Evaluating social exclusion interventions in university-community partnerships

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ABSTRACT

Most university-community partnerships (UCPs) involve elements of community-level social exclusion interventions. As such, they face substantial challenges in management and evaluation. This paper highlights the central challenges associated with evaluation of UCP and other social exclusion interventions at the community level, and suggests methods to overcome them. The main body of the paper presents a case study based on a four-year action research involving evaluation of a social exclusion intervention initiated and implemented by a UCP in Israel. The case study highlights the challenges faced by the evaluation team, the solutions provided, and the contribution of the evaluation to improvement and accountability.

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1. Introduction

Over recent years, social interventions in OECD countries have been subject to two important and parallel processes. The first is the growing recognition and funding of social exclusion and social cohesion interventions, many targeting specific communities, in place of the traditional anti-poverty approach (Levitas et al., 2007; Ratcliffe & Newman, 2011). The second process is the increasing involvement of academic institutions, including leading universities, in community interventions (Boyle & Silver, 2005). Concomitantly, the assessment and evaluation of these interventions have attracted heightened attention and, along with it, increasing resources. However, such evaluations often fail to overcome the intrinsic challenges associated with complexity, a lack of agreed performance indicators, and insufficient administrative data at the community level, all of which prevent the evaluation from supplying the information needed for improvement and accountability.

This paper reviews and discusses the main challenges associated with evaluations of social exclusion interventions at the community level, with an emphasis on university-community partnerships (UCPs), and, in particular, interventions where improvement demands are combined with managerial accountability demands that call for either a contribution or an attribution approach to evaluation (see Mayne, 2011). The bulk of the paper presents a case study based on a four-year action research around the evaluation of a UCP aimed at reducing social exclusion in one city and surrounding minority villages in northern Israel. The case study highlights the challenges confronted by the evaluation team, the solutions provided, and the contribution of the evaluation to improvement and accountability. In so doing the paper contributes not only to the evaluation literature, but more broadly to the literature on both social exclusion interventions and UCPs—two topics that are interrelated, yet which are only rarely addressed together in research, though both researchers and practitioners have much to gain from their joint analysis.

The paper proceeds as follows. I first review the development of UCPs before exploring how the terms "community" and "social exclusion" are defined, and the difficulties associated with evaluating social exclusion interventions at the community level. I continue by suggesting possible solutions and approaches relevant to social exclusion UCPs. I then present the case study. I conclude by summarizing implications of the case study for research and practitioners.

2. University-community partnerships

The emergence of UCPs in OECD countries is a natural outgrowth of two processes: an increasing focus on communities

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and neighborhoods as intervention units, and growing competition in knowledge production and higher education. The idea that the war on poverty could be won by empowering the poorest and most excluded communities first saw light in the United States during the 1990s (Putnam, 1993, 2000), and quickly influenced Europe (Ratcliffe, 2011). Politically, this notion served both the right and the left, as it was in line with the former's agenda of minimizing the role of welfare states in favor of market forces, and the latter's agenda of cohesion and empowerment. This broad agreement laid the ground for partnerships between third-sector organizations, municipalities, and national agencies aiming to combat inequalities and exclusion in deprived communities and neighborhoods (Majo, Jones, & Cock, 2011; Strier, 2011).

These new local partnerships were appealing to universities, which were gradually losing their monopoly on knowledge to private think thanks, corporate R&D endeavors, and for-profit education firms. With this new competition, universities had to create better connections with the communities in their cities, promote a more caring social image, and supply added value in order to attract students, donors and investors (Boyle & Silver, 2005). However, it soon grew clear that forging connections with local communities offered universities more than good public relations. The knowledge produced from such interventions proved to enrich both research and teaching by minimizing the gap between theoretical knowledge and practice related to social problems (Fisher, Fabricant, & Simmons, 2005). At the same time, UCPs were perceived as having much to contribute toward generating solutions to the problems facing many communities (Silka & Renault-Caragianes, 2006; Trani & Holsworth, 2010), in particular by providing a stage for the public's (excluded) voices and opinions (Farquhar & Dobson, 2005).

While UCPs, as formal institutional entities, take various forms and have differing goals, the common thread uniting most, if not all, UCPs is direct involvement in local communities, with the aim of reducing urban poverty and social exclusion, building capacity, and promoting cohesion. I now address these somewhat vague concepts and their implications for assessment and evaluation, beginning with the term "community" itself.

3. Communities, social exclusion, and problems in measurement and evaluation

UCPs, as their name suggests, initiate and implement interventions at the community level. But what are communities? Politicians and program planners may find it convenient to see communities as a set of people sharing a unitary set of values and interests, whether because they share social and ethnic affiliations and/or because they live within some geographically delineated area, such as a neighborhood. Yet closer scrutiny reveals difficulties with this definition. As Edwards (1997) maintained, "even in socially and ethnically homogeneous housing estates, it would be naïve to assume that everyone's interests were common and it certainly would not be plausible in an ethnically and racially mixed area" (p. 832). Others concur that even apparently outwardly homogeneous "communities" can include diverse subgroups with varying sets of interests and concerns (Shirlow & Murtagh, 2004). This is especially true for underprivileged communities, which are characterized by the lack of local interests, little sense of belonging, and which are not represented by any specific entity (Meegan & Mitchell, 2001). Hence, both ethnic/cultural designations and spatial designations such as "neighborhood" are not necessarily helpful: One neighbourhood or ethnic group can encompass several "communities," and one "community" can include people from different ethnic groups and neighborhoods. This lack of clarity has consequences for the measurement and evaluation of

UCPs, as without a clear unit of analysis, it becomes almost impossible to gather reliable performance data and, therefore, to demonstrate outcomes and impacts in a valid way (Hart & Northmore, 2011; Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004).

