Are complex programs the best response to complex policy?

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introduction

What happens along the way? How does complexity translate?

• Complex policy/programs
• Delivering complex programs
• Making sense of complex policy/programs through evaluation
• Discussion
  – The language of policy and problems which arise for the delivery of, maintaining commitment for, and evaluation of, long term programs
  – Role of housing research and researchers in this context
Making the policy >> research transition

• Then: research and policy analyst, helping shape policy and commissioning research including evaluations

• Now: on the research side, working in very similar fields/issues

• From a centralised policy environment with increasing devolutionary tendencies to one with limited engagement at the centre and varied State responses

• Despite a quite different arena, many similarities in terms of the challenges, broad objectives and the framing of debate – both from the policy and research community
• Complex interrelated nature of social disadvantage and exclusion requires integrated ‘joined-up’ strategy-led solutions to appropriately address those challenges.

• A good thing:
  – Joining-up and shared outcomes-based approach has to happen at the whole-of-Government level
  – Research plays a pivotal role in making the case, ‘evidence based’ policy making adds legitimacy

• Always a good thing?
  – Does reveling in the complexity of it all means that Government thinks less about some of the fundamentals/less robust engagement with the way the world works?
  – Linking everything with everything else raises the opportunity for unexpected/perverse outcomes significantly increases when translated into programs

• Policymakers like it because it emphasises learning and iteration: policy needs to be able to react and respond rather than always be right first time
developing complex policy

• Joining up centrally – an integrating agenda
  – Central strategy teams e.g. the Social Exclusion Unit, PM Strategy Unit in the UK
  – Co-ordination programs e.g. NSW Premier’s Department Strengthening Communities Unit
  – Whole of Government: Growing Victoria Together

• Long-term ‘outcomes based’ policy discourse which can be shared both within Departments and across Government
  – ‘Building stronger and safer communities’
  – ‘Working in partnership to build sustainable communities’
  – ‘Connected Communities’
  – ‘Creating vibrant places where people want to live’

• Provides a broad vision for direction: more ambitious?
• At a time of the ‘retreating State’: making such outcomes harder to deliver?
comprehensive or complex programs

- Social/spatial manifestation of complexity – disadvantage and dislocation
- Response: place-or area-based initiatives. Joining-up, integration and co-ordination at the level of the locality or sub-region: programs seek to tackle multiple issues which affect neighbourhoods
- Increasingly integral to UK and US housing renewal policy in recent years, adding to complexity through becoming more outward looking rather than inward focused (Hall, 1997)
  - UK: Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) New Deal for Communities (NDC), Housing Market Renewal (HMR)
  - US: HOPE VI, Philadelphia NTI
- And Australian context
  - Victorian Neighbourhood Renewal
  - Community Renewal Program Queensland
  - Living Communities/Community Renewal NSW
delivering complex programs

• Approach clearly brings benefits, not least in contexts where previously there was fragmentation of funding, or limited/no engagement
  – Those living in the ‘complex world’ often best placed to identify what’s wrong
  – Targeting resources
  – Building community cohesion and capacity
  – Helps Government work better

• However, translating complexity onto local delivery partnerships also raises significant challenges:
  – High expectations on partnerships but often limited frameworks to enable those expectations to be delivered
  – Considerable process and co-ordination: loss of direct focus of activity?
  – ‘Neighbourhood effects’: high expectations on place/geographies to contribute to addressing broader social and economic disadvantage
  – Regeneration cycles, political/policy cycles
  – Demands for new ‘regeneration profession’ skills
While some innovation seen, complex programs are typically delivered on the ground through tried-and-tested approaches

- ‘Reconnecting neighbourhoods’ or ‘purchase, demolish, rebuild’?

Broad ‘outcome-based’ language of strategic policy transposed onto programs:

- Realities of delivery can make such discourse problematic
- Policy support for program seen at odds with experiences of communities
evaluating complex programs

• As policy and programs become more complicated, the task of evaluation becomes equally so

• ‘Process/outcome’ and ‘realistic’ approaches (Ho, 1999; Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Robson, 1993)

• ‘Theories of change’ as a response to the complexity of the programs to be evaluated (Kubisch & Connell, 1998; Mann & Schorr, 1998)
  – ‘Comprehensive Community Initiatives’ from the US
  – Some application with complex programs in UK (NDC, LSP)

• Complex in itself, testing theories as much as real outcomes (Weiss, 1995; 2000)

• City Futures team currently involved in establishing a series of evaluation frameworks for complex programs
  – Local/program defined interests
  – Indicators: capturing meaningful and attributable change?
  – Boundaries to evaluation: Are we measuring what in fact policy/programs can directly influence, or ‘contribution’ to achieving those broader outcomes?
  – Should frameworks be more pragmatic than policy?
discussion

• Not a call for return to simplistic thinking! – the old adage: ‘There are many simple solutions to complex programs. Problem is that none of them work’ is a good one

• However, given the challenges faced in ‘best practice’ complex programs for policymakers, practitioners and evaluators alike, reasonable to seek a better understanding of those challenges

• 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 there is a lot in between policy as initially developed and change occurring on the ground. They have to take people with them

• Government/policy makers tend to focus on the need to take communities and stakeholders with them, and often forget that they need to take themselves as well
A question of:

• The language of policy
  – Should local partnerships be expected to deliver broad policy outcomes?
  – Should policy talk about building vibrant, sustainable communities when funding commitments are only enough to clean the streets, refurbish some houses?

• A responsibility to better articulate process and pathways as well as outcomes

• Complexity doesn’t travel well …
  – Presents considerable challenges at each point in the policy-program-evaluation chain, so is it more/less appropriate at some points than others?
  – Housing researchers have a role in taking responsibility in shaping debate and structuring how a program/policy is understood
    • In terms of introducing pragmatism where necessary
    • Finding the links and associations in the gaps left by policy language

• … But simplicity is likely to take you in the wrong direction