

The Evaluation Capacity Building Project

Using Evidence for Impact

THE PATH WE TOOK

AUGUST 2016

Introduction

Since 2012 the social services sector in New Zealand has experienced a strong shift towards *demonstrating effectiveness*.

This raises different challenges for stakeholders in the sector:

- > Policymakers need sound evidence to inform their decisions
- > Funders of social programmes and services want to ensure that resources are directed at appropriate interventions and targeted at people who need them
- > Service providers need to demonstrate, to themselves and to others, that their services and programmes make a positive difference to people's lives.

As a result, there is a push to better assess and document the impact of social services. This requires a stronger focus on more rigorous and systematic evidence collection, measurement, monitoring, analysis, reporting, evaluation, dissemination and use.

Non-governmental organisation (NGO) service providers want to know how well their interventions are achieving goals of changing people's lives for the better. However, many NGOs have identified a gap in their experience, knowledge, skills and understanding of how to assess the impact of their interventions.

To enable NGOs to deliver more effective interventions, it is essential that they have access to current resources to help build their evaluation capacity in a culturally-appropriate way.

The purpose of the overall Evaluation Capacity Building (ECB) Project is to create relevant, useful and user-friendly resources that culturally-diverse NGOs will be able to use in a straightforward and self-sufficient manner.

This publication explains how a set of New Zealand-based assessment and planning tools was produced to support the building of evaluation capacity across the social services sector.

KEY FINDINGS

- > Published literature on the concept of Evaluation Capacity Building currently provides limited consistent information. However, some common principles exist and relate to the **Context** in which an organisation operates, the **Organisation** itself, the **People/Individuals** making up the organisation, and the **overall process**.
- > A series of workshops was held with three culturally-diverse Non-Government Organisations in order to produce an ECB resource and develop a user-friendly process that would be relevant to New Zealand-based NGOs.
- > The resulting Evaluation Capacity Assessment (ECA) Tool and Evaluation Capacity Planning (ECP) Tool are based on the principles identified in the literature as well as the discussions and reflections that took place in the workshops.
- > NGOs and facilitators both gave positive feedback about the process they had experienced. The three NGOs were greatly motivated to apply ECB to their organisation.

Four sets of key principles underpin effective Evaluation Capacity Building

An initial international and national literature scan on Evaluation Capacity Building¹ returned limited information, particularly in the New Zealand context. However, the literature scan and subsequent project fieldwork identified some common, fundamental principles that should ideally be adhered to if organisations are to successfully build their evaluation capacity.

The first set of principles relates to the *context* in which an organisation operates:

- > Evaluation capacity building is context-sensitive and therefore varies from organisation to organisation (e.g. different organisations' cultures and environments).
- > Everyone in the organisation needs to understand and be clear about the purpose of building evaluation capacity, and what aspects of the organisation's goals and values are to be strengthened.
- > It takes time to build evaluation capacity which is sustainable and fully embedded in an organisation's thinking and practices. Evaluation capacity building is not a 'one-off' event but an ongoing development, and some organisations may take longer than others for ECB to become business as usual.

The second set of principles focuses on the *organisation* itself:

- > The organisation must be ready and willing to engage in building capacity and able to sustain its effort over time. This may require a wider organisational change (e.g. shift in values), as well as thoughtful consideration of the organisation's environment and interactions with local communities (i.e. context).
- > Trust and honesty are two key qualities that positively influence the process and its embedding in the organisation. These qualities need to be present within the organisation, and also between the organisation and partners who help build the organisation's evaluation capacity.
- > Transparency is another vital quality. It not only helps to strengthen trust and honesty, but also ensures accountability in the process.
- > Coaching and/or training – which include the provision of trusted advice along the way – also help build the organisation's evaluation capacity.

WHAT IS EVALUATION CAPACITY BUILDING?

Evaluation is about systematically and rigorously assessing the value (merit, worth and importance) of something of interest (e.g. organisation, programme or project). Evaluation is both a *process* (e.g. building an organisation's evaluation capacity) and an *outcome* (e.g. determining an intervention's strengths and weaknesses). People can *do* evaluation (e.g. assess a programme's effectiveness) and also *use* evaluation (e.g. improve service delivery). Evaluation serves different functions, such as accountability, learning and improvement.

