

Government Outcomes: Are residents and the community better off?

Abstract

This paper presents research findings of an investigation into the application of performance measurement practices (PMP) for achieving public sector outcomes-based performance management (OBPM) in Queensland under its Managing for Outcomes (MFO) policy. It identifies specific principles that support a performance-based environment in which outcomes-based performance is measured. This research also investigates whether there is support for the proposed OBPM and examines the extent to which PMP is adopted. The insider mixed-method research approach provides a complementary view of what should be happening with that which is actually happening in relation to PMP in the agency selected for this research. Findings raise concerns about the degree to which OBPM and in particular PMP in the Queensland Government can change given that the reporting against performance expectation apparently remains focused on budgeting processes and securing public funds. With such a focus it seems difficult to conclude that the Queensland Government, in its current state of implementation of MFO, is in a position to know whether or not its residents or its communities are “better off” as a result of delivery of its services.

1. Introduction

Despite it being 11 years since the implementation process commenced, the Queensland public sector remains very clear about the importance of an outcomes-focused approach to the management and accountability of government. It represents a significant change to the way government programs are managed. Historically, the public sector relied heavily on rules and procedures to control organisations. Now, more attention is paid to the way government programs are meeting objectives and less to carrying out activities and implementing processes. Government agencies are required to establish strategic objectives and determine the outputs needed to ensure government outcomes are met. The effective application of performance measurement practices (PMP) is critical for achieving an outcomes-focus for the Queensland Government as it attempts to track the cause and effect between an agency's outputs and its ultimate impact on the Queensland community and its residents. With a focus on performance, the Queensland Government's *Managing for Outcomes* (MFO) policy aims to improve the efficiency, effectiveness and accountability of government service delivery.

This paper presents research findings of an investigation into the application of PMP for achieving public sector outcomes-based performance management (OBPM) in Queensland under its MFO policy. A conceptual framework was developed for implementing the MFO policy within the Queensland public sector environment to which PMP may be applied. The underlying PMP were examined and specific principles were developed that drive a performance-based environment in which outcomes-based performance is measured. This paper also presents findings from an investigation as to whether there is support within the Queensland Government agency selected for this research for the theoretical principles developed. The extent to which the PMP proposed in this research are adopted and applied by the case study agency in order to achieve the objectives of the MFO policy is also presented.

This study makes two major contributions to the PMP literature. The first contribution stems from the fact that the insider researcher has knowledge of Queensland public sector's everyday life; the everyday jargon; and is able to see beyond the objectives that are merely window dressing. This insider researcher approach contributes to the literature by affirming its theoretical academic value within the different research methods. It contributes to the literature by recognising the subtlety and critical potential of a 'practical' agenda in research. Secondly, the research provides normative statements of what should be happening with a positivism approach on that which is actually happening in relation to PMP in the agency selected for this research. The research contributes to the literature by its assessment of a complex subject material that calls for creative solutions to common problems. Studies of such reforms have tended to fall into two camps: the pessimistic literature and the more optimistic literature (Moynihan, 2005: 214). Pessimistic literature suggests little or no success (Wildavsky, 1992; Radin, 2000; Downs, & Larkey, 1986; each in Moynihan, 2005). More optimistic literature cites the possibility of success from case studies and an appealing theory of how the public sector can become more results focused (Aristigueta, 1999 in Moynihan, 2005). This research contributes to the more pessimistic literature by delving into the differences between the intended-PMP and the PMP-in-use and how this has had limited success in the adoption of OBPM by the case study agency. This research, however, also contributes to the optimistic literature as it provides opportunities for practitioners to adopt sound theoretical principles in successfully implementing OBPM.

The remainder of this paper is organised in six sections. The next section provides an overview of the literature on OBPM and in particular PMP in public sector organisations. Section 3 provides the theoretical propositions. Section 4 discusses the research methodology; while the fifth section provides the results and discussions of the study followed by the conclusion.

2. Related Literature - OBPM

A concentration on outcomes is a central element in public sector OBPM (Wholey & Hatry, 1992; Wholey, 1999; Caudle, 2001). The public sector has become increasingly interested in a performance management framework as a systematic way of representing and communicating strategy, and as a means of providing a way of communicating their priorities to important stakeholder groups, such as the community and clients (Atkinson & Epstein, 2000: p 27). It is well recognised that the traditional approaches of simply increasing the level of resources for public sector agencies have been unsuccessful in finding better ways of achieving more effectiveness from their service delivery (Willoughby & Melkers, 2000; Andrews, 2004). It is suggested that an increased focus on outcomes enables agencies to determine the effectiveness of government programs in meeting community needs and to find ways to improve public sector service delivery. Such a focus improves community confidence in the capability of the government (Caudle, 2001: p 77).

