

The Importance of Context in Environmental Evaluation

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Overview of Today's Presentation

- Opportunities and challenges in evaluating environmental programs and policies
- The need for context sensitivity
- How AEA can support environmental evaluation practice and policy

Challenges in Environmental Evaluation

- The complexity of the interventions and their causal paths
 - Involving both social and physical processes
 - Confounded by a number of externalities
 - Requires having multiple indicators and examining multiple pathways
- In some instances, the ability to measure effects but not the causal mechanism or mechanisms
- The long-time frames for results to be realized
- Range of stakeholders with diverse and often conflicting beliefs, values, assumptions

Context-Sensitive Evaluation

- Emerging from the recent debate over methods is the recognition of the need for contextually-sensitive evaluation practice
- Contextually-sensitive evaluation practice matches methods to the conditions in the context and the needs of the stakeholders

Balancing Rigor, Needs, Context

- Challenge is to balance rigor, needs, and context in the study design
- Goal is to provide the highest quality, most actionable evidence
- Often takes intimate knowledge of the context and stakeholder needs at various levels

- Fitting the method to key features of a program context and its broader environment
- Using a range of design, data collection, and analytic strategies – many of them more recent methodological advances – that can improve the quality of outcome-based evidence
- Actively involving stakeholders – including consumers – throughout the effort



Addressing the Context

Context Broadly Defined

- “Problem” context
- Intervention context
- Program/project context/setting
- Decision-making context(s)
- Evaluation context



Context-Sensitive Strategies for Producing Actionable Evidence

Improving the Quality of the Evidence

- Producing actionable evidence through an array of:
 - strategies to rule in or rule out alternative explanations
 - techniques for improving the accuracy of the estimates of program effects
 - strategies for improving the explanatory power of our studies

Attribution Quandaries

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Establishing Causality/Ruling Out Alternatives

- Clarifying nature of the counterfactual and degree of expected bias
- Conducting plausibility analysis of threats to validity
- Collecting data on rival explanations
- Building in contrarian views

