



## Approaches to evaluation in Australian child and family welfare organizations



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### ABSTRACT

Child and family welfare organizations around the world aspire to achieve missions that will improve outcomes for vulnerable children and families and ultimately reduce the prevalence and impact of child maltreatment. In Australia, this work is currently being influenced by an increasingly turbulent political and economic climate; one that is requiring organizations to engage with evaluation in new and advanced ways so that they are not left behind in the increasingly complex and competitive environment that they now operate in. Despite the apparent awareness and understanding of the essential place of evaluation in quality and effective service delivery, it is also understood that evaluation of the human services work that child and family welfare organizations undertake is extremely challenging due to its intricate, ever-changing and often innovative nature. Embedding evaluation within such organizations therefore requires a tailored and planned decision-making and implementation process. This paper will briefly describe the recent socio-political history and environment that Australian child and family welfare organizations operate in and how this has impacted on engagement with evaluation. With consideration to this, it will describe the evaluation approaches available to organizations and the factors that may influence selection of a specific approach. It will then explore the benefits and challenges of these evaluation approaches, and consider the implications for child and family welfare agencies more broadly.

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## 1. Introduction

Evaluation has diffused differently around the world, at various times and in distinct ways, generally influenced by a nation's historical and social contexts. Over the past 20 years in particular however, a seemingly worldwide surge in demand for not-for-profits to engage in evaluation has occurred, coupled with a growing interest from organizations regarding what evaluation might offer their services and beneficiaries. This occurrence has been explained by the "appeal of the universal criteria of neutrality and objectivity, as the field has become increasingly rationalized, bureaucratized, and made subject to market forces" (Barman, 2007, p. 103). It has also been suggested that a series of social changes have created a juncture where major cultural change towards outcomes and impact is nigh. This has included growth in

the areas of social investment and social entrepreneurship, the rise of technology which is making data more accessible, and the economic downturn and resulting cuts in government spending creating a central role for evaluation in future decision-making (Lumley, Rickey, & Pike, 2011).

Current discourse around the world is suggesting that the "social sector seems to have woken up to the promise of data", with not-for-profits now primed to value and utilize evaluation more than ever (Lumley, 2013). This includes evaluation use within organizations, but also a move towards shared or collective impact across the child and family welfare sector. A growing understanding of what data and evaluation can offer organizations is now seen as exciting, and while it is known to be complex and challenging work, it is being considered a worthwhile undertaking to improve outcomes for beneficiaries, and in tackling the wider social problems that the sector aspires to address.

Shared concerns and challenges around the world have seen evaluation in the child and family welfare sector, and indeed the not-for-profit sector more broadly, become an international issue. Discussion and reflection about how to best evaluate the complex

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services that such organizations deliver is increasingly traversing national boundaries. Whilst each country grapples with its own national contexts and influences, common issues are creating an environment primed for international learning and action. Considering this resonance across international circumstances and jurisdictions, attention to the Australian experience, as outlined in this paper, provides a valuable insight into key issues and a contribution to the international knowledge-base that is being used to better understand and implement evaluation in child and family welfare organizations.

## 2. Child and family welfare organizations: the Australian context

As part of the Australian not-for-profit sector, child and family welfare organizations have a rich and long history of helping the most vulnerable and disadvantaged people and communities around Australia. Over the past 200 years, the Australian not-for-profit sector has grown in size and diversity, now contributing approximately \$43 billion to Gross Domestic Product; employing approximately 890,000 people; and receiving \$5.1 billion in donations and \$25.5 billion in direct government funding (Australian Charities and Not for Profit Commission, 2012). Of the 600,000 not-for-profits in Australia, around 56,000 are considered charities, with 43% having a social and community welfare purpose (ibid). An unknown proportion of these organizations work with children and families as their core business.