Evaluation capacity building comprises three key interrelated components (i.e. Context, Organisation and People/Individuals), which include a variety of factors. These components and factors are explained in more detail on page 6.



¹ See http://www.superu.govt.nz/resources/evaluation_capacity_tools



The third set of principles is relevant to the *people* working in the organisation:

- > Collaboration is essential and needs to permeate all the organisation's layers. Everyone in the organisation, from governance and leadership to management and staff, needs to 'get on board', participate and work together to build effective evaluation capacity.
- > At all levels, people need to be willing and motivated to take responsibility for ECB ('own' it) and commit to it on an ongoing basis.

The fourth set of principles is linked to the ECB *process*:

- > Taking a strengths-based approach is more effective for embedding ECB in an organisation than a deficit-based approach (e.g. it helps with buy-in across the organisation).
- > The process is not always straightforward, and there is not one specific way of building evaluation capacity. Patience and flexibility are required for the process to be effective.
- > Adequate resourcing is necessary (e.g. equipment, time, people and funding) to undertake and complete the process, and to ensure the sustainability of the organisation's evaluation capacity in the long term.
- > The process includes different consecutive phases, from assessment to planning, implementation and review. There is no set time period for each phase. However, the assessment phase is critical – it is a prerequisite for effective ECB, and needs to involve all the layers of the organisation, including client voices.
- > External facilitation may benefit the process by creating a safe and neutral ground to hold 'free and frank' discussions.

WHY IS EVALUATION CAPACITY IMPORTANT?

The benefits of evaluation capacity impact on a range of people and organisations, including service providers, their clients and family/whānau, funders of social services and other stakeholders.

Service providers with a strong evaluation capacity are in a better position to improve their organisation and services, adapt to change, and remain relevant. Ongoing learning, questioning and improvement are important features of these organisations.

Clients and their family/whānau benefit from service providers who have built their evaluation capacity, as needs tend to be better met through the delivery of targeted, potentially innovative, high quality services.

By developing their evaluation capacity, service providers are in a better position to meet *funders'* and *other stakeholders'* needs, because they are more able to show the impacts of an intervention.

"It [ECB process] gave us the ability to look critically at the organisation and be more solutions focused through sharing ideas with peers."

Three culturally diverse NGOs were instrumental in producing the evaluation capacity assessment and planning tools, and developing a process for using them

The tools and process had to reflect New Zealand realities, including specific local social issues, diversity of the social sector (type, size, structure, location and resources of organisations) and the wide range of clients' needs (e.g. in health, education, employment).

Three NGOs, Fonua Ola (Pacific focus), Ngāti Hine Health Trust (Māori focus) and Life to The Max were invited to participate in a series of workshops to produce the assessment tool and develop an easy and meaningful process for its use. The success of these workshops relied on the active, open and honest participation of the three NGOs.

"...we really need to identify the needs of our clients [...] it's not just housing and WINZ [sic], and different social issues. But also how the cultural issues impact on these social issues, and this needs to be evidenced in what we do."



Fonua Ola

This organisation aims to “achieve better outcomes for our most vulnerable people”.

It is based in South Auckland and started in the 1970s, although it was officially launched in 2007.

It provides a variety of services (e.g. social work, counselling, youth work, financial literacy, community support and family violence work) delivered ‘for Pacific, by Pacific’.

<http://www.fonuaola.org.nz>



Ngāti Hine Health Trust

This charitable trust delivers services in Northland (Whangarei, Kaipara and the Mid/Far North), and their offices are located in Whangarei, Dargaville, Kawakawa, Kaikohe, Kerikeri and Kaitaia. Their services meet three strategic priorities:

- > Early childhood education, youth services, support of parenting capability and primary healthcare services
- > Iwi radio, enhancing Te Reo and the preservation of Ngāti Hine history, including working alongside whānau and marae
- > Working in partnership with communities, undertaking Whānau Ora initiatives and developing whānau resources.

