Complexity Evaluation Framework

A system or process that is complex is made up of many diverse components that interact with each other in nonlinear ways. Their behaviour may also adapt or change over time. A system or process that is complex ecological and social systems, usually together at the same time.

In a complex policy environment decisions that preceded them depend on the sequence of states, actions, or decisions. Patterns of paths develop and take steps to manage.

You cannot definitively predict a new tax or regulation.

Components or actors within the system are capable of learning or evolving, changing how the system behaves in response to interventions as they are applied. E.g. When bacteria evolve to become resistant to antibiotics, or when an individual or organisation finds a way to circumvent a new tax or regulation.

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When selecting the overall approach, have you taken into account:

1. the complexity of a complex system
2. the evaluation purposes
3. the feasibility
4. budget, skills, experience, timescales, data requirements

Useful resources:
- HM Treasury Magenta Book
- Choosing Appropriate Evaluation Methods Tool (Befonji & O’Donnell, 2016)
- Speak to colleagues and experts: individuals with experience of complex evaluation from Defra, Government Departments, arms-length bodies and/or external experts.
- CECAN Evaluation Policy and Practice Note (2016)
- CECAN syllabus

There is no ‘gold standard’ way of going about evaluation – just the best approach given the purpose, nature and extent of complexity and resource availability and constraints. There are lots of evaluation approaches that can help. Combine them.

In a complex policy environment you cannot definitively predict how a system will behave. Expect the unexpected.

A complexity-appropriate evaluation can greatly assist policy teams in understanding the challenges posed by complexity, and provides opportunities to anticipate and take steps to manage these challenges.

A complexity-appropriate evaluation consists of a set of nested processes:
1. The evaluation is centred around and defined by the evaluation purpose.
2. This purpose informs an iterative process of understanding the system and intervention (UNDERSTANDING) and adapting the evaluation design (DESIGNING). These will both continue to develop and be updated throughout the evaluation.
3. All of these activities are conducted with the ongoing engagement of stakeholders, and understanding and learning are fed back and embedded into relevant processes both inside and outside of the evaluation (EMBEDDING).
4. Finally, all of these interacting components of an evaluation are led and managed by one or more individuals (MANAGING).

Choosing and using approaches: Useful resources
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