As in the United States, the operating environment for Australian child and family welfare organizations has changed significantly over the last half century, and this evolution has had a substantial impact on how such organizations value, use and promote evaluation, both internally and externally. Up until the early 1970's, Australia was one of the lowest-spending welfare nations in the world. It was at this time that the Labor government's social welfare reforms created extensive changes to the welfare system including the introduction of a national health service, an increase in social benefits, and the revitalization of community services (McMahon, Thomson, & Williams, 2000). In subsequent years, governments took on a greater role in funding social services, and the new public management of the 1980s and 1990s saw an increasing utilization of not-for-profit organizations delivering welfare services previously provided by government agencies (Productivity Commission, 2010). This marketization of the welfare state introduced competitive tendering processes through public procurement models, contributing to a growing uncertainty surrounding the financial sustainability of some child and family welfare organizations. Whilst many of the surviving organizations formed a heavy reliance on government funding for their existence, some went on to explore new opportunities to remain operational and grow independence. This included mergers and acquisitions, but also innovative ventures such as social enterprises that would generate discretionary income streams to provide some shield from any financial and political turbulence.

As the not-for-profit sector explored new innovations and opportunities, federal and state governments began investigating the activities of the sector and its development as a critical part of the Australian society and social economy. This included an Industry Commission report in 1995, and an Australian Bureau of Statistics report within the national accounting framework in 2002 (Productivity Commission, 2010). More recently in 2009, the Productivity Commission, the Australian Government's independent research and advisory body for social, economic and environmental issues, undertook a review of the contribution of the not-for-profit sector. The aims of this research focused on improving the measurement of the not-for-profit sector's

contribution to society, and how obstacles to this contribution might be minimized (Productivity Commission, 2010). From this review process, the Australian government implemented a not-for-profit reform agenda with the expressed purpose of strengthening the not-for-profit sector in Australia. This has included the introduction of an independent national regulatory body, the Australian Charities and Not-for-Profit Commission, which is similar to equivalent bodies in other countries such as the Charity Commission in the United Kingdom. Service sector reforms have also been occurring at a state level, including specific inquiries into the functioning and effectiveness of child and family welfare systems such as the Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protective Services in NSW (often referred to as the Woods Inquiry) in 2008 and the Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Child Inquiry in 2012 (often referred to as the Cummins Inquiry). These recent events were watershed moments for the not-for-profit and child and family welfare sectors in Australia, and today under the increasing scrutiny of government and the public, the operating environment of these organizations continues to change.

There has been an emerging interest in how the not-for-profit sector may better engage with capital investment, with the view of expanding the traditional form of funding organizations to deliver on social outcomes. The New South Wales state government has commenced a social benefit bond trial, following the social impact bond trial in the United Kingdom in 2010 and similar to the 'Pay for Success Bonds' in the United States (NSW Government, 2012). The social benefit bond allows investors to fund the delivery of services, and receive a return on investment when agreed social outcomes are achieved; maintaining and building on a reliance on evaluation (The Centre for Social Impact, 2011). This restructure of the relationship between government, not-for-profits and social investors may alter the way child and welfare organizations function as they are increasingly required to robustly demonstrate the achievement of measurable outcomes in order to attract and maintain the interest and confidence of investing parties and government departments.

As government explores this and similar opportunities to work with the business and private sector, there has also been a growing interest and use of business-type models initiated by Australian not-for-profit organizations, many of which rely on evaluation of outcomes. New methodologies such as Social Return on Investment and Social Accounting are being utilized as organizations look to articulate their point of difference in an increasingly competitive operating environment. These projects, easily understood by business as they 'speak its language', will go a long way in addressing the rising interest in strategic philanthropy in Australia, where foundations and trusts are demanding more from recipients' reporting so they can better assess the impact of their grants in addressing costly social problems (Patrizi & Thompson, 2011). The business sector is also part of the growing push for transparency of the activities of not-for-profit organizations, including through the use of incentives. For example, the corporate responsibility arm of accounting firm PwC Australia (formally PricewaterhouseCoopers) has initiated a transparency award, encouraging not-for-profit organizations to not only be transparent about their governance, finances and investments, business strategies and stakeholder engagement, but also about their activity and performance such as organizational outcomes (PwC Australia, 2013).

It is in this latter environment of scrutiny, transparency and accountability for Australian child and family welfare organizations, through the forging of new relationships between the first, second and third sectors, and with the increasing focus on evidence-informed practice in the human services, that an interesting role for evaluation has emerged.

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