Evaluation Planning, Design, and Implementation in a Regional Sustainable Agricultural Extension (SARE) Program

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Abstract
Evaluation of agricultural development and sustainability efforts can be a difficult challenge. Evaluation itself is not well understood in the agricultural community. Successful design and implementation of evaluation is tricky because impacts are diffuse. Collaborative evaluation is an evaluation model that addresses these problems by incorporating diffuse stakeholders in the evaluation process. The paper discusses collaborative evaluation. It then describes the process of designing and implementing a collaborative evaluation process. The example of the Southern Region (USA) SARE (Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education) Program Professional Development Program is used as a case study. Over the period of 1999-2001, an evaluation process was designed and implementation begun.
Introduction

Many agriculture programs, particularly those having wide local variability, are strengthened if they are managed not at the national level, but rather at a level closer to the action/impact level. The growing recognition of this fact in the United States of America has showcased the Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program as an example of such a program. In fact, the agency offers it as a model among its programs that seek regional and more local management approaches. Active involvement of stakeholders in the decision making process of this program is seen as a model of assuring accountability and relevance.

This article explores the development of the Professional Development Program (PDP) evaluation component of the Southern Region SARE, as an example of management that promotes substantive stakeholder participation. The many stakeholders in the Southern Region SARE PDP directly benefit from evaluation efforts that provide real information about the program to guide program improvement decisions. More specifically program evaluation efforts result in stakeholders understanding what works and gaining insight into actual impacts of the program. Further evaluation provides information so that successes of the program can be disseminated and marketed to funding agencies and interested support groups.

The goal of the PDP is to provide education and training for Cooperative Extension agents and other agricultural professionals in the principles and practices of sustainable agriculture (U.S. Government, 1990). The Southern Region SARE PDP has expanded sustainability issues beyond profitability, protection of the environment, and social responsibility to include the development and maintenance of leadership skills for substantive involvement of stakeholders in the decision making process. PDP activities have included competitive grants, state implementation plans, and an annual regional workshop. Evaluation in this context is a critical component of the entire decision making process in these areas.

Stakeholder involvement began with the original design of the PDP program as proposed to the Southern SARE in 1994 (Crickenberger, 1994). Since that time, the Management Team (MT) of the Southern Region PDP, a three-member coordinating group, has maintained stakeholder involvement as a core process value. The Southern Region PDP is a partnership of the Management Team and the decision-making group of stakeholders known as the Leadership Committee (LC). The LC, a group of 12 stakeholders, directs the management and policy decisions, including the allocation of funds, for program activities. They conduct these tasks within the context of their own vision of sustainable agriculture, using a Strategic Plan they have developed as a group, as well as operating under the requirements of the Southern Region Administrative Council (AC). Beyond that they coordinate PDP activities with the State Coordinators (SC) of the sustainable agriculture training programs of the Cooperative Extension Services of the Land Grant university partners in the region.

Purpose of the Paper

The purpose of the paper is to describe the dynamics of the creation and functioning of a successful collaborative evaluation partnership in the Southern Region SARE PDP. Sharing this experience will provide others with valuable information as they develop, manage, and evaluate comparable stakeholder involvements with locally based programs. Engaging different stakeholders and project implementers in project oversight substantively
influences program outcomes and impacts; thus, engaging them in program evaluation is similarly essential. The authors hope that this paper will provide support and assistance to others who are struggling to implement evaluation of similar programs in agriculture.

All evaluations need to clearly recognize the logical steps of program design and implementation. One such logic model, as presented by Woodhill and Robbins (1998) shows: 1) a Vision for the program that leads to 2) Goals and Objectives, which require 3) Inputs (e.g., money, time, work), which lead to 4) Actions, which produce 5) Outputs (e.g., program documents, demonstrations), which produce 6) Outcomes (e.g. knowledge gained by Extension agents, farmers). Outcomes may be further expanded in terms of when they occur so that outcomes can be distinguished as: 1) direct/immediate, 2) interim, or 3) long-term. Indicators are those measurements used to determine the extent to which an outcome is achieved. While problems abound with terminology and the identification of appropriate steps and indicators, what is important is that stakeholders grapple with the need for information about the program and the importance of evaluation findings for decision-making. Often people confuse “outputs” and “outcomes” in that they concentrate the bulk of their energy in program activities (e.g. the planting of trees) but forget to see if the activity has the desire result (e.g. reducing loss of topsoil). Evaluation of outputs is sometimes referred to as project monitoring (i.e., did you do what you said you would do with the inputs). Evaluation of outcomes examines the results of the program. Both aspects need to be evaluated. Unfortunately, many programs only engage in monitoring. Working collaboratively with program stakeholders from the outset of the evaluation planning process will promote better understanding of the process and its purposes, which should result in enhanced evaluation findings.

Not only do stakeholders need to participate in the evaluation so that they may better frame the process, but evaluations done by outsiders tend not to be used. Their participation also increases the probability that they will use the evaluation findings (Patton, 1997). People within a program may view the results of an outside evaluation as incomplete and lacking in understanding. Without buy-in and cooperation from program people in the evaluation, the results may lack the necessary validity to convince people to change what a program is doing. Therefore this paper argues for collaborative evaluation so that the process has the understanding of those involved and the results are useful and used (O’Sullivan, 2001).

