IPS Institute of Policy Studies

Good Enough Evidence for Social Good: A Report on the IPS-Tote Board Transforming the Non-Profit Sector Conference
By Yu Yen King and Ruby Thiagarajan

The IPS-Tote Board conference titled "Transforming the Non-Profit Sector" took place online on 20 and 21 October 2021. This is an annual event and complements other initiatives such as facilitated conversations, learning journeys, and overseas study trips (currently on hold) during the three-year partnership between IPS and Tote Board. The conference acts as an intellectual culmination of a collective learning journey that started from the many smaller discussions prior to it. 2021's conference theme was "Good Enough Evidence for Social Good".

The conference brought together members of the non-profit sector including members from grant making organisations, service providers, social enterprises, and member and association groups. Attendees ranged from practitioners and administrators to policymakers and academics.

The conference opened with speeches from Mrs Mildred Tan, Chairman of Tote Board and Minister Desmond Lee, Minister for National Development and Minister-in-Charge of Social Services Integration.

In Mrs Tan's speech, she underscored Tote Board's desire to "future-proof" the non-profit sector and the importance of pooling strengths to arrive at more effective solutions and interventions. Speaking from the perspective of a major funder of the non-profit sector, Mrs Tan emphasised the importance of looking beyond KPIs to truly understand the impact of funding on programmes and beneficiaries.

Minister Lee shared the government's plan on tackling inequality and increasing social mobility: more investment in diverse pathways to success will be complemented by community involvement and coordinated efforts from the non-profit sector. Minister Lee also encouraged the non-profit organisations to keep their interventions user-centric and focused on supporting families.

The Ngee Ann Kongsi-IPS Community Fellowships

The Ngee Ann Kongsi-IPS Community Fellowships are a year-long and will support the work of two non-profit leaders as they conduct community-based participatory research. The two Ngee Ann Kongsi-IPS Community Fellows for 2021–2022 are Ms Ng Bee Leng, the Director of Community Development and Corporate Support at AMKFSC, and Mr Lee Unsu, an independent researcher. Ms Ng will be conducting research on community-owned development while Mr Lee will be piloting a worker-owned social enterprise project in conjunction with Beyond Social Services.

Ms Ng shared some of her experiences as a community worker and cautioned against adhering too much to ideals set by funders and institutions. While these reference points might work well for resource accountability, they are not always the best way to centre citizens' voices. She also suggested that evaluation take a longer time horizon to assess the success of a programme. This would shift the focus away from short-term gains and would allow more space for authentic community building.

In his sharing, Mr Lee talked about his plans to work with Beyond Social Services to trial greater participant empowerment within the social enterprise project pilot. He envisioned it as a way where workers could have a greater say in decision-making in a circle. Everyone in the circle would have equivalence and an equal voice. While there were roles and a hierarchy of skills and talents, everyone would have the ability to object to something that negatively impacts their work. He planned on using a qualitative research approach to document this process to place more emphasis on the voices of the participants.

Panel 1: Everything about Evaluation, but is Evaluation Everything?

The first panel of the conference turned its attention to evaluation. Within the non-profit sector, there is a heavy emphasis on evaluation as the key to understanding what produces good programmes. This panel was curated to explain what evaluation is and to put into perspective what evaluation can and cannot do.

Non-Profit Performance Measurement and Evaluation

Dr Lori Wingate, the Executive Director of The Evaluation Center at Western Michigan University, gave a presentation on the promise and pitfalls of programme evaluation. Evaluation, at its best, is a way of allowing organisations and sponsors to understand which programmes are working and to allow resource allocation to be more efficient. It is underscored by a belief that evidence-based decision making should lead to improved societal outcomes.

Following the logical steps of evaluation, assessors need to define both the criteria and the standards by which they want to evaluate a programme before gathering the relevant data. This will allow them to synthesise their information in order to make an informed conclusion about the merit and worth of the programme under evaluation. It can be difficult to keep abreast of these steps when it comes to evaluating complex programmes. Programme logic models are a useful tool that can be used to illustrate how programmes translate resources into outcomes. They are oversimplifications of reality but they are still useful for highlighting the salient points of a programme.