The term "social exclusion," too, is inherently ambiguous and open to a range of definitions, making it difficult for evaluators to agree on definitive performance indicators. Some definitions (and hence sets of indicators) treat social exclusion as a subset of poverty, while others see it in terms of social cohesion (e.g., Ratcliffe & Newman, 2011), and still others attempt to address it as a stand-alone concept (e.g., Estivill, 2003). Most definitions of social exclusion refer to multiple topics and multiple units of analysis (individuals, processes, societies, etc.), which tends to make them abstract and empirically imprecise (Levitas et al., 2007). Another prominent weakness of many social exclusion definitions is the failure to differentiate between risk factors and outcomes. Levitas et al. (2007) seek to resolve this problem by defining social exclusion as "lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas" (p. 27). This definition treats structural issues of inequality, polarization and mobility (c.f. Ratcliffe, 2011) as determinants of social exclusion rather than symptoms of it. Yet while this definition tackles the significant aspects of exclusion, thus providing a basis to addresses some of the issues that hamper evaluation efforts, it has not been widely adopted, and social exclusion remains a broad term that is being used differently by various actors.

A related problem is that OECD countries still do not have effective performance measurement systems to measure social inclusion in general, and at the community level in particular. First, quantitative indicators in most measurement systems are embedded within a politics of accountability, focus strongly on control, subsequent to manipulations and thus have very limited contribution to improvement of policies and programs (Pollitt, 2008). Second, performance measurement systems are insensitive to the existence of diverse identities and cultural differences within and across communities (Ratcliff & Newman, 2011)—a problem which relates back to the difficulty of defining "community" discussed above. Third, existing measurement systems are not adept at exposing or analyzing the complex web-like relations that can arise between communities and between individuals. Fourth, measurement systems often focus on what is easy to measure, such as unemployment rates, income, size of the labor force, education, etc. These data are measured consistently (though figures are often outdated) in all OECD countries, but have little to offer in assessing inherent exclusion parameters such as individual feelings and the inability to participate in relationships and activities (Levitas et al., 2007). Fifth, social exclusion data suffers from low validity and reliability, because it is often collected through perception surveys of individuals, and indicators easily become catch-all terms (Fuller, 2011). Finally, while performance measurement systems collect administrative data at the national and municipal levels, we do not have concrete information on communities and smaller units of analysis at the project level. Although surveys can target audiences within specific neighborhoods and even specific streets and households (Harper & Mayhew, 2012), these are often irrelevant to community interventions which are not congruent to any geographical definitions (as discussed above).

A few pioneering social inclusion surveys have overcome some of these challenges. Notable examples include the 1999 survey of Poverty and Social Exclusion in Britain and its later iterations (Bradshaw & Main, 2010; Gordon et al., 2000) along with the Bristol Social Exclusion Matrix (in Levitas et al., 2007). These surveys question respondents on multiple exclusion dimensions,

most notably employment, participation and social relations. Similarly, the use of neighborhood knowledge management systems contributed to a focus on specific neighborhoods (Eversley & Mayhew, 2011). However, these were largely ad-hoc attempts, which did not sufficiently develop into systematic measures, and could not provide information at the community level (Fuller, 2011; Levitas et al., 2007).

Some projects have produced tools for benchmarking and global criteria for correct implementation (e.g., Hart, Northmore, & Gerhardt, 2009; Hills & Sullivan, 2006; Pearce, Pearson, & Cameron, 2007). However, these cannot be generalized to UCPs because they adhere to different units of analysis, and do not provide systematic measurement tools. In light of these challenges, it is not surprising that recent literature reviews have concluded that UCP evaluations do not measure outcomes and suffer from a lack of standardized tools (Hart & Northmore, 2011).

4. From measurement problems to contribution analysis

Even if administrative performance data at the community level existed, such data would only complement more detailed evaluations (Nielsen & Ejler, 2008), as the latter are generally expected to examine not only end results but also processes, contextual factors and, most important, causality (Patton, 2008). Yet while there are numerous approaches to evaluating causality for both improvement and accountability purposes (see Alkin, 2012), only a few of these are suitable for measuring social exclusion at the community level. Community interventions, including UCPs, by nature tend to involve projects with changing boundaries and incomparable outcomes, such that establishing matched control groups is generally impossible. For example, neighborhoods chosen for an intervention aimed at creating leadership teams cannot meaningfully be compared with different neighborhoods not subject to the intervention, because the numerous intervening variables associated with social exclusion parameters preclude attribution of the results leadership groups can attain.

A review of the literature suggests that evaluations of social exclusion programs at the community level in general, and UCPs in particular, increasingly respond to these difficulties by following a theory-of-change approach (Hart & Northmore, 2011; Maurrasse, 2002; Mayne, 2011; Ratcliffe & Newman, 2011). While there are many types of theories of change (Beach & Pedersen, 2013; Donaldson, 2007; Scriven, 2008; Weiss, 1997), common to all is the practice of modelling the expected path from actions to outputs and outcomes, and comparing this path with actual achievements to determine whether the chain of results occurred as expected. The common approach is to describe how actions lead to outputs, outcomes and impacts, attributing indicators to each result. Because in this practice theories of change adhere exactly to what programs should do or should have done, (Ofek, 2016) termed them *program-oriented theories of change*.