<http://www.nhht.co.nz>



Life to the Max

This organisation aims “to enable better life outcomes for children/ youth and their whānau/family”.

It is based in Whanganui and started in 1999, although its intervention was officially launched in 2001.

It delivers a prevention-based programme, targeted at potential and actual young offenders, in partnership with a range of organisations (e.g. Police, Child Youth and Family, Truancy, Ministry of Education, District Health services).

<http://www.lifetothemaxtrust.org.nz>



The three workshops were held between September 2015 and January 2016. External facilitation by professional researchers and evaluators guided the discussion and production of the tools, and reflection on the production process. However, when the tools are rolled out nationally in the future, the primary intention is for organisations to use them internally, i.e. without needing to engage external facilitators.

The facilitation techniques used during the workshops combined different strategies which ensured that the concept of evaluation capacity was fully discussed, and that all pertinent characteristics were included in the tools. This approach also enabled NGOs to be fully 'on board' throughout the process.

“For us, it’s important to know where to start, to have some idea of what we should or could be doing so we are not wasting our time or money. This got us somewhere, moved us in the right direction.”

Although the evaluation capacity building process goes from assessment to planning and implementation, the focus of the workshops was primarily on assessment and then planning.

The aim of the first workshop was twofold: to build a relationship between the participants and with the facilitators (whānaungatanga), and to engage the three NGOs with the concept of evaluation capacity building. The latter aim revolved around three components:

- > *Orientation to evaluation and ECB*, where NGOs started to think about evaluation and evaluation capacity and to share some of their experiences of those.
- > *Engaging with the ECB literature*, where NGOs became more familiar with the ECB concept and understood its importance.
- > *Developing a framework for assessment of evaluation capacity*, where NGOs produced a detailed concept of the assessment tool, through extensive discussion.

The first workshop involved group discussions and individual input through targeted worksheets. An initial literature scan informed discussions on the tool – for instance, the characteristics that would make it suitable for New Zealand. NGOs’ input and feedback were crucial to producing a useful assessment tool. The use of different facilitation techniques meant that ‘no stones were left unturned’ (e.g. some criteria were added and others refined). The subsequent concept for the assessment tool covered all relevant characteristics of evaluation capacity building (see box below).



What is the evaluation capacity assessment tool² about?

The Evaluation Capacity Assessment Tool aims to help organisations assess their current state of evaluation capacity, i.e. establish where their stronger and weaker areas lie so as to address the latter and enable the organisation to build a solid evaluation capacity.

The Tool is composed of three key, interrelated areas:

- > The **Context** which shapes the organisation and in which it operates
- > The **Organisation** itself
- > **People/Individuals** who made up the organisation.

Each key area is defined by four dimensions (i.e. a total of 12) which were initially identified in the literature (see table below) and then refined through the three workshops.

| Context | Organisation | People/Individuals |
|--------------------------|--|--------------------------|
| 1. Values and principles | 5. Leadership, attitude and behaviour | 9. Readiness |
| 2. Kaupapa/history | 6. Learning culture | 10. Skills and knowledge |
| 3. Enabling environment | 7. Communication and information sharing | 11. Level of involvement |
| 4. ECB purpose | 8. Resources and infrastructure | 12. Opportunity |

Each dimension comprises a set of statements (refined through the workshops from an initial set of 64 statements). These statements need to be individually rated (see table below) in order to identify the stronger and weaker areas of the organisation, and focus attention on addressing the weaker areas.

| Rating | Descriptor | Meaning |
|----------|------------------|---|
| E | Emerging | There is very little or no evidence of this occurring. |
| D | Developing | There is some evidence of this occurring in our organisation. It happens sometimes but is not well embedded in our routines. |
| C | Consolidating | We see this regularly in our organisation, however, not everyone is yet on board. |
| H | Highly developed | This is evident at all levels of the organisation and appears strongly embedded in the organisation's governance, leadership, systems, structure and practices. |

² See http://www.superu.govt.nz/resources/evaluation_capacity_tools



The second workshop focused on the assessment tool (completing the questionnaire and discussing the findings). The workshop began with a brief summary of ‘the journey to date’, followed by each participant trialling the assessment tool (questionnaire) based on their own organisation. The questionnaire had been professionally designed upon completion of the first workshop – with the use of a graphic designer to make the assessment tool more user-friendly and accessible.

