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Summary of
Fourth Family Research Network (FRN) Forum:
Effective Social Programme Evaluation

26 March 2010
Auditorium, Level 1, Civil Service College

Co-organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS), the FRN Forum is a series of closed-door sessions to encourage discussions and inspire more research on the family. The fourth FRN Forum on "Effective Social Programme Evaluation" was attended by 166 participants from academia, the public and social service sectors. This Forum was moderated by Dr Rosaleen Ow, Head, Department of Social Work, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore.

In the first presentation, Dr Hyekyung Choo, Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore, provided an overview of the concept, aims and principles underlying programme evaluation. She focussed her presentation on "outcome evaluation", the process to determine if a programme has resulted in changes to its participants. The issues highlighted included: (a) the pre-conditions for effective programme, that is, establishing clear goals, having precise outcome indicators and establishing reliable baseline data; and (b) the random assignment of participants to intervention or control groups for purposes of programme evaluation – to rule out selection bias and other influences not due to the programme.

In the second presentation, Dr Irene Ng, Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore, spoke about her involvement in the longitudinal evaluation of the Work Support Self Reliance (WSSR) Programme. The WSSR programme was started in 2006 by the MCYS to help recipients find employment and achieve financial independence through interim financial support and other assistance. She highlighted the following key learning points for effective programme evaluation:

- The aims of the programme have to be defined.
- Baseline data has to be established. Such data can take various forms, including administrative records, interviews with staff and participants.
- Data systems have to be well-managed.
- Scales and instruments should be validated, especially if adapted from overseas research.
- Relationship with stakeholders should be sustained and multiple strategies have to be adopted to address the high attrition of participants.
- Participants randomly assigned to the control group as part of the evaluation should not be disadvantaged. For example, the WSSR programme treated the benefits received by the control group as the baseline for the evaluation rather than withholding the benefits from them.

In the third presentation, Mdm Sharifah Sakinah Ali Alkaff, Director, Youth Development Department, Yayasan Mendaki, spoke on the evaluation of the NUR Drop-In Centres (DIC). The NUR DIC was formed as part of an integrated programme for teenagers to provide a holistic intervention for troubled teenagers and their parents. She said that programme evaluation is a continuous process of clarifying outcome indicators (key performance indices), identifying data required, measuring

effectiveness, and ensuring the relevance of a programme. For the NUR DIC programme, feedback from the programme participants was collected periodically to identify ways of improving the effectiveness of the programme. Through programme evaluation, a more targeted outreach was achieved by addressing the specific needs of the participants of different age groups in the programme.

The last presentation by Dr David Rothwell, Post-Doctoral Fellow, Department of Social Work, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore, dealt with conducting programme evaluation under less-than-ideal conditions. In this instance, he was tasked to evaluate the Kahikū Programme in Hawaii, a "savings matching" programme aimed at encouraging low-income earners to save and to acquire lasting assets, after it was implemented and completed. Besides the lack of data, Dr Rothwell also had to overcome the sense of distrust from interviewees and a highly mobile respondent population.   Dr Rothwell adopted multi-modal survey methods (such as online surveys, face-to-face interviews and mail questionnaires) to maximise his outreach and response rate. He also made use of existing data to gain insights on characteristics of the programme participants.

Other issues raised at the Forum included the potential of administrative records for use in programme evaluation, the challenges of conducting an evaluation on a programme with a small group of participants, and the importance of establishing comparison groups.

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Notes taken by Chua Chun Ser, IPS Research Assistant.