While program-oriented theories of change were conceived as a reliable means of establishing the contribution of given inputs and activities to given outcomes, in complex and dynamic environments they are often criticized for their inflexibility and linear ontology (Patton, 2011). This is because under the program-oriented approach specific indicators are pre-determined, meaning that in dynamic environments they may no longer be relevant by the time the program is evaluated (Van Ongevalle, Huyse, Temmink, Boutylkova, & Maarse, 2012). To address this problem, some scholars have developed an alternative approach under the name *actor-oriented theories of change*.

Evaluators using actor-oriented theories of change frame expectations of each actor separately within the theory of change, and analyze these expectations against the backdrop of actions by other actors and by program management (see Deprez, 2013; Earl, Carden, & Smutylo, 2001). Because their focus is on actors rather than on pre-determined assumptions about what programs should do or should have done, these theories of change have the flexibility to adapt to changes and emerging effects in complex realities.

Both program- and actor-oriented theories can utilize positivist and constructivist methods, can be participatory and involve various actors, and can apply quantitative and qualitative methods. The choice between them depends on factors such as the evaluators' expertise and capacity, requests from management, and the complexity of the intervention (Ofek, 2016). However, the distinction between these two types of theories of change and related challenges is largely absent from the discussion on evaluating UCPs and social exclusion interventions.

5. The partnership dimension in UCPs and other social exclusion interventions

There are many potential barriers to creating functioning and effective partnerships at the community level in general and in UCPs in particular, including unequal power structures, different organizational cultures and values, conflicting interests, lack of trust, and more (Agranoff, 2007; Miller & Hafner, 2008; Maurrasse, 2002). But while the literature is replete with methods of achieving collaboration and promoting partnerships in UCPs (Barnes et al., 2009; McNall, Reed, Brown, & Allen, 2009; Sandy & Holland, 2006), the evaluation of the partnership dimension is absent. This is true also for social cohesion and exclusion, which are increasingly dependent on partnerships and networks, where the network dimension is absent from the literature on measurement and evaluation (Levitas et al., 2007; Ratcliff & Newman, 2011).

While the UCP and social exclusion literature tell us very little about how to evaluate networks, the governance network literature is more helpful. Network theorists agree that network evaluation can differ broadly from evaluation of a particular program or policy, and that the network itself should function as a unit of analysis during some portion of the evaluation process (Provan & Milward, 2001; Proven & Kenis, 2008; Torfing, Peters, Pierre, & Sørensen, 2012; Turrini, Cristofoli, Fromsini, & Nasi, 2010). Yet as those authors point out, the goals in this unit of analysis tend to be intangible, such as defining network effectiveness and identifying determinants for achieving it. Hence, traditional evaluation tools such as quantitative indicators, cost-efficiency analysis, and operational effectiveness measures can only rarely be employed for this purpose.

When examining criteria for network effectiveness, most network theories rely in one way or another on Provan and Milward's (2001) canonical set of criteria for community-based network evaluation. Provan and Milward argue that evaluations of network effectiveness involve three units of analysis: the community, networks implementing the interventions, and the organizations within the networks. Torfing et al. (2012) used this framework to suggest that an effective network should be evaluated upon six major components: it should (a) produce a clear understanding of the problems to be addressed; (b) generate innovative solutions for these problems; (c) reach joint decisions; (d) ensure smooth implementation based on collaboration; (e) adjust flexibly to problems and changes; and (f) create conditions for future collaboration.

As mentioned, only rarely do evaluations of UCPs and social exclusion partnerships perform network evaluations following these or any other network evaluation guidelines, and most do not evaluate networks as specific units of analysis. The result is that they ignore a major determinant of success in these partnerships, and a key to achieving results on the ground.

6. Case study: evaluating a social exclusion UCP

The following sections present the results of a four-year action research on the evaluation of social exclusion interventions implemented by a UCP in Israel. The evaluation team, led by the author, considered the range of difficulties presented above, and addressed them by using a combination of actor- and program-oriented theories of change together with a network evaluation. The case sheds light on solutions to challenges often faced by evaluators and management in evaluating UCPs and other social exclusion interventions at the community level. The case also highlights how various dimensions of the evaluation can contribute to improving UCP management and decision-making.

6.1. Description of the case study

The UCP analyzed in this paper is the Academia-Community Collaboration for Solidarity and Empowerment of Excluded Communities (hereafter the Social Exclusion UCP), a partnership funded since 2011 by Israel's Ministry of Education, with the stated aim of combating poverty and social exclusion in communities in the city of Haifa[1] and in some neighboring Arab minority villages. The University of Haifa was chosen as the program's leading partner, and a managerial body under the rector's office was established for this purpose. The partnership officially consists of several university faculties, municipal departments and third-sector organizations. Each partner supplies representatives to a steering committee which meets on a regular basis; a smaller management committee is responsible for the daily management of the network, with a committee of experts playing an advisory role. The partnership implements 15 projects on average at any one time,[2] most of them targeted toward three deprived neighborhoods in the western part of Haifa. All projects are monitored and evaluated regularly.

The Social Exclusion UCP aims to reduce social exclusion by connecting people to their own communities, helping them avail themselves of opportunities, improving access to social services and justice, and encouraging voluntary actions by individuals and associations by promoting leadership capacity building (see also Putnam, 2000). The program's four inter-related action pillars are interdisciplinary faculty-community courses, community projects, leadership capacity building, and research and development. As part of its work, the Social Exclusion UCP aims to enhance relationships among various poverty-related actors and create local partnerships that can work directly to address causes of poverty and social exclusion. A key aspect of the program is thus what is known as strategic leveraging: the mobilization of strong relationships that have the capacity to create new collective values and innovative responses (Keast & Mandell, 2014).