Each participant was given a paper-based questionnaire to complete. The scores were immediately entered in an Excel spreadsheet and graphs were charted in order to present each NGO’s results visually and ‘in real time’. This enabled the participants to discuss the results constructively, using a ‘sense making’ method. The differing results generally reflected the organisation’s size and complexity, as well as its level of development in relation to evaluation.

Following discussion on the questionnaires’ results, each NGO was able to identify the weaker areas to prioritise and strengthen. This marked the beginning of the next phase, i.e. planning to build evaluation capacity by focusing on specific areas. A worksheet highlighting critical planning information was given to the participants to fill in with realistic ideas (see box below).

At the end of the second workshop, participants were invited to reflect and comment on the overall process so far, through a combination of individual work, small group discussions and overall workshop discussion, and a copy of their own results was given to each NGO.

What is evaluation capacity planning about?

Once an organisation’s evaluation capacity assessment has been completed, discussion is needed to identify what the organisation does well, what it needs to do better and how to do it (e.g. keep doing, stop doing, do differently and create).

This discussion leads to the next step, which is to develop a practical and realistic plan (e.g. achievable within 12 months of implementation) to build the organisation’s evaluation capacity. Priorities, actions, measures, resources and other relevant information need to be formally articulated in the plan (see table below).

| Priorities | Actions and measures | Strategies | Resources and support |
|---|---|---|--|
| <i>What are we going to do? (Three priorities that are positive and possible)</i> | <i>What evidence do we need? How will we know we have been successful? (What will be our measures of success?) What will we see, hear and feel?</i> | <i>What strategies will most help us achieve our results?</i> | <i>What kind of resources and support do we think we will need to achieve our results?</i> |
| 1. | | | |
| 2. | | | |
| 3. | | | |

This initial table was later refined through the three workshops and became the Evaluation Capacity Planning (ECP) Tool³.

³ See http://www.superu.govt.nz/resources/evaluation_capacity_tools

“It’s really helped us to get clear about what we need to do, what evidence we need to collect to be able to demonstrate the value of our work with whānau.”

The third workshop was grounded in the previous workshops and focused on planning for evaluation capacity building. As previously, this workshop started with an oral and written recap of the previous milestones and achievements. This was followed by further work on each of the NGOs’ evaluation capacity building plans, which were subsequently finalised by the facilitators. Each NGO later received a copy of their own plan.

The workshops were fruitful for all involved and inspired NGOs to continue building their evaluation capacity

Facilitators collected feedback from the three NGOs during the workshop period, and in the following two to three months.

The workshops were enriching at a personal and organisational level. Participants not only learned ‘technical’ information about evaluation capacity. They were also able to apply learning to their organisation and to start building evaluation capacity through this experimental, New Zealand-based process. NGOs were enthusiastic about their positive experience of the process and outcome of the three workshops. Feedback shows their enjoyment of the overall process, and their willingness to continue the ‘ECB journey’.

Particular factors contributed to participants’ enjoyment and ‘usability’ of the overall process. These factors were:

- > A positive workshop environment with values that enabled participants to feel ‘safe’ (e.g. free and equal participation, openness and transparency, and acknowledgement of each NGO’s uniqueness).
- > Collaboration with all layers of each organisation, which created a greater understanding among participants of the various roles within an organisation and the need to for enhanced cooperation.
- > Expert facilitation, which enabled participants to learn, share, reflect and discuss.

“The process was valuable in getting everybody enthused about the importance of evaluation and I think it reminded us that we need to be continually reflecting on the difference we make for whānau – at a personal level and as an organisation.”



“... at the end of the day, it’s about the value of working together for the betterment of our people.”



Overall, the three workshops established a stimulating platform for participants to understand the value of evaluation capacity, why it needs to become an inherent part of their organisation, and how they can embed it for the long term.

