Government’ level, Government maximises the benefits of its influence and minimises potentially contradictory activity. However can you, should you, transfer the long-term aims and intended outcomes of complex policy onto programs which need to deliver in the short- and mid- as well as the long-term?

Programs have to deliver, and they have to take people with them. Complex aims and visions are often delivered through more standard elements. Again, this is not a call for a return to simple input/output rather than outcome focused programs, but there is a need for the language of broad, long-term policy aspiration to be mediated in how the range of programs which collectively aim to bring about those goals are positioned. Rather than make every program complex, it can be argued that some of this complexity may be better left at the level of policy. This does not mean that the outcomes of less complex programs are not able to help achieve the broader objectives required by complex policy.

While long-term outcomes-based language provides a route into discussing urban policy issues with broader audiences, it may also act to detract from the more tangible activities and actions that may be required. Broad aims such as ‘building strong and safer communities’ take a long time to achieve: much longer than spending cycles to which
politicians can commit, and often longer than the terms of even successful Governments. They also depend on actions and events outside the influence and remit of the policy environment, and cost a great deal more than is typically available to programs developed to support of those policies. The case can be made for a more considered view by policymakers of the extent to which complex outcomes at the program level need to be demonstrated, and a responsibility to better articulate process and pathways as well as outcomes.

Arguably, researchers have a role in promoting more pragmatic language when informing policy and when helping shaping frameworks whereby those policies and their programs will be evaluated. Amorphous terms such as ‘sustainability’ and ‘liveability’ should not be dismantled – they provide invaluable frameworks on which to build consensus in terms of shared purpose – but there is debate to be had regarding at which level such outcomes can and should be achieved. Rather than relaying the standard mantra of a need for greater integration and holistic approaches, researchers can further contribute to the difficult task of exploring how complex policy outcomes come together at the policy as well as program level.
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