The evaluation described in this case study was commissioned by the partnership in 2012 for a period of four years, and was contracted out to the Center for Public Management and Policy at the University of Haifa. The author of this study was engaged as director of this evaluation on behalf of the contractor and led the evaluation from its initiation in January 2012 as part of an action research (see below). The evaluation's terms of reference included both improvement and accountability requirements. Each annual evaluation was intended to report to the Ministry and various actors on the results achieved, as well as to inform program managers' decision-making for the following planning phase. Management requested relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability analyses.

6.2. Data and methods

6.2.1. Action research

As the Social Exclusion UCP evaluation manager, I performed an action research from the initial stage of the evaluation until its current stage in 2016, in order to thoroughly document the evaluation process, its effectiveness and use. Action research is "the application of fact-finding to practical problem-solving in a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it, involving the collaboration and cooperation of researches, practitioners and laymen" (Sarantakos, 1998, p. 7). Action research rejects the notion of an objective, value-free approach to enquiry by independent observers in favor of an explicitly political, socially engaged, and democratic practice (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003). A key value shared by action researchers is that human systems can best be understood if the researcher is involved in the phenomena which s/he is studying, and if the members of the system itself are involved in the inquiry process. A central idea of action research is that while theory should inform practice, it should also be generated through concrete application in the field.

Argyris, Putnam, and Smith (1985) identified four important elements of action research: (a) collaboration between researches and actors involved in the situation; (b) critical inquiry; (c) a focus on social practice; and (d) reflective learning. Following these guidelines, I invested to ensure active and effective collaboration from all relevant actors not only for the evaluation process itself, but also for discussions regarding the present research. To support a process of critical enquiry and self-learning, I used semi-structured interviews developed together with neutral researchers, where data were coded according to pre-determined objective categories (see below). Specific questions addressed respondents' satisfaction with the various phases and results of the evaluation process.

It should be noted at the start that no significant differences were found between evaluators, managers, and evaluands in terms of their responses to any interview questions. Hence, in the sections below 1 do not differentiate between these groups of interviewees in reporting most of my findings.

6.2.3. Data collection

As just mentioned, besides my direct involvement and self-documentation, data about the evaluation and how it was used were gathered via semi-structured interviews with members of the management committee as well as managers of the various projects. Interviews were face-to-face and conducted personally by the author. Each interview lasted about an hour, divided about equally between data collection for the evaluation itself and for the action research. Questions elicited respondents' satisfaction with the evaluation process and the way various types of information were used by management and staff. Overall, 49 interviews were conducted for the purpose of the action research, aside from numerous other interviews conducted for the purpose of the evaluation itself over the four years. All interviews were transcribed and manually coded.

6.3. Challenges facing the evaluation team

From the beginning, the evaluation of the Social Exclusion UCP faced the three major challenges mentioned above: the difficulty of obtaining administrative performance measurement data for the evaluated projects; the inability to establish relevant control

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[1] Haifa, in northern Israel, is the country's third largest city, with a population of around 300,000 in the city itself and another 350,000 in the larger metropolitan area. Haifa's seaport, petroleum industry and heavy industry employ thousands of workers.

[2] The number of projects varies from year to year.

groups; and difficulties in predicting or tracking back cause-and-effect relations because of the program's high level of complexity, which made it impossible to use SMART indicators. With respect to the first challenge, the main issue was that, as often happens in UCPs, each project targeted groups of between 15 and 30 carefully chosen participants (community members and leaders). In such cases, administrative information is simply irrelevant because interventions work directly with beneficiaries and require performance information at the individual level, rather than through geographical units or other units of analysis targeted by administrative performance measures. Indeed, some projects involved participants who not only lived in different neighborhoods, but belonged to different ethnic and cultural communities (e.g., Israeli Arabs, Ethiopians, and Russians). As noted earlier, administrative data in most performance measurement systems ignore cultural differences between communities, and hence could not provide relevant information in the present case.

These same features of the present partnership gave rise to the second challenge, preventing the establishment of control groups. That is, because people with different characteristics and from different neighborhoods were carefully chosen to participate in the projects, it was technically impossible to match identical groups by propensity score matching or similar techniques. The changing boundaries of projects further increased this challenge.

The third challenge was associated with high complexity and the inability to relate activities directly to results. Interviews and surveys with management and staff revealed that there was little information about how activities were expected to lead to outputs and outcomes, because of the small scale of the unit of analysis, the changing nature of the program and intervening variables.

The governance arrangements of the partnership and related politics made it even more difficult to predict cause-and-effect relations. As often happens in UCPs, the target populations consisted of different ethnic minorities. This hampered the use of administrative data (see above) and, given the complex history of relations between minorities in Israel (with tensions both between Arabs and Jews and between Jewish minorities), it negatively affected collaboration between groups. Moreover, because most university students, who were a major actor in the intervention, did not belong to one of the minority groups, the abovementioned diversity reduced trust between the students and the communities with which they were engaging.

Politics at the local government level increased the complexity even further. While the Welfare and Education departments of the municipality were a part of the partnership, interests differed between these departments and the very senior level of the municipality, including the mayor himself. Power relations within the university also influenced the planning, outcomes and evaluation of the program. Governance bodies related to the program were the rector's office (officially the main implementer), the university's presidency and the university's deanship, which had its own UCP projects and which was engaged in the current program as a main actor. To make things even more complex, the members of the program's management committee were also members of the university's School of Social Work (not solely employees of the rector's office). Finally, as mentioned, various faculties were engaged in the various projects as stand-alone actors, and had their own interests. The evaluation team, therefore, had to find the best approach to address this diversity and power relations, which very often characterize UCPs around the world (Miller & Hafner, 2008; Trani & Holsworth, 2010).