A programme logic model should break down different levels of outcomes and look at short, medium, and long-term effects of an intervention. A common pitfall that occurs with evaluation is the overemphasis on high-level outcomes. According to Dr Wingate, only focusing on the impact at the last stage of a programme can mean that evaluators will miss the causal links and be unable to understand which intermediary steps have caused a programme to succeed or fail. Dr Wingate also encouraged non-profits to embrace the fact that evaluation might not be necessary or worth the cost. Outcomes can sometimes be too difficult to measure or services can be too vital for evaluation to provide important input on how they should be run. The right questions must be asked about the programme's maturity, scope, and resources in order to know if and how evaluation can best serve it.

What Works for Whom and Under What Conditions

Dr Hubertus Vrijhoef, Chief Executive Officer of Panaxea, turned his attention to realist evaluation, a form of evaluation that looks to improve the understanding of how and why interventions work or do not work in particular contexts. Realist evaluation diverges from randomised controlled trials (RCTs), which are often held up as a "gold standard" in the research sphere. While RCTs look to understand whether an intervention works under ideal circumstances, realist evaluation places its focus on understanding which intervention works in real life contexts and for which recipients. This makes it more useful for non-profits who are usually operating in non-experimental circumstances.

Realist evaluation works well with complex interventions and programmes. It is also useful when practitioners are looking to understand the interplay between context, mechanisms, and outcomes. This can be seen when trying to scale up a programme for different audiences, for example. However, realist evaluation should not be used in all circumstances. Realist evaluation is not the appropriate tool if the aim of an evaluation is to find the nett effect of an intervention. Instead, realist evaluation works best when assessors are looking to understand why and how a programme works. Furthermore, realist evaluation can be taxing on both human and financial resources due to its need of both iterative qualitative and quantitative data over a long period of time. Should those resources not be available, conducting realist evaluation may not be the best choice.

Discussion

Dr Robyn Tan, Research Fellow at the National University of Singapore Social Service Research Centre, and Mrs Boon-Ngee Sebastian, Senior Director of Grant Management at Tote Board were the discussants at this panel.

Drawing on Ms Ng's presentation on community development and her plans for the Ngee Ann Kongsi-IPS Community Fellowship, Dr Tan stated that community development cannot be seen as a programme because it cannot be easily standardised or replicated. Instead of asking if community development works, a more meaningful question is: "What is it about community development that works and under which conditions?" This is where realist evaluation is especially useful. Dr Tan also pointed to Mr Lee's Community Fellowship presentation where he talked about his aversion to the idea of "scalability". Dr Tan pointed out that the realist approach could be the key to understanding how and whether it is possible to scale a programme across different sites and contexts.

Mrs Sebastian also shared her perspective on Tote Board's approach to outcome measurement. When Tote Board began its philanthropic work, all grants were given out as donations and did not rely on KPIs or evaluation to understand the impact of its funding. Currently, Tote Board has outcome indicators for all of its grants and has also observed that its partners have also started developing their own evaluation frameworks. She also shared that Tote Board intends to deepen its discussion with sectoral partners on refreshing its evaluation frameworks.

Panel 2: What's Good Enough Evidence to Inform Your Programmes?

The second panel of the 2021 Transforming the Non-Profit Sector conference raised the question of what would be good enough evidence to inform programmes run by non-profit organisations, given that non-profit organisations have different capacities and occupy different positions in the ecosystem of evidence production and usage.

The Changing Landscape for Evidence-Informed Policy and Practice

Professor Emeritus Huw Davies, co-founder of the Research Unit for Research Utilisation at the University of St Andrews, posited that it is important to unpack what "knowledge" is and analyse the links between research and action. Professor Davies contended that we should move away from rational linear models, which view researchers and practitioners as two distinct communities, and where generalisable knowledge can be transferred from the former to the latter. According to Professor Davies, data is always interpreted in a particular context depending on the values of stakeholders, and the process of using evidence to deliver change is inevitably contested. Professor Davies urged the audience to consider the nature, history and interrelations of problems requiring intervention, as well as the lived experience of those whom the solutions are trying to help. He also observed that the more that practitioners are involved in defining the research questions and shaping the research process, the more likely they are to be engaged and interested in the findings.