The OBPM process is commonly described as a comprehensive and integrative planning, budgeting and performance management approach that includes the following key elements (Queensland Treasury, 1998: p 5):

- identifying outcomes that the Government desires for its communities and citizens;
- setting clear strategic direction and objectives;
- resourcing and deciding on appropriate delivery options that support expected performance including an integrated budgeting process;
- monitoring operations and measuring results; and
- analysing, reporting, and obtaining feedback on outcomes.

The planning process of an agency, which involves the gathering of information about the “big picture”, establishes a long-term direction for the agency. That direction is then translated into specific goals, objectives and actions. While the need to draw strong links between performance measurement and strategic direction setting is paramount, the performance management process is incomplete without its integration with resourcing, monitoring and evaluation processes. Evaluation is important because it provides feedback on the efficiency, effectiveness and performance of public sector agencies and the implementation of public policy. It completes the performance management cycle. Feedback received from evaluation leads to improvements, expansions or replacements of government programs. “In essence, it contributes to accountable governance” (OECD, 1999: p 413).

The adoption of an outcomes-based approach to managing government services requires public sector agencies to define “what they intend to accomplish, measure performance for, and report on, and use the information for decision making and strengthening accountability” (Caudle, 2001: p 77). The core idea of OBPM is “to use performance information to increase performance by holding [agencies] accountable for clearly specified goals and providing them with adequate authority to achieve these goals” (Moynihan, 2006: p 78).

To do this, government decisions and controls must focus on outputs and outcomes rather than on inputs and procedures (Wholey & Hatry, 1992; Schick, 1999; Wholey, 1999; Mwita, 2000; Behn, 2003; Modell, 2005). Each of these elements depends on one another and they are not simply “a menu of independent prescriptions” (Moynihan, 2006: p 79). It is the disclosure of outcome data that enhances

public accountability – “the end we seek is not *better service* but *better results*” (Friedman, 1996: p 5). This distinction enhances the performance management process because it contributes to a clearer thinking about what government is to achieve and assists in the selection of appropriate strategies to get there. To assist and guide the performance management regime in public organisations, a number of questions must be considered (Bolton, 2003: p 22). Such questions include the following:

- How well does the agency fulfill its mission? How does the agency know that its mission is fulfilled?
- How effective is the agency in supporting that mission?
- How does its performance compare to that of other agencies/jurisdictions? How does it compare to that of the best organisation?

While these questions may guide public sector agencies in establishing a performance management regime, Bolton suggests that the first of these questions is the most difficult for public sector agencies to answer. It requires an assessment of the nature of the agency’s goals: are the goals realistic, challenging, and clearly aligned with the mission and are targets appropriately set, achievable and measurable? As Stinchcomb (2001) notes, if the mission is not well articulated and the pathway to achieving it not clearly outlined, it is impossible to determine why the agency’s program produced certain outcomes nor why the outcomes were not achieved. “Accountability is unattainable without clear specification of how the program’s activities or intervention are expected to achieve the program goals” (Solomon, 2002: p 392).

The implication, therefore, is that strategic planning is the initial component of performance management and it requires “a disciplined effort to produce fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organisation is, what it does, and why it does it” (Bryson 1995: p 5). Strategic planning by agencies is the main linking mechanism between the agency’s actions and the statewide goals (Moynihan, 2005: p 218).

While various jurisdictions publish their own guidance material for agencies (OMB, 1995; GAO, 1996; Queensland Treasury, 1997; SSC, 2002; Campbell Public Affairs Institute, 2002; DBM, 2002; Treasury Board of Canada, 2006), a review of these suggests that the fundamental steps they recommend are similar. However, despite this guidance, difficulties continue to emerge. Andrews, Boyne, & Walker (2006: p 52) suggests that such crises arise from a lack of attention to the issue of performance and from a lack of relevant data. Problems in agencies often begin with their missions: in many cases, agencies are assigned multiple missions leaving them confused (Laurent, 2001: p 10; Henrich, 2002: p 714)

While it is argued that the relationship between agencies’ activities, outputs and the Government’s desired outcomes can be complex and challenging, the achievement of outcomes should be the primary purpose for which an output is delivered and an activity is undertaken. At a broad conceptual level it does not appear difficult to select outcome categories. Most people, for example, want children to grow up in stable and safe family homes and be able to function as productive members of the community. While agreement is more easily reached at the general level of the desires of the citizens of a community, as the process of defining outcomes becomes more specific, the concerns of particular audiences differ. It is suggested that since agencies have multiple stakeholders with multiple goals, hence multiple accountabilities, a considerable element of judgment or implicit bargaining between conflicting interests inhibits the ability to identify and measure outcomes adequately (Smith, 1995: p 14-15). Thus there remains uncertainty as to what outcomes the agency is trying to contribute towards in the first place (Gianakis, 1996).