Given these constraints, it was initially decided to rely on a theories-of-change approach, using data generated by the evaluation team according to agreed indicators. However, the interviews and surveys with management and staff mentioned above revealed that because of high complexity and the inability to relate activities

directly to results, program-oriented theories of change were unlikely to be effective (Ofek, 2015). The complex, dynamic and uncertain nature of most of the projects being evaluated made it impossible to use SMART indicators for outputs and outcomes for these projects, and certainly not for the results the partnership aimed to achieve at the community level.

To overcome these challenges, we used outcome mapping (OM), an actor-oriented theory of change approach for planning and evaluation, for the first three years of the action research, moving to a program-oriented theory of change for the final year. The procedure is described in the following sections.

6.4. Overcoming challenges by using actor-oriented theories of change

Outcome mapping, like other actor-oriented theories of change, was designed as a way of allowing evaluators to use theories of change in complex settings, when causal paths cannot be predicted or tracked back, and SMART indicators cannot be assigned to results (Earl et al., 2001). To implement the approach, at the beginning of each year a one- or two-day workshop was conducted with either the management group or the steering committee. These workshops had three main stages. First, at the start of each workshop, participants stated and revised the UCP's expected final results. Although initially managers were reluctant to invest time in discussing final results, interviewees stated that ultimately they realized this was a highly important step, which helped in directing the UCP's goals and activities.

The second stage was to map the boundary partners of the partnership, namely actors with whom the UCP expected to interact, according to three concentric circles: those whom the program aimed to influence directly and in a controlled manner; those the program expected to influence directly but without control; and those over whom the program might have indirect or potential influence (see also Van Ongevalle et al., 2012). This process was conducted by the evaluation manager separately with representatives of the management group and steering committee. In both cases, it involved lively discussions between the partnership members about actors' interests and expected role in the partnership. In these arenas, power relations had to be dealt with and negotiated (see also Koppenjan & Klijn, 2004). This resulted in a detailed map illustrating the interrelationships and interdependencies between actors involved in the project. Our interviews revealed that this mapping – a step which is often absent from traditional program-oriented theories of change – was a crucial exercise because of the complex governance and power relations described above. As one interviewee mentioned: "We are aware that politics influence our program both here [in the university] and among our partners. But the mapping made it clear to us who the key partners are, on whom should we focus, and what should be their [the other actors'] degree of involvement in planning and implementation . . . The mapping also clarified how actors are expected to influence each other." As demonstrated below, this step was also crucial because the interrelations between actors mapped out at this juncture were the basis on which the evaluation could later demonstrate causality and analyze the complex, web-like influence of the UCP on expected objectives.

The third stage was the creation of theories of change. In contrast to the usual procedure with program-oriented theories of change, here a single theory of change was designed for each actor at all levels of the partnership: (a) the partnership itself; (b) the university, university faculties, and professors engaging with the partnership; (c) university students; (d) the municipality and municipality departments; (e) third-sector organizations working directly with the partnership and potential NGOs; and (f) various communities. For each actor we developed progress markers according to expectations at three levels, representing a relatively

early response to program activities at the first level, more-active changes at the second level, and fully transformative changes at the third level. Only when actions and targets materialized were their timing and specifics clarified in the model (see also Earl et al., 2001; Van Ongevalle et al., 2012). Developed as a set for each actor, the progress markers demonstrated the path from activities to results, with an emphasis on the interrelations and mutual influence between them. Expectations from actors revolved around four main social exclusion dimensions: actors' involvement, conscientization, judicial assistance, and advocacy for community and individuals' rights (Strier, 2011). This exercise was repeated for each of the program's four strategic pillars mentioned above, together with cross-cutting expectations between the pillars. Because theories of change were developed for each actor separately (emphasizing interrelations among actors) and did not adhere to program's SMART indicators, the evaluation achieved flexibility and ability to adapt to high levels of complexity, uncertainty and change (Ofek, 2016). The separate theories of change also kept a clearer focus on each actor, a crucial endeavor in light of the complex governance and interrelationships between actors.

As expected in such a process, actors had different opinions about their role in the partnership and the roles of others. In order to make rigorous theories of change on the one hand, but with a major participatory dimension on the other, the evaluation team eliminated contradictions from the theories of change, revised them into a final-draft document, and sent this to the partners for a review. The team received back only a few comments, which did not contradict each other and were included in the final theory of change.

Interviewees mentioned that this was an effective way not only to create valid theories of change in a participatory manner, but also to negotiate power relations. As one interviewee from a partner organization stated: "The process of creating the models together made us feel that we were a part of the process. But most importantly, it helped us understand our different expectations from different actors, and at the same time clarify that although we have different interests, they all fit into the final goals of the program."

Fig. 1 presents the theories-of-change procedure as a general scheme. In reality this work took the form of an electronic Excel file, with the expectations color-coded by actor. Interrelationships were framed within the expectations themselves. No hard copies of the full set of expectations were printed due to the size of the file.[3]

Based on the actor-oriented theories of change and progress markers, the evaluation team targeted all the above-mentioned actors through a series of focus groups, semi-structured interviews and quantitative surveys. On average, each year we reached 37 people through individual interviews, between 80 and 90 people through focus groups (7 to 10 people in each of nine focus groups per year), and more than a hundred through written surveys. These were used to produce two reports during each implementation year: a mid-term report which focused on areas where changes could be introduced immediately, and a full report at the close of the year, which was used in planning for the coming year. Thus, six reports were produced during the first three years of the program (our strategy for the fourth-year will be discussed below).

