



Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

...is a forum that encourages debate on a wide range of research findings, with the overall aim of promoting evidence-based policy and law-making within Northern Ireland



Outcomes Based Accountability: a critical perspective

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Outcomes Based Frameworks:

- A relatively new feature in the devolved administrations in the UK has been the emergence of outcomes based frameworks
- Key influence has been the Outcomes Based Accountability (OBA) methodology as produced by American writer, Mark Friedman.



This presentation examines:

- Concerns raised by use of OBA for PfG
- The form of outcomes based approach used
- The conceptual difficulties and issues of validity with OBA
- Enduring problems with performance indicators
- Policy implications of the use of OBA and the NI situation
- Example of OBA issues with reference to health policy



Key Outcome Based Methodologies

- Classical definition - Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011):
needs-objectives – inputs – activities – outputs - outcomes
- Logic Model and variations:
priorities - inputs – outputs [short, medium and long term]
- Outcomes Frameworks in the NHS and Adult Social Care Outcomes Frameworks in Britain:
domains of services + PIs – collect objective and subjective data on impact – apply lessons
- Outcomes Based Accountability Framework –working backwards:
Outcomes – indicators [4-6] – collect data – specify activities [PfG]



Key Conceptual Issues with OBA

- The meaning of the term outcomes – desired or imagined outcomes (normative not empirical statements); the conflation into the term ‘outcomes’ a range of performance management terms, including objectives, goals, targets, benchmarks and outputs.
- The meaning of indicators as proxies for outcomes which are too general or too vague to measure as often only definition of outcomes put forward as the cause of outcomes
- The relationship between indicators and outcomes.

Outcomes and Indicators

- The OBA methodology of working backwards from the desired outcomes has been seen as assuming a linear relationship between outcomes and indicators.
- Criticism of such approaches – see for eg, Bovaird (2014) who sees these as invoking a narrow underspecified cause and effect chain model.
- Argued that actual outcomes are a complex interplay of factors which can not be reduced to a short list of numbers - and to measure outcomes and trace contributions of a multiplicity of factors is a complicated resource-intensive exercise (Connolly, 2014; Tannahill, 2016).

OBA Analysis Part 2

- Framework of working backwards ends and focus on assessing actual impact.
- Accountability and a distinction between population and performance accountability.
- The meaning of the word 'accountability' in this context and its different meaning from public or political accountability.
- Scope of delivery in literature usually categorised between micro, mezzo and macro.
- Enduring debate over problems with performance indicators – mainly covering securing agreement on what to measure, dangers of data manipulation and problem of attribution (Flynn, 2012).
- OBA methodology includes examination of performance measurement categories 'quantity' and 'quality' and asks, 'Is anyone better off?' but interpretations and calculation of this can vary and, government policies may not be intended to make people better off.



Example of Health Policy as Treated by Government Using OBA

Outcomes: *We have long, health, active lives* – demonstrates vagueness

Six Indicators:

- Healthy life expectancy at birth
- Preventable mortality
- % population with GHQ12 scores >4 (signifying possible mental health problem)
- % people who are satisfied with health and social care
- Gap between highest and lowest deprivation quintile in healthy expectancy at birth
- Confidence of the population aged 60 years or older (as measured by self-efficacy)

Key question – how this leads to better health and social care policy?



Conclusions

- OBA has some distinctive characteristics – including ‘working backwards’ from the specified desired outcomes to the interventions which created them.
- This distinguishes OBA from alternative outcome approaches and suggests OBA is incompatible with them.
- Some benefits from a focus on intended outcomes in providing a focus for activity and encouraging long term thinking – but – argued that the outcome of social policy interventions is more complex than is suggested by OBA methodology.
- Where application of OBA has been found useful is in small local projects where everything can be tightly controlled and measured.

The OBA methodology has not produced any robust evidence regarding the impact on policy making and despite the numbers of outcomes or indicators produced, they reveal little about the policy intervention that would be justified or required.

Bovaird (2014) 'Lists of outcomes have been paraded as providing a rationale for government policies, without any convincing attempt to show how they relate to actual Interventions'.





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