The long range nature of many government programs and the time-lag before outcomes become observable often means that agencies are less inclined to shift their focus away from activities and towards outcomes (Boland & Fowler, 2000; Greiner, 1996). The fact also that the task of identifying and measuring outcomes is time-consuming (Campbell, 2002) is further exacerbated by the apparent difficulty in isolating the effects of operations when services are produced jointly with other organisations (Bolton, 2003). The influence of random factors, such as unexpected natural disasters or unexpected challenges within a community that impinge on the timely achievement of outcomes also adds to these difficulties. The existence of these difficulties may make it easy for management to identify a number of possible reasons for not fulfilling its goals (Pitsvada & LoStracco, 2002). The pressure to bear on agencies from these issues often render the very meaning of outcomes and effectiveness potentially changeable and elusive (Smith, 1995; Wang & Berman, 2001) and while it is argued that the adoption and use of outcome indicators can be a useful approach for realising publicly-valued goals, the specification of these in practice is often rare rather than routine (Campbell, 2002).

These commentaries are also supported by empirical evidence which suggests that significant instabilities exist in the way OBPM has been adopted in the public sector (Carlin & Guthrie, 2001; Laurent, 2001; Sample & Tipple, 2001; Campbell, 2002; Gianakis, 2002; Moynihan & Ingraham, 2003; Moynihan, 2006). For example, Carlin & Guthrie (2001) highlight problems in the reporting of non-financial performance indicators in the Victorian budget papers; Campbell (2002) questions the practical utility of outcomes assessment and the degree to which it is taken seriously in the decisions of funders; while Radin (2000) suggests that the OBPM rhetoric has caused it to collide with institutional and political constraints. Additionally, these findings are supported by reports submitted by various public sector authorities. For example, in reviewing the status of OBPM practices, it is reported that the outcome statements used by government are often “too broad and far reaching” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002: p 42); while “most of the stated objectives that were reported by agencies were expressed in such vague terms as to be of little use managerially and of little use to report actual outcomes against” (State of Victoria, 1999: p 49).

In the end, there is the risk that OBPM becomes more rhetoric than a reality (Gianakis, 1996; Carlin & Guthrie, 2001; Moynihan, 2005). This observation is not new: Wildavsky (1966: p 303) notes that “political realities lie behind the failure to devise principles for defining programs”. Hence, given the reported technical problems associated with specifying outcomes and objectives, along with the claimed risks of dysfunctional effects associated with reporting on outcome achievements, performance comparisons solely or predominately based on such measures are unlikely to facilitate the quest for managerial accountability (Henrich, 2002). Consequently, the result is likely to be agencies measuring the wrong things and/or failing to measure what is important (Friedman, 2001).

Despite these difficulties there remains a continued interest for the public sector to move beyond the provision of services to the development of programs that target specific outcomes that benefit the community (Ellis, Braff & Hutchinson, 2001). Justification for government programs has become essential for credibility and depends on a sound programming process that clearly establishes a link between theory, the program model and subsequent changes in participating target groups (McKensie & Smeltzer, 1997). When agencies are faced with societal issues or problems that require some public sector intervention, often the issues or problems faced require an approach that centres on making changes to the conditions of the community and/or behaviour of targeted residents. A failure to articulate how programs contribute to these changes means that many programs are dominated by short-term, unstructured activities that do not focus on behavioural changes. In this context an

outcomes-based approach to public sector management should involve answering three basic questions: what to change, what to change to, and how to cause the change (Goldratt, 1990).

The question begs, therefore:

“What approach should public sector agencies adopt to clearly establish a link between the strategic direction of the agency and its programs such that it can explain that it is contributing to the Government’s desired outcomes and to the desired changes in conditions of the community and its residents?”

3. Theoretical Proposition

The study proposed an approach that enables agencies to articulate a plausible and logical explanation of how the outputs of its program aim to produce desired outcomes for the community and its residents. The proposed approach involves describing the performance “story” (Behn, 2004) that leads to achievement of desired government outcomes and establishing a logical hierarchy of the means by which the agency’s strategic objectives will be reached and outcomes achieved (Wholey, 1987; Behn, 2003).

The proposition is that an agency’s performance story is best described by:

- i. cascading government desired outcomes through linking the agency’s strategic objectives to a series of shorter term and intermediate term outcomes expected as a result of delivering the agency’s outputs;
- ii. linking the agency’s outputs to this set of shorter term outcomes through the development of strategies; and
- iii. linking the agency’s outputs to activities and resources through statements of purpose.

This full process is depicted in Figure 1.

