The Big Push forward: The Australian Debate (Oct 2011)

Description

October 26, 2011 by Chris Roche. Tweet

On 19 October 2011, Oxfam Australia hosted a â??Big Push Forwardâ?? event in Melbourne with the co-conveners of this initiative â?? Rosalind Eyben and Irene Guijt. Sixty development practitioners, including AusAid staff and academics came together to discuss whether the concerns voiced by the Big Push Forward project are relevant in Australia.

HOW RELEVANT ARE THE ISSUES TO AUSTRALIA?

Following an introduction from Rosalind and Irene, we had short inputs from three speakers on how these issues resonated in our part of the world. **Dennis Altman**, from the Institute of Human Security, at La Trobe University suggested that the neo-liberal language which permeates Western society has been recast in the development world. into an auditing culture, focusing on evaluation, monitoring, and counting beans. **Marc Purcell** the CEO of Australiaâ??s International NGO umbrella group ACFID noted that the commitment to international aid in Australia is extremely brittle, and that the public debate about aid in Australia has led to a deep anxiety in government about how the aid programme is being perceived. But he argued that maybe itâ??s no bad thing for economists to look at the work of â??pampered NGOsâ??. **Jess Dart**, the Managing Director of consulting company Clear Horizon, felt that whilst Australian NGOs do more internal evaluation than most there was a view expressed at this yearâ??s Australasian Evaluation Conference that â??development is the cowboy of evaluationâ??. If we canâ??t tell the story of what weâ??ve done, people will ask for results. There are lots of really good methods out there and we can use these to offer solid alternatives to tell more complex stories of transformation.

OZIFYING THE THEMES

We explored the seven themes that the Big Push Forward website is focusing upon and discussed how to â??ozifyâ?? them. Groups worked on specific clusters to generate ideas for â??pushing forwardâ??. This included 5 of the original 7 clusters and one new one focused on Program Design and Evaluation. After a process of ritual dissent, facilitated by Irene, final ideas were presented.

1. **Developing different methods of reporting**

- *â??**Making sense of it all**â?•.* Look at alternative forms of aggregation and sense-making using the cluster to make a call for ideas about whatâ??s going on and how to engage others. This should include exploring means of more direct citizen-to-citizen dialogue

2. Reclaiming value for money

- ***â?? Research to Surface Valuing and Valuesâ?•.*** *C*ollaborate amongst agencies, to find out what has been the experience of value for money in Australia and AusAID and the piloting of new approaches. This would allow the main approaches to be understood, and the values that

underpin them to be better understood.

3. **Organisational learning and reflective practice**

- ***â??A Practitionersâ?? forum to build commitment to organisational learning and reflective practiceâ?•.*** Set up an inter-agency forum on M&E to look at: methodologies for reflective practice and organisational learning, build capacities to ensure better reflection, documenting different models for reflective practice, discussions around conceptual model and practical implications.

4. **Communicating to the public**

- ***â??Market complexity to the marketersâ?•.*** *D*o more internally in our organisations with those that speak to the public and help them communicate the day-to-day practice on the ground. We could explore the use of community forums to engage the public in terms of complexity of aid.

5. **Challenging dominant discourses**

- ***â?? Unsettling storytelling from Aboriginal Australiaâ?•.*** Use story-telling and narrative methods to try to unsettle some of the debates about Results Based Management in order to ask the difficult questions e.g. what does development actually mean and what does it mean to those being developed? This would highlight the difficulties and create better understanding through creating this connection for Australian people.

6. **Program design**

- ***â?? Peer and Public Review for Good Practiceâ?•.*** Develop a forum that creates more space for program designs that hold the qualities of community participation, co-creation, & voice in determining the results. Use a virtual peer process from different agencies and public peer review enabling commentary from others.

WRAPPING IT UP

In our final session four people were asked to share their reflections on what they heard

Chris Nelson from AusAID and soon to be with the World Bank Justice for the Poor program suggested there were lots of ingredients but we needed to bake the cake. He also noted that there were several opportunities to engage with AusAID in the next six months in particular as there are some gaps and a need for innovation in their current results framework. He also advised of the importance of building internal networks and coalitions within institutions on this agenda.

Rosalind Eyben remarked that there seemed to be several spaces for BPF engagement: internally in our own organisations; in communities of practice between organisations; with AusAID and internationally as Australia engages more strategically within the international aid system and international policy fora. Rosalind in particular liked the idea of story-telling here in Australia in order to communicate what actually happens to people and their small organisations as the results agenda impinges upon them.

Patricia Rogers, Professor in Public Sector Evaluation at RMIT University, noted that many of the ideas suggested are based on sharing good examples of practice. She identified some common issues that need to be addressed: Who says itâ??s good practice? How do we distinguish between â??this sounds like a good ideaâ?? to â??this has been done and we can show it makes a differenceâ??? How do we create space to do things differently? How might we leverage resources together and with our partners? (see for example BetterEvaluation.org)

Jo Crawford, a Research and Policy Advisor at the International Womenâ??s Development Agency, felt it critical to consider the tension between acting now on this agenda versus taking the time to define what we need to do. Jo made a plea for process and participation in these conversations. Otherwise values will be narrowly defined. This requires a diversity of views and voices around the table when frameworks are being established

LOTS OF ENERGY

This was a day which demonstrated a lot of energy, ideas and willingness to engage on this agenda. After the meeting one of the participants Helen Sullivan, the new Director of the Centre for Public Policy (CPP) at Melbourne University wrote the following after attending a couple of other events which touched upon the same issues.

â??â?¦*there is useful work that CPP can do in helping policy makers (politicians, professionals and â??publicsâ??) navigate the policy world they inhabit, which is not the world as it is often constructed in text books and guides where rational, reasonable actors with the necessary time and space define, design and deliberate policy problems and solutions to a â??goodâ?? end, but rather comprises actors who are motivated by reason* ***and*** *emotion, driven by evidence* ***and*** *values, and where the boundary between politics* ***and*** *policy is often blurred. This is not to deny the potential value of evidence-based policymaking but to assert that politics, evidence and democratic institutions co-exist and that each are informed by values and power relationships that can facilitate and limit the quality of policy and policymaking.â?•*

Hear! Hear!

We urge all participants who were at the Melbourne meeting, and others interested in this debate in Australia, to join the Big Push Forward and share your thoughts and experiences.

Chris Roche and Susan Hornbeck

25 October 2011

Category

1. Debate

Tags

1. aggregation
2. complexity
3. good practice
4. organisational learning

5. peer review
6. sensemaking
7. storytelling
8. values

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