

Program theory: understanding community safety programs

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Theory-based Program Evaluation

A theory of the way that a program might work increasingly provides the starting point for planning evaluations in a wide variety of fields. This approach is particularly valuable when an evaluation is planned to study *program impact* and where the program is *complex*, perhaps operating across various 'levels' in society (policy institution, local agency, community, households and families, individuals) in different localities and communities, and administered by agencies in partnership.

A 'realistic evaluation' version of this program theory approach places a central emphasis on the manner in which program strategies initiate causal processes that will, in particular settings, generate the desired outcomes. From this perspective the *program itself* is seen as a theory of change, and constructing the theory of how the program is expected to operate is a *necessary first step* in any program evaluation.

A program theory can be developed from:

- The research literature, where a study of the causal processes leading to socially desired outcomes results in a 'scientifically-based' intervention program (e.g. in health promotion);
- Program documents that provide information on the goals, objectives and strategies of a program-in-action; and/or
- More-or-less structured individual or group conversations with program developers, managers and participants.

A Program Theory Workshop

Following the 'structured conversation' method, a one-day workshop modified from Funnell's 'Program Theory Matrix' approach has been used to build local theories of how bushfire community safety programs might work to achieve their desired outcomes.

- Initially a *hierarchy of desired outcomes* (from short to longer-term) is constructed by the workshop group.
- Subsequently the *activities and resources* needed and/or provided to achieve these outcomes are added.
- Followed by the *causal processes* that might be activated, the *circumstances* (settings and people) that might facilitate these processes and possible *barriers* that might impede them.
- If time is available, possible *indicators of program success* might also be explored.

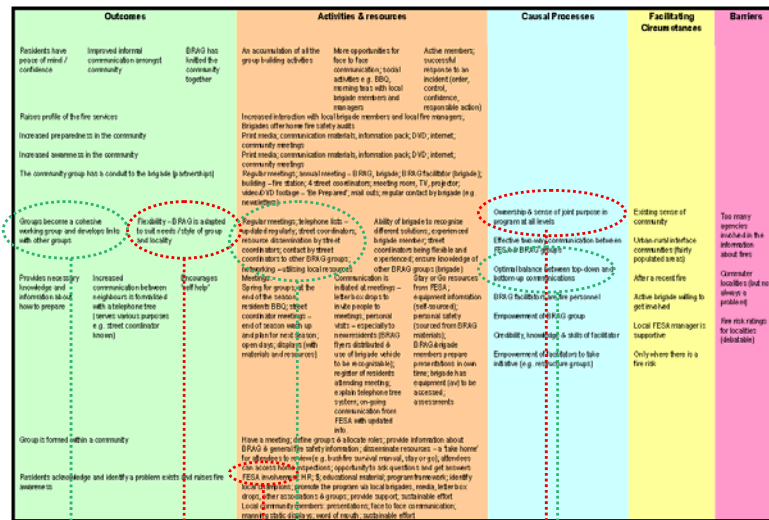
A Program Theory for the BRAG Program in W.A.

The program theory workshop has been trialled in several evaluation studies conducted by Project C7. One of these was for FESA's Bushfire Ready Action Groups program (BRAG).

The workshop involved central office staff from FESA community safety, regional FESA and local government employees involved in the implementation of BRAG, and BRAG volunteer facilitators and street coordinators.

The program theory matrix

The workshop enabled the development of an initial program theory matrix which then formed the basis for a more comprehensive case study of the way BRAG operates in three different locations in WA. It enabled the identification of various possible links between *program strategies*, *processes* and *outcomes* that can be tested in the case studies...



Strategy - process - outcome links

- Strategy: Identify local champions as facilitators and support through regions
 - Process: FESA community safety officers encourage local brigade ownership in BRAG
 - Outcome: Flexibility – BRAG is adapted to suit needs / style of group and locality
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- Strategy: Regular meetings, updating of 'phone lists, resource dissemination by street coordinators, contact by street coordinators to other BRAG groups, networking utilising local resources etc.
 - Process: Optimal balance between top-down and bottom-up activities
 - Outcome: Groups become a cohesive working group and develop links with other groups

Wider utilisation of the program theory approach

The fieldwork for this case study has been completed and the program theory matrix has proved very useful in terms of the development of interview questions and the structure of the report.

The write up for this project will include the documentation of C7's program theory approach in order to enhance the capacity of FESA to undertake future evaluative work. Indeed the C7 team is committed to working closely with our end-users to ensure end products such as the program theory approach are successfully adopted and meet the needs and requirements of communities living with the threat of fire.

Now that the program theory workshop approach has been successfully trialled with a range of programs the C7 team is looking at ways to enhance its usefulness and impact. This includes the potential for a more inclusive approach to both planning and evaluation at the community level within a broad 'democratic deliberative' model.