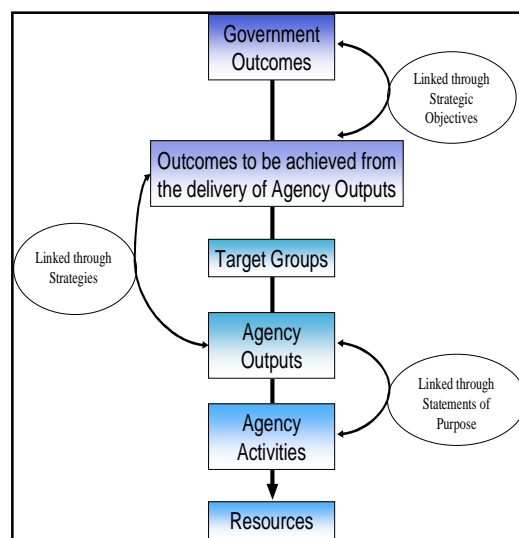


Figure 1 - OBPM Linking Process

In the first place, developing statements of strategic objectives involves describing the strategic direction of the agency. It provides a top-level overview of the agency. Through planning processes, agencies should be clear about the nature of the desired changes in the community and target groups over which it has most direct influence as a result of their service delivery and how this direction statement contributes toward the achievement of government's desired outcomes. Working from these strategic objectives, the agency determines strategies that are designed to drive these strategic objectives. These strategies delineate the changes that need to occur, and also point toward the accompanying outputs and services make a program more effective. Reaching the agency's strategic objectives is dependent on ensuring a focus on strategy and the rationale behind government programs.

This initial process relies on following a logical sequence that clarifies how the agency's strategic objectives and its strategies should drive its programs. Specific outputs and services should fit together such that they are likely to produce the desired outcomes (Chen & Rossi, 1983; Hernandez, 2000; Rossi & Freeman, 1993). Linking these elements logically assists in establishing a common ground for discussion and understanding, thereby forming the basis for assigning responsibility for achieving government's desired outcomes. This process should reduce the risks associated with programs lacking specificity in the selection of possible outcomes. It should also reduce the risks to the agency in using broad and vague objectives for its interventions and programs, which make it difficult to assess whether specific program objectives have been achieved (Baldwin, 2000: p 19). Additionally, this enhanced linking process provides "a paradigm to systematically explain the relationship between theoretical premise, program intervention, immediate and long-term outcomes, and provides a logical explanation of the logic flow from program activities to the anticipated short and long-term impact of the intervention" (Cato, 2006, p 18).

Developing this OBPM model is best achieved by adopting elements of what is referred to as program theory (Patton, 1990) and which is grounded in theories of change (Weiss, 1998; Connell & Kubisch, 1998; W.F. Kellogg, 2001; Anderson, 2005). A theory of change approach assists in explaining how an agency's program aims to produce changes in the conditions of its targeted population group (Hernandez, Hodges, & Cascardi, 1998; McLaughlin & Jordan, 1999). Weiss (1998) defines a theory of change as an explanation of the causal links that tie a program activity to expected outcomes.

Two integrated techniques are considered useful in developing an OBPM model:

1. **Change maps** which translate the agency's strategic objectives into a set of sequential outcomes that lead to the government's desired long-term outcomes. Change maps enable the clear articulation of intermediate and short-term outcomes that support the achievement of higher level desired outcomes. In developing change maps it is the agency's strategies that produce short and intermediate outcomes which are considered to contribute to longer-term community change. In this sense, it is the strategies of the programs that can be thought of as short term outcomes that are related by evidence (theoretical or empirical) to desired community-level change. This concept is referred to as a "chain" of outcomes (Julian, 2005: p 162). Change maps are considered to be the essential front end of the OBPM process.
2. **Logic models** which map the agency's resources and activities to its outputs and ultimately to the set of sequential outcomes. This is done by clearly identifying the purposes for undertaking activities.

These two techniques operate at various levels of the theory of change approach: the change map operates at the macro level; while the logic model operates at the level of the particular program or service. While they operate at various levels it is important that they are linked hierarchically to ensure that consistency of purpose and strategy across levels can be achieved (McLaughlin & Jordan, 1999). The use of these two techniques creates a picture or visual presentation of how an intervention works. Together they depict an intervention in terms of its basic components and represents how and why an intervention is theorised to work (W.K.Kellogg Foundation, 2001: p III).

This paper focuses on the macro level and the application of change maps to assist agencies in articulating how they contribute to government outcomes. Clearly at the macro level this process is not without its challenges. Ellermann, Kataoka-Yahiro & Wong, (2006: p 220) suggests that it requires dialogue, context, time and reflection. It typically involves a thinking process (Hernandez, 2000; Friedman, 2001, Ellermann, Kataoka-Yahiro & Wong, 2006) that begins with a description of the intermediate outcomes expected from the agency's program and then move across a series of shorter-term outcomes, and strategies to create a map, in the first place, of the program (Brown, 1995 in Hernandez, 2000: p 32).