Methods and Data sources

The term collaborative evaluation often is used interchangeably with participatory and/or empowerment evaluation. Cousins, along with colleagues (1992, 1995, 1996, 1998), have done considerable work in the area of collaborative and participatory evaluation. They define collaborative evaluation as “any evaluation in which there is a significant degree of collaboration or cooperation between evaluators and stakeholders in planning and/or conducting the evaluation” (Cousins, Donohue, & Bloom, 1996, p.210). The collaborative approach evolves from the circumstances surrounding an evaluation and the belief that collaborative evaluation would yield the most effective results.

Some collaborative approaches focus on enhancing evaluation utilization while others emphasize the importance of empowering participants. Fetterman (2001) points out that strong overlaps in practice exist among the three terms - collaborative, participatory, and empowerment evaluation and sees this overlap as positive. For him collaborative covers the broadest range of activities. He argues that empowerment differs from participatory evaluation (as represented by Brunner and Guzman (1989)) on the dimension of stakeholder
control with empowerment evaluation assuming greater stakeholder control than participatory. In fact, empowerment evaluation assumes that stakeholders will takeover leadership of the evaluation process. In contrast, Cousins and Earl (1992 & 1995) maintain that with participatory evaluation, the external evaluator should lead the evaluation. While Patton (1997) maintains in his principles of participatory evaluation that, “The evaluator is a facilitator, collaborator, and learning resource; participants are decision makers and evaluators” (p. 100). All three of these stakeholder-based evaluation approaches emphasize the importance of including various stakeholder audiences in the evaluation.

For the authors, the term collaboration implies that people share responsibility and decision-making. When stakeholders are asked to provide information for an evaluation, technically they are participating in that evaluation, but they are not necessarily collaborators in the evaluation process. A parallel example would be that program participants, while engaged in a program, are usually not considered as collaborators in determining the content or direction of the program. Thus, the term collaborative evaluation, rather than participatory, specifies the desired level of involvement. To the extent that they are able, program staff and other stakeholders should be considered part of the evaluation team. An important caveat here (as it has been misunderstood) is that a collaborative stance does not relieve the evaluator of the overall responsibility for conducting the evaluation or producing evaluation results. Evaluators are engaged because of the expertise they bring to the endeavor, and leadership for the evaluation resides with that expertise.

Program staff often ignore evaluation findings, because they do not understand them or have not been involved directly in the planning and implementation of the evaluation process. Distanced evaluators, conducting distanced evaluations, fail to engage program stakeholders in the evaluation and thereby limit the potential for the findings to positively influence the program. Logically, if program staff are collaboratively involved in the evaluation, then their use and understanding of the findings should increase.

Collaborative evaluation approaches have long been controversial in the field (O’Sullivan, 1995). Traditionally, evaluators have debated the appropriateness of a role that involves evaluators directly with program staff, whereas collaborative evaluators question the relevance and effectiveness of distanced evaluations. Yet, in many instances program staff in collaborative evaluation can be considered extensions of the evaluation team. As such, they bring to the evaluation effort different levels of expertise that the evaluation team leader recognizes and incorporates into assignments. From a management perspective, strengthening evaluation skills among team members is an extremely desirable practice. Most evaluators who engage in collaborative evaluation believe that the advantages gained in program awareness, staff cooperation, access to information, quality of information gathered, and enhanced receptivity to findings, far outweigh the potential for (not the presence of) biased findings.

The authors practice collaborative evaluation by designing evaluations that engage clients in the process. The level of engagement varies by program evaluation purpose and client, but generally the evaluator seeks clients who want to participate in a collaborative evaluation process. Additionally, in light of usually limited evaluation funds, clients-collaborators contribute substantive resources (especially in time and connection with program recipients) that allow expanded evaluation activities. The possible levels of collaboration are directly determined by how program stakeholders view evaluation. To conduct successful collaborative evaluations, evaluators must determine
the level of evaluation expertise within the program. As noted earlier the Southern Region SARE PDP program has multiple levels of program participation. The initial step for the development of the evaluation was the agreement by the Leadership Committee (LC) that a collaborative evaluation would be desirable. The LC reached this decision after funding a series of component evaluations, which were completed by external evaluators. These external evaluations were not used because one did not yield convincing results and the other provided information which was moot due to changes in the program. (These changes, of course, had been made without input from a planned formal evaluation process.) The LC also allocated funds for the design and implementation of a collaborative evaluation.

The LC developed a Call For Proposals (CFP) for a collaborative evaluation that would span two years. The CFP stipulated that the evaluators design a collaborative evaluation system for the Southern Region SAE PDP by working with the LC during the first year of implementation. External evaluators would introduce the evaluation system into the PDP program during the second year of the evaluation. The CFP was disseminated on the SARE website, and three evaluators submitted proposals. The LC selected one after reviewing the proposals. Shortly thereafter a contractual arrangement was completed and the process was begun.