Challenging the notion of "evidence-based practice", Professor Davies commented that we should instead consider how the various stakeholders operate in an ecosystem where evidence helps to inform policy and practice. During the breakout session with Professor Davies, participants discussed different models to build research capability in service delivery organisations, such as engaging knowledge brokers, embedding academic researchers within organisations and building partnerships in a research network.

How to Navigate the Evidence Base

Dr Howard White, Chief Executive Officer of the Campbell Collaboration, noted that some programmes do not operate at a scale that can generate sufficient sample size for impact evaluation. However, organisations should still conduct basic monitoring and factual reporting to produce qualitative feedback for formative evaluation and process evaluations.

With the help of an evidence pyramid, Dr White illustrated the different knowledge products available to organisations that do not produce their own research. He advised organisations to hire knowledge brokers to help navigate these different evidence portals and interpret evidence through the organisation's perspective. Dr White explained that these knowledge brokers could serve as intermediaries within organisations between the decision makers and the practitioners. During the breakout session, Dr White further elaborated that knowledge brokers are usually not academic researchers, and knowledge brokers should be able to work with different stakeholders and communicate results in plain language.

Noting that learning is a critical aspect of monitoring and evaluation that is often neglected, Dr White urged non-profit organisation leaders to build a culture of learning where organisations evaluate their programmes and use evidence to guide what they do.

Translating Evidence into Programmes and Practice

Mrs Anita Low-Lim, Senior Director of TOUCH Community Services' Impact & Research Unit, acknowledged that it is difficult to introduce new approaches in an organisation. She reflected on how her team had to work at communicating the benefits of research and building trust within the organisation. Mrs Low-Lim attributed their success in integrating research into their organisational culture and practice to the support of their management, board of directors, and direct service colleagues.

Mrs Low-Lim shared that their ground practitioners have learnt much from working directly with academic researchers and their Impact and Research team. Advocating for non-profit organisations to build research capability, Mrs Low-Lim stated that using theories of change and logic models has brought greater clarity to their staff, donors, volunteers, and even clients on the objectives of their programme. She also observed that there has been an increase in confidence in TOUCH and improved sustainability of their services, when funders understand that their evidence-informed work seeks to increase effectiveness.

Discussion

Dr Chu Chi Meng, Director of the Translational Social Research Division at the National Council of Social Service (NCSS), and Ms Helen Sim, Assistant Director of the Strategic Planning and Research Department at Fei Yue Community Services, were the discussants on this panel.

Dr Chu shared that currently eight in 10 social service agencies (SSAs) surveyed by NCSS indicated a desire to strengthen their research and evaluation capabilities. However, they faced challenges such as having insufficient manpower, insufficient funding, and insufficient knowledge on how to conduct research and evaluation. He mentioned that NCSS has recently announced a sector evaluation framework to provide organisations and funders in the social service sector with a common language to frame and evaluate outcomes.

Ms Sim echoed Professor Davies' call to engage diverse stakeholders in the research process because interventions for complex social problems may have repercussions on different communities. She also acknowledged how it can be difficult to find evidence that demonstrate failures, but it is important to cultivate an environment where failure is part of learning. She suggested that organisations explore other ways of appraising staff performance, beyond their ability to meet the funders' key performance indicators.

Panel 3: Research That You Didn't Know You Could Do

The third and final panel of the 2021 Transforming the Non-Profit Sector conference featured Dr Patricia Leavy, editor of *Handbook of Arts-Based Research*; Professor Sarah Banks, Chair in Applied Social Sciences and Co-Director of the Centre for Social Justice and Community Action, in the Department of Sociology at Durham University; and Mr Elias Teo, Community Lead of the DesignSingapore Council's School of X.

Arts-Based Research: Promise and Perils

Dr Patricia Leavy explained that anybody can do arts-based research in any discipline. Such research adapts the tenets of the creative arts to address research questions in engaged

ways, so it can be used as the method of inquiry for data generation, data analysis and representation of research findings.