While the outcomes orientation is an important development in government agencies, there is little doubt that the implementation is a difficult endeavour. The range of issues and concerns is immense including the questions, what is an outcome and what outcomes are important? Managers and employees within an agency who have the expertise to move from outcome definition to outcome measurement need to negotiate with broader stakeholders on which outcomes are the most important for the agency. It is the final statements of important outcomes (including short term and intermediate outcomes) that the agency is expected to contribute toward. This engagement and negotiation process is not always comfortable: differences in opinion are likely to emerge (Blamey & Mackenzie, 2002: p 9). Often discussions become difficult as the agency, through engagement with the community in particular, may expose itself to negative feedback (Poertner, McDonald, & Murray, 2000: p 804). It is often the case that the concerns of planners, researchers and practitioners are quite different. For example, it can be argued that in many cases, practitioners are not overly concerned with attributing cause to a particular activity, at least in a theoretical sense. On the other hand, trying to rule out alternative explanations for observed effects is a preoccupation of researchers. It is not surprising, therefore, that the dialogue carries with it the passion of its participants. It is suggested, however, that behind the specifics of these discussions are fundamental questions about the desired outcomes to which the agency should contribute (Julian, 1997: p 251-257). These specifics often indicate a continuum of issues ranging from pure program theory to practice. Through this dialogue, however, it may be argued that theory and practice can be complementary (Price & Behrens, 2003 in Wandersman, 2003: p 227-42).

There can be no doubt that the development of relevant outcome performance indicators is dependent on the clear definition of these outcomes. This, however, is not without difficulties. For example, issues are raised concerning the degree to which many change maps are testable. This is particularly the case in terms of efforts to identify possible quantifiable measures and in relation to specifying the magnitude of change expected (Blamey & Mackenzie, 2002). However, it is generally considered that outcome measurement makes no substantive claims about the impact of services (Hatry et al, 1996: p 21-22). It makes no attempt to measure the difference between what happened and what would have happened in the absence of services. Consequently, most data simply document that changes, positive or negative, occurred in the conditions of the community or the lives of residents. Such changes, however, are

commonly determined, at the highest level of the change map, in terms of movement in key social, economic or environmental indicators representing specific problems.

This tendency to collect data at the higher level only does not enable measurement of how short term or intermediate outcomes are achieved by the agency. Unless “there is a clear conceptual model at the beginning for short-term results and long-term outcomes, then baseline indicators cannot be selected and measured, and measurement in general will be error prone and ineffective” (Alter & Murty, 1997: p 104). Thus a hierarchical arrangement of indicators should enable an assessment of the intended outcomes expected from the delivery of agency outputs, and the linkage between these outcomes and the long-term outcomes desired by Government.

At the lower levels of the indicator hierarchy this requires the development of measures of effectiveness. Measuring effect is critical in providing a clear linkage to the outcomes of the program on the community and how the agency’s programs contribute toward these outcomes. Effectiveness is concerned with the extent to which outputs meet societal needs (Boland & Fowler, 2000: p 417-446). Measures of effect show whether the agency’s clients are better off as a consequence of receiving the services and gauge the effect of the service on the lives of citizens. Measures of effect focus on changes in skills, attitude, behaviour and/or circumstance (Friedman, 2001) and require consideration of questions such as:

- Is the community better off as a result of the agency’s programs?
- What is the extent of change for the better that the agency’s outputs produced?

These questions may then become more specific in terms of:

- Did the skills of clients within particular target groups improve?
- Did the attitude of clients within particular target groups change for the better?
- Did the client’s behaviour change for the better?
- Has the client’s life circumstance improved in some demonstrable way?

The common complaint of PMP in the public sector, however, is that efforts to measure performance have largely focused on process rather than outcome. Such an approach has limited value because they do not inform whether objectives have been attained (Boland & Fowler, 2000). What should matter to government is the end focus which should be what Government has achieved, that is the outcome. Measuring how Government goes about achieving it, that is, the process should not be the focus (Pitsvada & LoStracco, 2002: p 65).

Hence, the theoretical proposition highlights that in the first place government programs require the definition and quantification of outcomes. The definition of outcomes is best achieved through adopting a theory of change approach in developing change maps that depicts the clear intermediate and short term outcomes expected from the delivery of services and that contribute toward achievement of high level outcomes desired by Government. Outcome indicators should seek to answer “Was the community and its residents better off as a result of the delivery of the government program?”

Despite agencies receiving advice on developing performance indicators (Queensland Treasury, 1997; SSC, 2002; Campbell Public Affairs Institute, 2002; DBM, 2002; Treasury Board of Canada, 2006), several empirical studies have reported findings that demonstrate that in general Government continues to

remain focussed on resource expenditures and the quantity of services that have been delivered. Several studies find that few governments focus on the quality and outcomes of their programs (Wholey & Hatry, 1992; Gianakis, 1996; Atkinson, Waterhouse & Wells, 1997; Foltin, 1999; Rochet, 2004; QAO, 2005b); while others report a continued focus on resource expenditures (Gianakis, 1996; Greiner, 1996; Carlin & Guthrie, 2001; Melkers, et al, 2002).

The question therefore begs:

“Is there support for these theoretical propositions in the Queensland public sector?” And if so, “To what extent are these proposed PMP adopted and applied by the case study agency selected for this research?”