The three NGOs show a strong commitment to following through with their evaluation capacity building plans. They want to keep strengthening their evidence building systems and practices to increase their credibility and legitimacy, not only among their funders (for reporting and compliance purposes) but also among their client base (for the purposes of effective service delivery). They acknowledge that accessing adequate resourcing is challenging, but key to achieving these goals.

The facilitators' feedback supports NGOs' reflections and recognises participants' willingness to use new learning and better evidence in their own organisation's work (e.g. ensuring service quality and meeting clients' needs).

The facilitators also reflected on their experience with the NGOs and commented on some lessons learned through the workshops. They highlighted five key points:

- > A strong and positive relationship is a powerful influence: the facilitators not only had an existing relationship with these NGOs but also ensured they 'matched' them culturally. The facilitators were deeply aware of historical research and evaluation issues related to Māori and Pacific peoples. As a result, the facilitators were able to create a 'safe' space based on trust and respect, which reinforced positive relationships and allowed participants to express their thoughts openly and with honesty. The workshops were successful in achieving the goals of producing assessment and planning tools through a user-friendly process.

“Facilitators did a superb job of keeping the environment ‘safe’ so everyone felt they could contribute constructively.”

**“In terms of the process...
it's easy, it's engaging,
it's informative, it's visionary,
we can see the end because
we have said what it looks like.”**

- > Reciprocity is an enriching by-product of facilitation: the facilitators acknowledged they would influence the NGOs through guiding and advising them. However, the facilitators were also open to learning from NGOs and adapting guidance to their needs. This resulted in a shared positive experience with reciprocal learning.
- > An interactive, visual and real-time process greatly enhances the process and outputs: participants and facilitators alike were deeply engaged in the workshops and enthusiastically stated the benefits they had gained (e.g. better understanding of ECB and its importance, how to do it in their organisation and who needs to be involved). The combination of methods used during the three workshops made them very interesting, relevant and practical for participants.
- > Evaluation Capability Building has to be flexible enough to adapt to each organisation's needs and to reflect NGOs' diverse realities (e.g. in their history, vision, goals, culture, values, processes and practices) in order to be a useful resource.
- > NGOs may require practical support and guidance (e.g. expert facilitation) when going through the process: the three workshops highlighted that NGOs faced some difficulty in undertaking the three key phases (assessment, planning and implementation). NGOs required some confidence and 'concrete' support (e.g. realistic examples of what they can do) in order to explore the strengths and weaker areas of their organisation, and to address the gaps.

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The next few steps are critical to ensuring the nationwide uptake of evaluation capacity building among NGOs

First, it is necessary to test (and potentially refine) the assessment and planning tools with a wider range of New Zealand-based NGOs to ensure the tools are usable and practical and that they enable these NGOs to better meet their clients' needs.

Once the tools have been validated, they will be promoted nationwide so that a greater range and number of NGOs can access and use them, enabling more NGOs to develop higher levels of evaluation capacity.

When a 'critical mass' of NGOs using the tools has been reached, it may become easier for others to access support in using the tools (e.g. by contacting NGOs that have already done so).





Notes:



Our purpose

To increase the use of evidence by people across the social sector so that they can make better decisions – about funding, policies or services – to improve the lives of New Zealanders, New Zealand’s communities, families and whānau.

What we do

We work across the wider social sector to:

- **promote** informed debate on the key social issues for New Zealand, its families and whānau, and increase awareness about what works
- **grow** the quality, relevance and quantity of the evidence base in priority areas
- **facilitate** the use of evidence by sharing it and supporting its use in decision-making.

Related resources:



NGO tools to help you do evaluations (August 2016)

Part 1: Your guide to getting there

Part 2: Evaluation Capacity Assessment (ECA) Tool

Part 3: Evaluation Capacity Planning (ECP) Tool

Part 4: Implementing your organisations evaluation capacity plan



The Evaluation Capacity Building Project Report (August 2016)



Successful NGO evaluation cultures. Literature scan (August 2016)

For more information contact enquiries@superu.govt.nz

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The Families Commission operates under the name Social Policy Evaluation and Research Unit (Superu)