Commissioning Complex Evaluations
The practitioners’ perspective: how to make things better

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risksolutions
leave nothing to chance
Outline

• Key challenges for commissioning evaluations complexity presents
• Some shifts / tensions in the commissioning landscape ?
• What I would do! A personal perspective
Perspective

Risk Solutions is a small (v. small) specialist consultancy – and like ICF mostly work in partnership
Rarely asked to do an evaluation these days that is not in some way complex
Focusing here where:
• The environment is really tricky, and
• Where evaluation can be most challenging but also most useful – supporting adaptive management …
Focusing here on Steps 1 and 3
But totally endorse Andrew’s ideas for risk sharing and building community
## Complexity challenges to commissioning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Complex system challenges</th>
<th>Evaluation challenges</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>• Hard to establish a clear <strong>boundary</strong> around the evaluation</td>
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<td>Systems may be in continual change, or may resist change</td>
<td>• The intervention and the objectives, design and data requirements of the evaluation may change over time</td>
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<td>• Evaluation plans may need to change to address emergence of unexpected features</td>
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<td>The nature of the change is unpredictable</td>
<td>• The programme (or system change) may <strong>not be at a ‘final state’</strong> when the evaluation comes to an end</td>
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<td>Multiple interactions and influences</td>
<td>• Long, <strong>indirect causal chains</strong> linking inputs to impacts</td>
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<td>Context (and history) matters</td>
<td>• Outcomes <strong>may vary</strong> from one context to another</td>
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<tr>
<td>Multiple causality</td>
<td>• <strong>New approaches needed</strong> for causality and attribution</td>
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<td>Multiple perspectives</td>
<td>• Need data from <strong>multiple sources/informants</strong></td>
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<td>Complexity is difficult to communicate</td>
<td>• Difficulties in communicating methodology and findings</td>
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Commissioning context

Tighter budgets

But different perspectives on what quality means:
- Discomfort with some complexity appropriate methods
- Standards of certainty desired may be unattainable

Push to increase standards

But barriers to commissioning
- Risk aversion, and
- ‘Hardening’ of interpretation of procurement rules (?)

Increasing recognition of the value of:
- New methods (innovation)
- Adaptive, flexible, and evaluation approaches
Making things better? The specification Flexibility/agility and innovation

• Commission for flexibility not a fixed methodology
  ▪ More open specification
  ▪ Commission a team
    ▲ Access to breadth of knowledge and skills, and depth of experience
    ▲ Skill in hybrid approaches and synthesis
    ▲ Collaborative and responsive working arrangements
  ▪ Evidence could include:
    ▲ Examples of successful delivery in complex changing environments
    ▲ Description of the approach the team consider appropriate at this stage and how this may need to change
    ▲ Description of how they will work with you to identify and respond to the need for change and manage risks and uncertainty

• Post award have effective governance in place to manage change e.g.
  ▪ Steering boards
  ▪ Interactive peer review
Making things better?
Open specification - What we need to know

What evaluation results will be used for – noting that the emphasis may shift over time …

Set out what is known about the system – note that the evaluation should improve understanding and that the system may change …

Set out the timings, existing sources of data etc and critically the budget…
Making things better?
Let us know how much money you have

• Without an idea of budget the evaluators cannot know what is affordable
• With a more open specification - the commissioner can have no firm basis for comparison of bids where wildly different assumptions have been made on budget
• Setting the budget at a realistic level, and giving it low weighting, makes sure proposals can be fairly compared on quality
  ▪ the confidence they provide that the need will be met as far as is possible
• Not stating a budget risks tender failure
Making things better? The process
Time and talk

• Give us time to respond effectively:
  ▪ Give us sufficient time to assemble a team and prepare the proposal
  ▪ Make sure the amount and complexity of information requested is commensurate with the value of the work

• Allow for genuine dialogue before finalising the selection
  ▪ Information days prior to tender deadline
  ▪ A genuine opportunity to sit down and discuss options post submission
Making things better? Embedding evaluation
Breaking down barriers

• Be joined up …
  ▪ Start thinking about complexity and evaluation at design stage
  ▪ Commission evaluation alongside implementation

• Get commitment from users from the start
  ▪ Involve them in designing the specification and throughout to
    ▲ keep focussed on the need, and
    ▲ re-set priorities as needs change over time
  ▪ Plan for, and reflect in the specification, for lots of interactions between evaluators and users
And finally a plug …

CECAN as a catalyst for capability building …

Refer to, at all times, but especially when commissioning:

• The new magenta book annex on complexity …
• CECAN web-site resources