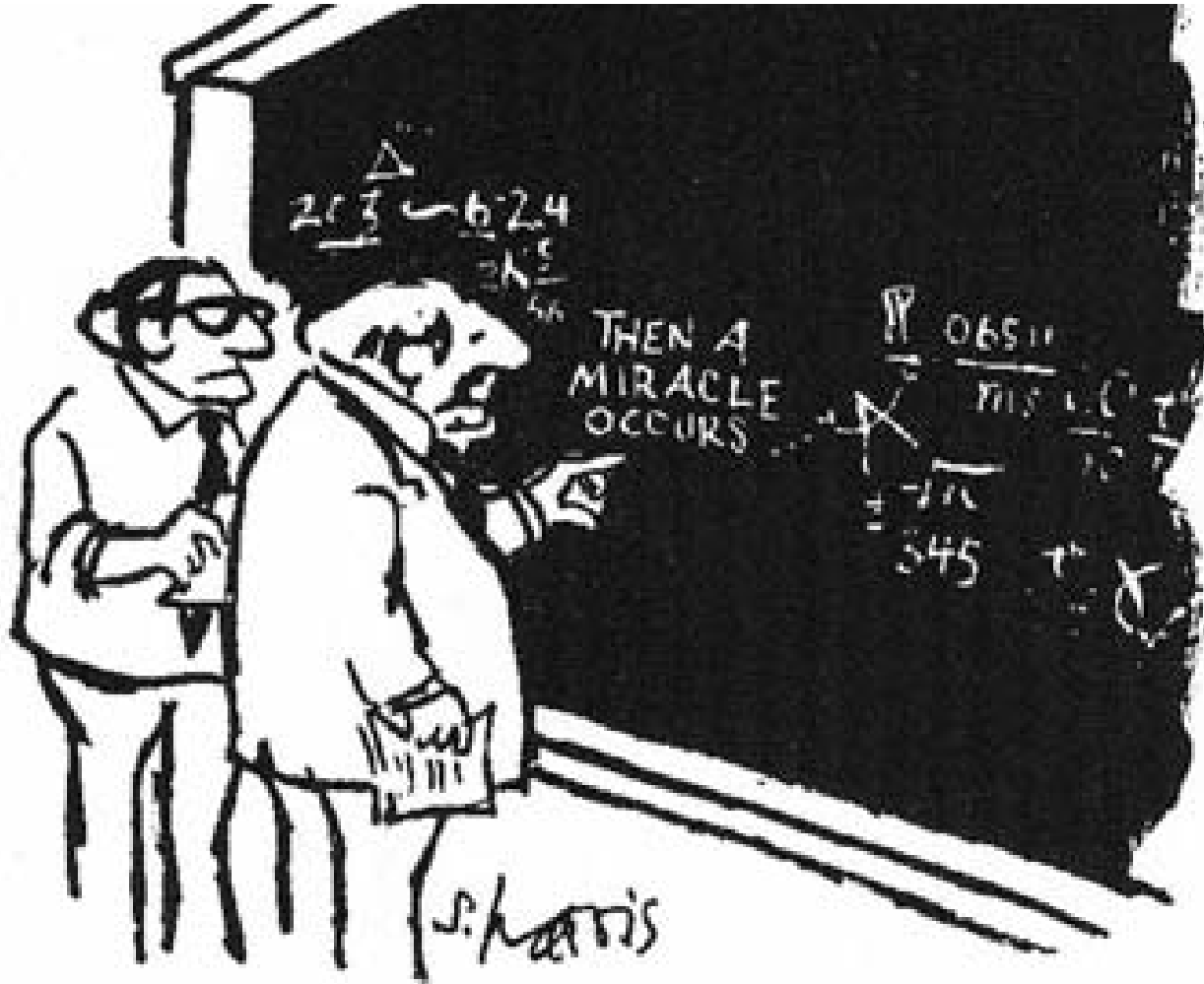


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Improving The Accuracy Of The Estimates Of Effects

- Strengthening designs:
 - Conducting evaluability assessments to target studies
 - Incorporating attention to the program fidelity of treatment
 - Matching on pre-tests
 - Using statistical matching strategies such as propensity scores
 - Using measures such as U3 that is an effect size measure for pre-post designs

Explanatory Power



"I think you should be more explicit here in step two."

Enhancing Explanatory Power

- Improving the depth of findings through:
 - Use of explicit conceptual model/theory
 - Incorporating a focus on the ‘why’ and ‘why not’
 - Explicating the causal ‘generative’ mechanisms within a program/policy

Enhancing Explanatory Power

- Incorporating analyses that:
 - examine mediators linking program/policy activities with outcomes and change
 - examine unintended outcomes
 - attend to patterns of change
 - go beyond “averages” to understanding variation in outcomes



Involving Stakeholders

Attention to Stakeholders and Social Justice

- Stakeholder involvement
 - Who is involved
 - When and how they are involved/provide guidance
 - What priority is given to input from different stakeholders

Attention to Stakeholders and Social Justice

- Social justice
 - Sensitivity to conducting study and disseminating findings that do not further disenfranchise the least advantaged
 - Transparency of methods, flaws, qualifications



The Role of AEA

American Evaluation Association

- Began officially in 1986
- Current membership is at nearly 6,000 members
- Continue to show signs of growth, diversity, and stability
 - Growth is a reflection of increased demand for evaluation globally, need for professional support and community, and for interest in quality evaluation

AEA: Programs and Supports

- Active Topical Interest Groups and Local Affiliates
 - Relevant TIGs
 - Environmental Program Evaluation
 - Evaluation Managers and Supervisors
 - Government and Evaluation
- Annual Conference (over 2500 attendees)
 - This year's theme "Context and Evaluation"
- Summer Institute in collaboration with CDC
- Growth in professional development workshops
- Guiding Principles
- Active Listserv "EvalTalk"
- Active Website (www.eval.org)
 - On-line directory for networking
 - On-line forums are new strategy for member engagement
 - Onsite resource library
 - On line access to 4 key evaluation journals
- Evaluation Policy Task Force

AEA: Evaluation Policy

- Established an Evaluation Policy Task Force (EPTF) in 2007
- Charge is to assist AEA in developing an ongoing capability to influence ***evaluation policies*** that are critical to the practice of evaluation

Examples of AEA's Policy Work To Date

- Comments on OMB PART Guidance document
- Meeting with and presentation to work group of OMB's Performance Improvement Council
- Development of one page hand-outs describing evaluation and evaluators and what they can offer to effective government
- Development of "An Evaluation Roadmap for a More Effective Government"

Evaluation Roadmap Framework

- Scope and Coverage of Evaluation
- Management
- Quality and Independence
- Transparency

Evaluation Scope and Coverage

- As a tool throughout the life-cycle of programs and policies
- Evaluate to support and inform program decision-making and management
- Tailor approach and methods to the questions, program and context, audience
 - Range of approaches likely required

Evaluation Management

- Administered by professionals with competence in evaluation
- Guided by annual and long-term evaluation plans, and written evaluation policies
- Provided sufficient and stable sources of funds
- Provided high level support for evaluation

Quality and Independence

- Preserve and promote objectivity
- Develop and adopt quality standards
- Promote use of robust set of appropriate methods
- Safeguard the independence of the evaluation functions

Transparency

- Consult with Congress and other stakeholders
- Disseminate accountability findings in broad public and timely manner
- Create clearing houses and encourage secondary analyses

Implications for Environmental Evaluation

- Attending to a range of designs and methods, fit to the various aspects of context
- Recognizing the importance of evaluation throughout a program/policy life-cycle
- Fostering capacity building for individuals and organizations
- Promoting a culture of evaluation and creating demand