6.5. Main contributions of the evaluation

Over the four years of the partnership, the evaluations made countless contributions to the UCP's projects management. In this section I discuss contributions that evolved specifically from our use of actor-oriented theories of change, which would not necessarily have been achieved by other approaches.

First, because of the developmental nature of the partnership and the dynamic and complex environment in which it operated, the Social Exclusion UCP lacked clear objectives. As such, the flexibility of actor-oriented theories of change provided a roadmap for planning and decision-making which could not be achieved using traditional logic models. This can be referred to as the "process use" dimension of the evaluation—i.e., the notion that the thinking process required by an evaluation can be at least as influential as its findings and recommendation (Patton, 2008, 2011). The need to frame expectations from each actor was a major benefit, as it helped all actors to formulate and express clear objectives. Aside from the contribution to the evaluation team, one interviewee from the steering committee remarked that "thinking about expectations from each actor was an eye-opener for me, because for the first time I could see the role of each actor and interrelationships and place within the wider picture. While I had a clear idea of the outputs and outcomes I wish to see at the program level, thinking about actors was a whole different process." Another interviewee mentioned that " . . . this process pointed to deprivation and exclusion dimensions of different actors, of which I was not aware before."

Even more important, the evaluation team was able to develop a simple A4 model based on the theories of change which could be employed in interviews as a graphic tool to discuss the various actors' objectives. This, in turn, had a positive by-product in that it helped employees who were not part of the steering committee to understand their location in the complex network, what others expected of them, and how they should interact with other actors. As one municipality manager stated, "We are not used to working with vague objectives and changing results; the model you used during our meetings made things much clearer and provided a route we could follow." As noted above, this is an important advantage of actor-oriented theories of change which is absent from traditional program-oriented models. The complex governance arrangement among multiple actors made this contribution even more significant.

An important contribution highlighted by the UCP's senior management was the internal and external accountability analyses the evaluations supplied. Each year's final evaluation reports were delivered directly to the funder (the Ministry of Education), and so external accountability was highly important. Given the lack of administrative performance measurement information, the absence of control groups, and the projects' changing goals, accountability analysis was challenging. But despite early concerns, our ability to expose causal paths based on predetermined expectations from actors supplied a highly valid accountability analysis that satisfied both the program managers and the donor. This analysis also highlighted innovative features of the partnership, particular problem-solving successes, and the program's relevance to its beneficiaries. Finally, it served as an additional important source of information for the program management as it brought into focus the added value of giving the university a role in combating social exclusion.

Another contribution mentioned by interviewees was the evaluation's ability to convey the partnership's influence on the perceptions as well as behaviors of various stakeholders—that is, the way community members and public and non-profit organizations perceived poverty and social exclusion, as well as the means they employed to combat it. This analysis grew out of our focus on the interrelations between different actors. For example, the evaluation supplied information showing that university students well-versed in the concepts of social exclusion and inclusive poverty (Strier, 2011) influenced the perceptions and vocabulary of

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[3] No hard copies were ever printed, as the full file was too long (both horizontally and vertically) to fit comfortably even on A3-sized paper.

Final results																		
Final results of cross-cutting				Final results Pillar A				Final results Pillar B			Final results Pillar C			Final results Pillar D				
Cross-cutting expectations for all actors				Pillar A (several projects)				Pillar B (several projects)			Pillar C (several projects)			Pillar D (several projects)				
																			Expectations: Level 3
																			Expectations: Level 2
																			Expectations: Level 1
Actor A	Actor B	Actor C	Actor D	Actor A	Actor B	Actor C	Actor D	Actor A	Actor B	Actor C	Actor D	Actor E	Actor F	Actor A	Actor B	Actor C	Actor D	Actor E

Fig. 1. Scheme of the actor-oriented theory of change used in the Social Exclusion UCP.

managers and social workers within municipal departments. Similar paths of influence were identified at other levels (e.g., between the partnership's managers).

While the evaluation identified the aforementioned contributions to changes in employee approaches, it also revealed the inherent tensions between actors from the university, municipality and third sector, and methodological tensions such as students' inability to implement theoretical knowledge in their practical work. By addressing the interrelationships between parties, in the face of the complex governance and power relations, the evaluation supplied practical recommendations to overcome these problems. Interviewees mentioned that this analysis of interrelationships helped in overcoming challenges in subsequent years. For example, one interviewee from the management group mentioned that "the evaluation made us think about changing the organizational structure of the program, so we could better accommodate the interrelationships between actors and adapt to different expectations." An interviewee from the steering committee mentioned that:

Recommendations assisted us in four main dimensions: A) understanding which actors and aspects of the program we should focus on next year; B) understanding who the important change agents are, and their relationships and influences on other actors; C) as a result of gaps revealed in perceptions, the way we should change our communication with partners, and especially the welfare departments in the field; D) how to better manage expectations and perceptions among actors.

Another contribution of the actor-oriented theory of change approach was that it helped clarify for the partnership management what could be expected from the university-based partners (students and faculty). With respect to students, while their involvement benefited all parties, and they made significant contributions to the program (e.g., helping change perceptions concerning social involvement, introducing critical approaches to poverty and exclusion, improving relations with the community, and helping achieve positive project outputs and outcomes), expecting students to function as the prime change agents of the program was unrealistic. The same was true for university faculties and professors, who both benefited from and contributed to the partnership, but who did not influence communities and local organizations as expected. The evaluation also provided significant information about how university students were influenced by

various actors and interactions. In light of such evidence, much of the program's resources were shifted to other pillars. This finding highlights the importance of using an actor-oriented approach in complex settings, as despite perceived successful program indicators the analysis revealed important weaknesses that called for fundamental changes in governance settings and program implementation.