4. Research Methodology

In contrast to research that is conducted by researchers who might temporarily join the organisation for the purposes and duration of the research (Adler & Adler, 1987), this study adopted an insider research approach. It drew on the insights of the researcher, as a senior officer employed within the Queensland public sector, to obtain rich data and through careful judgement, “articulate(s) tacit knowledge that has become deeply segmented because of socialisation in an organisational system and reframes it as theoretical knowledge” of what really goes on in the agency selected for this research (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007: 60). To limit the risk of being criticised of “going native” (Morse, 1998) and therefore losing objectivity (Rooney, 2005; Alvesson, 2003), a mixed method approach (Flick, 1998) was used to ensure the standards of academic rigour.

The proposition developed sets out the expected findings from this research. The data collection and analysis was then structured in order to not only determine support for the theoretical principle developed but also to determine the extent to which PMP is adopted in the Queensland Government agency selected for this research. To conduct this investigation, a combination of briefings, consultations and feedback with a critical group of practitioners, document analysis, and case study interviews were used.

A critical group of practitioners was used to co-create knowledge in the development of the theoretical principle. “Professions are characterised by the sophistication of their practitioners’ knowledge, understanding and skills We also see critical friendship as a potential strategy for enhancing research” (Golby & Appleby, 1995: p 149-150). Membership to the group was assessed on the basis of individuals “working knowledge” of the professional areas of performance reporting, performance measurement, strategic planning, corporate reporting, or performance evaluation within a Queensland government agency. It was important that members were representative of the various types of government agencies. Hence the process focussed on ensuring representation of agencies with social, economic and environmental foci. It was also necessary that membership of this group include employees from central agencies that act as custodians for the Queensland Government’s performance management framework. Central agencies provide a leadership role to the agencies for the implementation of MFO. They also are responsible for advancing government policy priorities.

The group was also invited to provide feedback in creating the interview questions that are succinct and acceptable to the agencies. This provided an extra layer of expertise and perspective that would otherwise be missing from the use of only one research method.

The strength in utilizing this group lies in the co-operative style of inquiry. The researcher held briefings, consultations and feedback sessions with the group to develop the theoretical principle. This was achieved through a series of iterations (Reason, 1999) and provided the researcher with the opportunity to acquire “understanding in use” rather than “reconstituted understanding” (Meehan & Coghlan, 2004: 412). The critical group of practitioners was an invaluable source of information on “what should be done” by agencies in implementing MFO.

Documentation was analysed for the purposes of gaining knowledge of the Queensland Government’s MFO policy and the PMP-in-use at the agency selected for this research. This was considered a useful method of gathering data about policy and practice; of providing an objective and historical source of data for a research study (Robson et al., 2001); and of corroborating evidence from other sources and specifying issues in greater detail than available through other data gathering methods (Burns, 2000: p 467). These documents, however, may only partially reflect reality: they may tell the researcher only what should be done, not whether it is actually done (Robson et al., 2001: p 71).

In addition to analysing policy statements and guidelines published by central agencies along with relevant legislation, information was gathered from relevant documentation pertaining to the performance of the agency selected for this research (AGENCY). AGENCY is required by legislation¹ to ensure that it communicates performance against the objectives identified in its Strategic Plan. AGENCY is also required to document its planned and estimated actual output performance in its Ministerial Portfolio Statement (MPS), which is presented to Parliament as part of the annual budget process. Consequently, documents reviewed in the first instance included the Strategic Plan and the MPS. AGENCY’s key strategic documents were also reviewed in light of the Queensland Government’s policy for MFO. The researcher was concerned with the level of consistency between AGENCY’s adoption of MFO and the Queensland Government’s MFO policy statements.

The document analysis assisted in determining the degree to which performance information is consistently communicated throughout all documents and the degree to which gaps exist in performance information and/or the “performance story” (McLaughlin & Jordan, 1999).

The case study was used to examine the extent to which the proposed PMP is adopted and applied by the Queensland Government agency selected for this research. Hence, case study design incorporated the theoretical principle developed which informs the nature of PMP that should be applied. A protocol was established for the case study and interviews, detailing the tasks, instruments and procedures that would guide the collection and analysis of data (Perry, 1998, Nieto & Perez, 2000). This structured approach provided an action plan for getting from the research problem to the research conclusions and provided a basis for structuring data collection and analysis (Rowley, 2002: p 17).

The Case Study Agency:

The research involved one Queensland Government agency (AGENCY) from which selected participants from two work units (BUNIT and CENTRAL) were invited to participate.

¹ Financial Administration and Audit Act 1977, Section 95

AGENCY plays a role in supporting the key Queensland Government outcomes of *a community of well-skilled and knowledgeable people; a diverse economy; and a fair and socially cohesive community*. The output that it delivers aims to boost the social and economic capacity of individuals and communities within the State. AGENCY's network of service delivery centres (SDC), of which BUNIT is one, provides approximately 270,000 clients each year with publicly-funded programs. With funding of approximately \$540 million for the delivery of its services in the financial year 2006-07, AGENCY employs approximately 7,000 employees to assist individuals who may face barriers to social and economical participation in the community.