According to Dr Leavy, traditional research often circulate within a limited audience and contain prohibitive jargon. Therefore, arts-based research may be more accessible to people of different ages, educational and language backgrounds. Dr Leavy also shared that not only can arts-based research represent the multi-dimensional nature of human lives, the arts are also generally helpful in disrupting dominant ideologies or stereotypes and challenging the general audience to crystalise connections between their individual lives and the larger structural context.

Dr Leavy acknowledged that arts-based research can be misunderstood or undervalued by those unfamiliar with it. This can pose difficulties when securing funding. She suggests that researchers use mixed methods and conduct more traditional data collection methods — such as focus group discussions, surveys, or interviews — to gather participants' reflections after they have engaged in the creative arts component of the project.

Co-Producing Research with Communities

Professor Sarah Banks emphasised that participatory research is focused on achieving social justice and social change, and is guided by the principles of equity, democracy and valuing diverse contributions. These diverse perspectives contribute to a better research design, according to Professor Banks, because the people who are directly experiencing social issues can pinpoint what the key issues are and help researchers ask better questions. Professor Banks discussed issues pertaining to the positionality of researchers, where co-produced research often results in the blurring of boundaries between researcher and the researched.

Professor Banks also shared how it takes time and effort to build trust and partnerships. Not only do community participants require training in research skills, researchers may also need training for working with diversity and conflict in communities, she said. Professor Banks noted that the iterative and messy research process may cause difficulties with funders or university research ethics committees who often require a clear timeline and proposal at the start of the project.

During the breakout session, a question was raised about whether full participation from the community is required at every stage of the research project. Professor Banks clarified that it often depends on the time and capacity that participants can commit.

Beyond using research findings to campaign for social change, the participants also discussed how providing compensation to support community researchers is important. Professor Banks commented that it is important to convince funders to properly resource research projects to include financial compensation for community researchers.

Design Research for Social Change

Mr Elias Teo defined design research as an empathy-based approach that seeks to understand the different perspectives of different people. He shared how researchers may

have inherent bias and assumptions, and that their understanding of the problem may not reflect how the community views the issue. Thus, user-centric research can help researchers better understand the context of the problem, its root causes, and the pain points and motivations of people involved.

Mr Teo provided examples of the different methods in design research, including observational or ethnographic methods, where researchers sought to notice subconscious actions and reactions or responses in conversations, and asked open-ended questions to elicit the participants' reflections. Such perspectives from diverse stakeholders can complement data from more traditional forms of research and provide deeper insights alongside mass survey instruments.

Discussion

To provide the audience with a concrete example of a design research project, Mdm Muzaiyanah Hamzah, Assistant Director of the Social Development department at Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS), shared how MUIS revamped their decade-old financial assistance scheme to include gamified elements. Mdm Muzaiyanah stated that MUIS sought to make their programme more client-centric by allowing their clients to define what goals would be important to them and what programmes or activities would most benefit them. Mdm Muzaiyanah reflected on how the entire process of design research, prototyping the programme and fine-tuning it over several iterations was a rewarding experience for their clients and staff.

Dr Hana Alhadad, Adjunct Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, reflected on how arts-based research in Singapore has been used to broaden community engagement with social issues, provoke different ways of thinking and seeing, and inspire social action.

While she is a proponent of arts-based and participatory research, Dr Alhadad raised some issues for consideration when engaging with complex and difficult social issues and when invoking emotions from research participants. First, Dr Alhadad raised concerns about representation of community participants' lived experiences, and who ultimately owns the work that is co-produced with communities. She commented that these questions would need to be addressed at the beginning of the research process. Dr Alhadad posited that all stakeholders need to have reflexivity and flexibility. Researchers and participants should be reflexive about whether they are dominating spaces that are meant for democratic participation, while researchers and funders should manage their expectations regarding timelines and key performance indicators.

Lastly, Dr Alhadad pointed out that researchers seeking to engage in arts-based or participatory research should be more aware of and take steps to mitigate the emotional risks that participants may face. She reflected on how researchers may not be adequately trained, and highlighted the importance of trauma-informed and equity-centred approaches.

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