

Evaluating Collaboration in Local Governance through the Theory of Change (TOC)

Jacinta Cunneen
Department of Politics & Public Administration
University of Limerick



jacinta.cunneen@ul.ie

Outline of Presentation

- Context of Research
- What is meant by Theory of Change?
- Use of Theory of Change in Local Governance
- Case Study: Applying the Theory of Change in an Irish context
- Research findings to-date
- Strengths and Limitations of TOC approach
- Future Research Directions

Introduction

- Changing social, political and economic circumstances → Collaborative working and partnerships
- Partnerships useful because
 - they acknowledge the social dimensions of complex problems
 - they may involve statutory and non-statutory agencies
 - they prevent duplication and inefficiency

Theory of Change (TOC) ?

- It is a theory about how and why a programme will work. (Weiss,1995)
- It is a system of social and behavioural assumptions underlying a public policy. (Leeuw, 1995)
- Used successfully in the US for evaluating community-based initiatives since the 1980s
- A TOC model used in the UK in the last decade for evaluating public policy and programmes.

Why use the Theory of Change to evaluate collaboration in local governance?

- It provides a conceptual framework that links the environment and policy context with the structures and actions of partnerships.
- It makes connections between the various elements of partnership working e.g. Legitimacy, Capacity, Structures, Activities and Outcomes.
- It is a mechanism for identifying key elements in the design of policy and programme evaluations.
- Evidence in empirical research of its effectiveness in public policy and programme development.


Research Focus

- The focus of my research is on collaboration in multi-agency structures for the delivery of community safety interventions.
 - To develop a model of best practice for delivering community safety on public housing estates.
 - Literature review of empirical research explored and relevant theories expounded.
- Theory of Change approach to evaluate a community safety partnership.



Irish Case Study

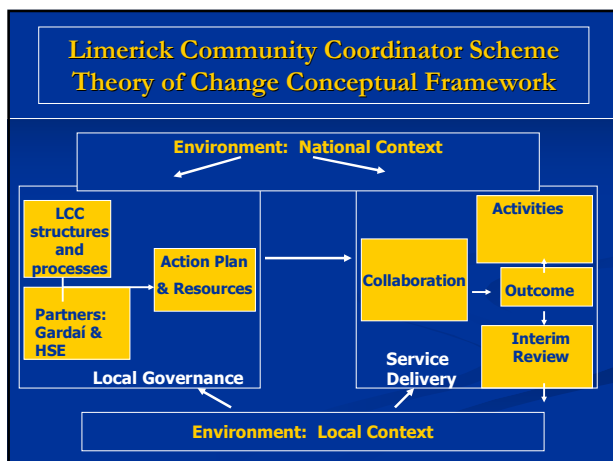
- Incidents of anti-social behaviour (ASB) rising in recent years particularly on public housing estates. Statutory powers of local authorities increased to tackle it.
- Limerick Community Safety Partnership (City Council, Gardaí (Police) and Health Services Executive (HSE) set up Community Coordinator Pilot Scheme in 2007 to tackle the problem of ASB on selected housing estates.
- Funded by the DoEHLG for 3 years.



Assumptions

Community safety would be realised:

- If the fear of crime and anti-social behaviour was reduced
- If the environment was improved
- If community spirit was raised
- If tenants were more informed about community safety
- Actions planned accordingly



Case Study Evaluation through TOC Approach

- National policy → collaboration in partnership
- Local policy → City Safety Strategy
- Partners identified
- Funding accessed
- Workshops/stakeholders
- Community safety issues identified
- Action plan developed
- On-going reviews and changes to delivery
- Interim evaluation end year one
- Reflexive learning
- Revised Action Plan for year two

TOC Research to-date

- Theory of Change as conceptual framework and evaluation tool
- Interim Evaluation –
 - Structured interviews with key agents
 - Survey of stakeholders
 - Survey and focus groups with tenants
- Log-book records
 - Incidents/actions taken clustered under 4 themes representing the assumptions/ propositions
 - Linkages to other agencies recorded
 - Patterns analysed

Strengths of TOC

- The TOC framework outlines component parts of the process.
- It helps partners to clearly define their strategy.
- It helps to outline the assumptions behind the strategy.
- It clarifies actions and expected outcomes.
- It facilitates learning, is iterative, reflexive, provides opportunity to test revised actions.
- It identifies gaps in the collaborative process.

Weaknesses of TOC

- Positions evaluator 'inside' the action research and may cause lack of objectivity and issues of bias and reliability.
- Lack of explicit theory because of multiple theories of change may lead to conflicting theories of intervention.
- Process might mean fewer stakeholders involved → exclusion issues.
- Experience of evaluating multi-agency programmes necessary.

Future Research Directions

- Research to-date has been formative
 - Context
 - Structure
 - Programme Activities
 - Stakeholder feedback
 - Revised actions
- Next tranche will be summative
 - Greater focus on the collaborative dynamics and issues that arise.

Research Outcome

- Comprehensive evaluation of a community safety pilot scheme.
- A multi-agency collaborative model for use by local authorities for community safety interventions.
- A multi-agency model for use by other public service providers.