AGENCY has structured its organisation along the purchaser-provider model². CENTRAL, in the role of purchaser, manages the funding of AGENCY by entering into contracts with both public and private providers that specify the programs that can be delivered, the maximum level of funding that will be paid and the services that these providers are to provide during the contract period. Funding, which is received from both Commonwealth and State sources, is distributed to providers on the basis on an established price structure. CENTRAL negotiates with each of the fifteen SDCs to provide programs in geographical locations that are not well serviced by the private providers. SDCs operate as semi-autonomous SDCs located throughout the State of Queensland. Approximately \$350 million is distributed to these centres, of which BUNIT is one, to provide these services. CENTRAL is also responsible for the monitoring and reporting of performance of AGENCY's network of SDCs to the central agencies.

BUNIT, one of the largest SDCs in AGENCY's network, delivers approximately 6.5 million hours of service across six locations and to more than 30,000 clients. With State funds of approximately \$42 million, BUNIT offers services including programs to assist those with a disability; indigenous programs; and support for clients from non-English speaking backgrounds. BUNIT receives approximately 75% of its funding from CENTRAL. The remainder of its funding is self-sourced through competitive tendering arrangements for the delivery of some of its programs as well as for self-generated commercial activities.

The organisational characteristics of selected participants are broad, "providing perspectives from different levels in the corporate hierarchy; from different functional areas, and from different production settings" (Anderson, 1995: p 10-13). However, this research is relevant to a limited number of functional areas within CENTRAL, namely, Performance Monitoring and Reporting Branch, which is responsible for the collation and reporting of performance information, and the Resourcing Branch, which is responsible for managing the distribution of funds to the SDCs. Directors and managers from different operational areas of BUNIT, along with employees from corporate and finance sections permitted differing perspectives from across BUNIT's organisational structure. While the number of participants is small in total at 12, the employees identified for this research were drawn from different functional areas and from different production settings.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 12 participants from BUNIT and CENTRAL. Using an interview guide, participants were asked for their opinions on various aspects of OBPM, in particular

² Purchaser-provider model involves the reorganisation of public service activities into different organisations or business units to create the discrete purchasers and providers of services on offer in a quasi market environment. This reorganisation separates the purchasing, policy making and regulatory functions of government agencies from the provision of goods/services producing a clear delineation between the functions of policy development and policy implementation.

performance measurement, so as to determine the support or otherwise for the theoretical principle developed in this research.

The interviews elicited information as to the contribution to Government outcomes of their work: how they might identify whether particular clients are “better off” as a result of receiving services from AGENCY; whether their work unit collects information that might help inform it about whether or not it is achieving these outcomes. Information was also elicited as to whether interviewees thought it was important to develop a ‘chain of results’ for developing a series of outcomes; whether they thought a hierarchy of indicators should be used that somehow are logically linked; and how the work unit goes about deciding on which indicators to use.

5. Results and Discussion

Evidence in Support of Theoretical Principles

Briefings, consultations and feedback with the critical group of practitioners resulted in support for the theoretical principle with the following comments provided.

These discussions provided some reinforcement of where the Government has been leading our performance agenda to improve our service delivery processes and outcomes for the community.

I was very impressed with the simple yet forthright approach to Performance Management.

I believe there is now a momentum developing in the Queensland public sector to progress this approach to performance management. This is a huge achievement.

Members of this group agreed that the theoretical principle describes well the conceptual framework underpinning the MFO policy. Members of this group displayed a genuine interest in the public sector moving beyond the provision of services to the development of programs that target specific outcomes that benefit the community. Support for this principle is given because it clearly enables agencies to determine why their program did or did not produce certain outcomes or why the government outcomes were not achieved.

Analysis of documentation produced by central agencies provided evidence as to whether there is support for the use of techniques such as change maps to describe performance expectations. Examination of documents relating to the implementation of MFO indicates clearly the need for agencies to map outputs to outcomes (Queensland Treasury, 2003). Policy documents highlight that while it is recognised that the process of linking of outputs to outcomes is challenging, the cause and effect between an output or action and its ultimate impact or outcome is difficult to track without a clear mapping process (p 1). While these key policy documents do not provide step-by-step procedures for undertaking this mapping process, recommendations specify a “need to illustrate how the hierarchical arrangement of indicators provides evidence of the impact of outputs on outcomes” (Queensland Treasury, 2003: p 1 - 2).

While published documentation does not illustrate the use of the proposed linking process, guidance for this is found in seminar papers from information sessions conducted by Queensland Treasury. For example, the advice provided is to link agency outputs to the results expected from the delivery of these outputs and then ultimately to Government outcomes. This implies the use of techniques such as

change maps. Agencies are advised to describe their performance in terms of the following questions: What was invested? What was done? How well was it done? Was anyone better off? What changes occurred in the community and how did this contribute towards Government outcomes?