With respect to the program's influence on its intended beneficiaries, namely community members, the evaluation analyzed changes in the following general outcomes: individual behavior, aspects of subjective well-being, self-perceptions, self-sufficiency, relations with the community and community organizations, perceptions of poverty and exclusion, and development of sustainable community leadership. Here the use of actor-oriented theories of change was of the utmost importance, as relying on expectations from actors as progress markers provided flexibility and enabled the evaluation team to cope with intervening variables. The surveys, interviews and focus groups directly addressed actors' expectations, and used valid and reliable tools to measure changes over time in beneficiaries' perceptions and well-being. At the same time, the interrelationships between project beneficiaries and other actors were carefully analyzed so as to reveal paths of influence between the various actors and community members. This information was used for accountability, and hence for decisions on the continuation and termination of individual projects, as well as contributions to improvement and lessons learnt.

6.6. Network evaluation: institutionalizing the UCP

As mentioned above, a highly important (and often neglected) dimension of UCP evaluations is network assessment. In our case, each year the evaluators guided steering committee members to form expectations from the network as a stand-alone unit of analysis, defined loosely as an arena for conscious interactions between actors in order to achieve common goals (Provan & Kenis, 2008). These expectations were evaluated according to Provan and Milward's (2001) framework and Torfing et al.'s (2012) six criteria of effective partnership, both described earlier in this paper.

While it was known that the partners had competing interests (see above), the network analysis revealed their magnitude and the degree to which they prevented collaboration. A major problem in our case was that the magnitude of these interests had hitherto

remained hidden. These competing interests related not only to how interventions should be managed and implemented, but also to broad and fundamental issues of leadership, positions, and roles. For example, aside from the complex power relations described above, we found that the municipality perceived the university as disconnected from events on the ground, and so actors from the municipality invested hidden efforts to ensure that certain activities sought by university actors would not be carried out. Competing interests and rivalries of this type are one of the main barriers to effective collaboration in general (Koppenjan & Klijn, 2004) and in UCPs in particular (Strier, 2014). Our first-year evaluation highlighted these differing interests, power relations and hidden agendas, and recommended strategies for resolving these issues. After the publication of these findings, areas of conflict were discussed in meetings, and actors from the different partners were able to reach agreement on how to mitigate them. A large number of our interviewees mentioned that this was a significant contribution of the evaluation, one that enabled effective collaboration down the road. A member of the management group stated that "the findings revealed clearly how we are perceived by our partners. This is an unpleasant surprise, but this is also something that we can solve both by talking with our partners about it, and by changing the way we communicate and even change our behavior."

A similarly important contribution of the evaluation related to actors' varying – and at times contradictory – expectations from the partnership. Here, we drew on the 3Cs model of engagement (Mandell & Keast, 2008), where *cooperation* is the lowest level of engagement, *coordination* implies more tightly and formally linked decision-making, and *collaboration* is the most stable and long-term relationship, characterized by high levels of financial and managerial interdependency and institutionalization. By asking all members to indicate where they perceived the partnership's actual and ideal location along this continuum, we gave the partners a common language to discuss their perceptions of the partnership, their expectations from it, and ways of leveraging the network (Keast & Mandell, 2014). Interviewees representing all the organizations and all positions in the program reported that these contributions were crucial in helping the partnership advance from the lowest level of coordination in its second year to a collaboration-type network in the fourth year. One interviewee described the result of the network evaluation as follows: "From the second year on we conceived the partnership as on a scale of levels of collaboration, and we had a common language to discuss it. This gave us initial and important concepts to talk about our expectations from the partnership, where we stand now and where we want it to be."

While it would be impossible to review here the many benefits of network analysis, one final contribution of our evaluation should be noted: namely, our early finding that coordination between network actors was not functioning efficiently (see Bouckaert, Peters, & Verhoest, 2010). By analyzing interrelations between actors in the partnership, the evaluation team was able to identify the broken links and bottlenecks to information flow at different levels of the network, and to recommend ways of resolving these problems. A large number of our interviewees cited this finding and recommendations in the first stages of the partnership as key elements enabling more-effective collaboration over time.

Interviewees from both management and partner organizations suggested that the information from the network analysis was a key determinant in institutionalizing the partnership in its initial stage. As one interviewee from the management group put it, "the evaluation findings about how each partner conceived the partnership, our differing interests and expectations, had a major contribution in transforming the partnership into a concrete organization. The language and framework for discussion the evaluation provided was essential in achieving it."

Without treating the network dimension as a separate unit of analysis, it is unlikely that the evaluation would have exposed the failings described in this section. Although all types of theories of change are designed to focus on processes and results, and actor-oriented theories of change are used to describe interrelations between actors in particular, creating a theory of change for the network itself enables evaluators to focus on aspects that go beyond specific actors or specific elements of the project. Such a theory of change dialogues with other theories of change (in our case actor-oriented), but instead of focusing on specific actors or on specific outputs, it focuses on the interactions between all actors together and the way they wish the partnership to perform. Of course, addressing the network as a separate unit of analysis should be complementary to theory of change evaluations of other units of analysis, but it cannot replace them. The experience from this case study shows that in four years, there were no overlaps between expectations from specific partners and expectations from the network as a whole. As can be understood, this analysis was highly helpful in analyzing the complex network of power relations, a phenomenon that characterizes many UCPs around the world (see above).