The Evaluation team met with the Management Team to connect the design process of a collaborative evaluation with the goals that the Management Team had for the evaluation. A matrix of stakeholders and their activities was developed to show how the various stakeholders interacted with the PDP program. The group agreed that design of the collaborative evaluation should begin by focusing on the PDP Strategic Plan, which had been developed over a two-year period prior to November 1998. Historically this strategic plan was shared with new LC members so that they would be familiar with the document as they participated in the development and implementation of the PDP competitive grants, state implementation grants, and the annual meeting planning process.

A month later, the evaluation team met separately with the LC and the Extension State Coordinators. The purpose of that meeting was to validate the strategic plan contents and then review suggested outcomes that could be used to assess accomplishments toward strategic plans goals. Each group of stakeholders was asked to identify how its roles were present in the strategic plan and to be sure that all PDP activities were included. They also were asked to review the proposed outcomes for needed modifications. Out of that discussion came the realization that the strategic plan was quite focused on the center of the project where the LC and the management team operated but not on the periphery across the region where the state coordinators (SC) conduct their activities. It is already obvious from the collaborative evaluation process that the role of the SC was not clearly understood when the original Strategic Plan was developed.

With the Management Team, evaluators summarized the results of these discussions and subsequently met with LC members and members of the Southern SARE Administrative Council (AC) to once again review the strategic plan for completeness and determine consensus around the outcomes. The process was further expanded to suggest indicators that would measure progress toward outcomes. This initial process gives a benchmark from which the more complex mix of indicators which demonstrate long term and complete outcomes can be developed. Movement in that direction can be achieved as a result of the efforts to collect and use evaluation data. An example of the document review is presented in Table 1.
Table 1. Southern Region SARE Professional Development Program (PDP) Evaluation Plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objectives</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Person/Group Responsible</th>
<th>Projected Outcomes</th>
<th>Outcome Indicators</th>
<th>Instruments/ Measures</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Goal 1:</strong> To provide leadership to agricultural professionals to enhance their ability to educate farmers and ranchers in the principles and practices of sustainable agriculture.</td>
<td>1.a. Sustain a leadership committee in partnership with the management team, state coordinators and SARE staff to serve as a model of strength in diversity, systems thinking and group creativity.</td>
<td>1.a.1a. Plan and implement 2 meetings for 12 LC members and 4 crossover AC members and annual meeting with state coordinators. The purpose of the meetings is to manage the SARE PDP process.</td>
<td>1.a.1p. LC, MT, SC, and SARE staff work collaboratively to plan and implement all activities proposed. 1.a.2p. Diverse and active LC membership. 1.a.3p. LC, MT, SC, and SARE staff make programmatic changes based on evaluation evidence.</td>
<td>• Number attending meetings by LC, MT, SC, and SARE staff. • Extent to which AC members participate in LC meetings. • Extent to which AC members participate in state activities. • Track programmatic changes made and why they were made (link to evaluation) and review at annual meeting. • Diversity of membership— institutions, geography, ethnicity, gender, production systems. • Diversity of nominations.</td>
<td>• Meeting registration and attendance logs • Survey of AC, LC, MT, SC • Meeting minutes and notes • Membership logs • Records of nominations</td>
</tr>
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To finish out the evaluation planning process, the evaluators developed a data collection matrix to which the stakeholders agreed, based on the shared understanding of outcomes and indicators. The next step will be to identify the data sources themselves and the roles of the various collaborators in the data collection and use. The outside evaluation team will assist with each of these steps. The end result will be that by the second year of the project, an evaluation plan will have been designed and implementation will have been begun.

Results and conclusions

From the collaborative evaluation experience so far, a number of positive outcomes have already occurred. This new evaluation paradigm has forced program stakeholders to look at the program design and management systems. It has meant the ranking of priorities in terms of resource allocation. It has forced a review of the program calendar and the evaluation timetable and expectations. It has forced a changed understanding of the roles of various stakeholders.

Educational Importance

Educational program implementation in agriculture and community development needs successful models for useful and useable evaluation. Traditional models of evaluation are not adequate to provide the theoretical framework to address systemic evaluation issues in rural and agricultural development. The Southern Region SARE PDP model of collaborative evaluation provides a model of effective program management, implementation and evaluation.

The process of Southern Region PDP shows that strong stakeholder involvement is possible and is very fruitful in terms of accountability and credibility. However it does not happen on its own but must be guided and modeled with a clear vision of the desired outcome (Taylor-Powell, 1999). As Taylor-Powell notes, in an era in which results and outcomes are of crucial importance, it is striking that we have to pay special attention to processes to arrive at program results. As she writes, "When evaluation becomes part of the collaborative, it provides the focus, feedback and learning to support continuous progress and growth." (p.7).

A central partner like the PDP Management Team is important to the team since it allows for modeling a shared- leadership style. It also permits the keeping of a multiplicity of partners and goals in mind. Collaboration is a complex experience of shared understanding. Finally a group of stakeholders would not have the long-term perspective or knowledge of the process as they rotate into and out of their leadership responsibilities.

References