6.7. From an actor- to program-oriented theory of change

The actor-oriented theory of change approach was crucial to ensuring effective evaluation of the Social Exclusion UCP in its first three years, as it supplied the necessary flexibility to cope with the high level of complexity and uncertainty. But by the fourth year the uncertainty regarding desired cause-and-effect relations had been reduced, the power relations became clearer, and differing interests were mitigated to some degree. This enabled the evaluation team to switch to a program-oriented theory of change for the final evaluation, one designed around projects rather than actors. As before, members of the various partner organizations were invited to a workshop at the start of the year. This time, however, they were asked to help develop a specific theory of change for each project, with a focus on perceived outputs, intermediate outcomes and final outcomes. Interrelations were mapped and addressed within these theories of change. At this stage, actors were aware of their differing interests (which were mitigated by this time), as well as the role and position of each actor. Hence, unlike in its first years, it was not crucial to remap these interrelations separately, but it was enough to address them under the program-oriented theory of change.

During the program's fourth year, the new program-oriented theories of change guided the monitoring and evaluation processes for each project. The evaluation team reported on the specific projects, but kept an overall approach by describing how the activities and results of the projects contributed to the goals of the UCP in combating social exclusion. In keeping with the challenges described earlier in this paper, there was no effort to measure declines in social exclusion in entire neighborhoods or communities, but only among the targeted populations.

Our experience shows that switching between program- and actor-oriented theories of change during the course of an evaluation is not only possible, but recommended as a way to deal with changes in levels of complexity and uncertainty. Indeed, as reported in (Ofek, 2016), it is even possible to combine the two approaches at the same time. For example, while the Social Exclusion UCP as a whole was evaluated using actor-oriented theories of change for its first three years, a program-oriented approach was used throughout the length of the program for one project with a particularly low level of complexity. Equally, it is possible to use a program-oriented theory of change to evaluate

one or another program, while using an actor-oriented approach for a specific component. In either case, network analysis should play a role in any UCP evaluation.

7. Lessons learned: implications for research and practice

Experimental designs and SMART indicators are often perceived as the gold standard for evaluations of UCPs and other social exclusion partnerships. However, the value of these approaches can be limited in some circumstances, and particular in nonlinear, complex and dynamic environments. In such cases, the present research suggests that alternative approaches can be used to complement traditional methods. This paper offers an illustrative case study showing how theories of change from two different evaluation paradigms can be used together, utilizing various quantitative and qualitative data collection methods.

The case study presented here shows how an evaluation approach based on actor-oriented theories of change can be used as the basis for both improvement and accountability in a situation where managerial accountability demands call for either a contribution or an attribution approach (see Mayne, 2011). The observations outlined in this paper show that the actor-oriented approach can be used to define measurable objectives, and to assess progress in meeting them, despite uncertainty and complexity. As our case study shows, the evaluation served a crucial function by giving UCP actors and communities a common language and measures with which to discuss the topic and analyze progress towards agreed goals. These contributions would not have been possible using a traditional program-oriented theory of change in the first years of the evaluation because of the nonlinearity and dynamic nature of the intervention, the complex governance arrangements and the consequent difficulty of defining predetermined objectives and indicators. However, as demonstrated in this case study, as programs mature and levels of complexity decreased, it is possible to introduce a traditional program-oriented theory of change, for each project separately or for the program as a whole. This ensures that flexibility remains an overarching principle in the evaluation process, both by employing a more-flexible (actor-oriented) approach when appropriate and by reverting to a more-traditional (program-oriented) approach as and when circumstances within the program change.

As Epstein and Klerman (2012) maintain, impact analysis can follow and complement the use of theories of change, preferably in cases where programs have brought their own theories of change to fruition. This is true for both actor- and program theories of change. It means that in cases management wishes evaluators to use more traditional approaches, impact evaluation can complement actor-oriented theories of change, which may seem to some managers as "too constructivist". Such use of approaches is another way to combine methods from various paradigms, respond to a variety of intended users' preferences, and finally increase the use and influence of evaluations.

Our case study also shows that a crucial but neglected aspect of evaluating UCPs and other social exclusion partnerships is evaluation of the network itself. Treating the network as a separate unit of analysis, provides indispensable information that, in our case, helped the partners in the program overcome problems of conflicting interests and perceptions, thereby helping ensure that the various actors operated as a smoothly functioning team by the program's fourth year. As done in this case, network evaluation can be used within theories of change, both program- and actor-oriented. Including network elements in the theory of change and evaluate them using valid tools, is particularly important for evaluations of social exclusion UCPs because of lack of administrative performance measurement

systems and the genuine value of interrelations between the actors comprising the partnership.

8. Conclusion

Evaluating UCP and social exclusion interventions is a complex task which involves inherent challenges, potentially including a lack of administrative performance information combined with high levels of complexity, uncertainty and change. The theoretical overview and case study analysis provided in this paper show that management and evaluators can overcome inherent challenges associated with evaluations of UCP and other social exclusion interventions, as long as oft-neglected dimensions are systematically targeted and the evaluation approach is adapted to the needs and characteristics of the program environment (including managerial demands). Normally, such evaluations should address four units of analysis (individuals, specific communities, partners, and the network itself), which should be targeted as individual (and interdependent) actors. The case study demonstrates that this can be done effectively, combining ex-ante, process and ex-post evaluations, for both improvement and accountability requirements. In particular, the paper shows how the choice between actor- and program-oriented theories of change, or some combination of the two, can enhance the flexibility of the evaluation and adapt it to changing levels of complexity. Equally important, it shows how network analysis can be used to scrutinize interdependencies and mutual influences among program actors, thereby enabling the evaluation of causal chains and the contribution of activities to results.

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