This information provided the strongest evidence of consistency with the theoretical principle proposed. Further analysis of documentation identified established specifications for the development of performance measures by government agencies. With respect to outcome indicators, it is recognised by central agencies that since accountability for outcomes would be shared amongst several agencies, outcome indicator information supplied by agencies is to be coordinated by central agencies to enable analysis of outcome trends over time. These indicators are published annually by the Government in its *Priorities in Progress Report* (PIP). Agencies are responsible for reporting annually in their MPS against performance targets specified for its outputs (Queensland Treasury, 1998: p 1). There is no legislative requirement for agencies to report at a level lower than output, such as activities. Thus outcomes along with outcome indicators are reserved for reporting at a whole-of-Government level, while outputs and output measures are reported in agencies' annual budget documents. What is unclear, however, is how the information contained in these two documents is linked. Outcomes and outcome indicators reported in the PIP are typically reported at a high level, while measures reported in the MPS focus on output information.

This leads to a potential weakness: developing and reporting performance information in order to meet the legislative requirements associated with the State's budgeting process and to ensure the central reporting on progress in achieving Government long term outcomes. From this perspective, support for the theoretical principle is, at best, implied. While documentation suggests that agencies should develop indicators suitable for communicating their contribution both in the short and intermediate terms to the Government's desired outcomes and suitable for assessing the success of outputs in contributing toward these desired outcomes, there is an apparent lack of clarity on how agencies might do this.

Evidence of Extent of Adoption of Proposed OBPM

The starting point for the examination of AGENCY's approach to implementing OBPM was to determine whether AGENCY has identified in the first place, the key Government outcome/s to which it contributes and secondly, whether AGENCY's strategic objectives are clearly defined as it is these that primarily determine what AGENCY aims to achieve and what provides a link between short term and intermediate impacts and government long term outcomes. This information was gleaned from AGENCY's key strategic document, namely the 2005 – 2009 Strategic Plan.

This information was inserted into a simplified OBPM model (as proposed in Figure 1) to determine the degree to which gaps exist in the "performance story" (McLaughlin & Jordan, 1999) being communicated by AGENCY. This is depicted in Figure 2.

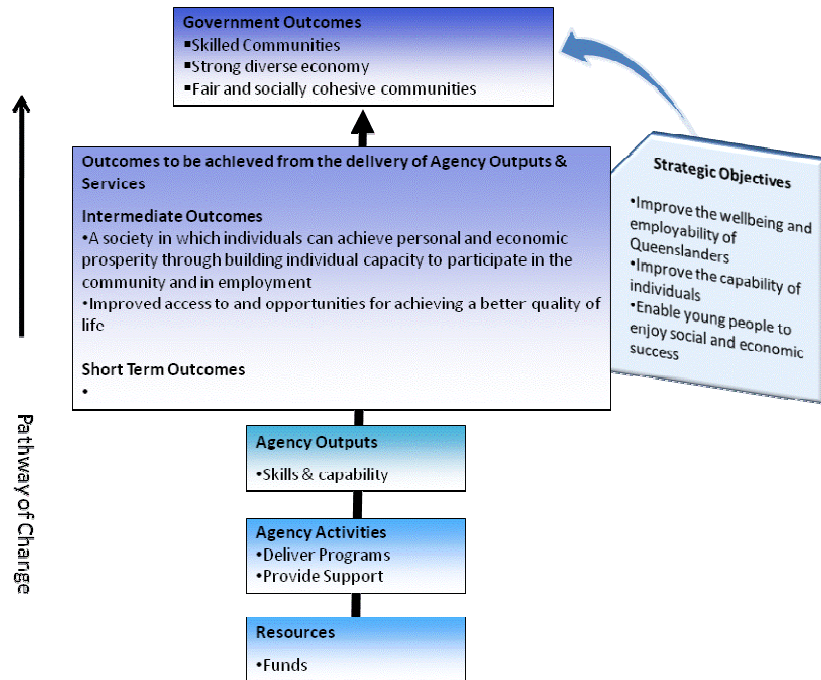


Figure 2: AGENCY simplified OBPM model

Upon inspection of this model the pathway described by AGENCY to achieve long term outcomes is not clearly outlined. For example, it takes a great leap of faith to see how the output of AGENCY, namely “Skills and Capabilities”, leads to “individuals achieving personal and economic prosperity or improved opportunities for achieving a better quality of life”. Furthermore, strategic objectives as described by AGENCY are somewhat vague. For example, “to enjoy social and economic success” is seemingly a nebulous, although aspirational, statement that may be subject to varying interpretations by readers of the document. The objectives seemingly provide limited information about the specific changes in clients’ skills, behaviours, or life circumstances that might be required in order to achieve “personal and economic prosperity”.

This suggests that a reader would find it quite difficult to find a common ground for discussion and understanding of AGENCY’s programs for achieving government’s desired outcomes. This difficulty is largely because the described pathway of change and strategic objectives lack specificity. The result is a significant gap in performance information.

Views were sought from case study participants from the two work units of AGENCY, namely BUNIT and CENTRAL in regard to their understanding of how their work contributes to the achievement of outcomes. Responses from the different levels of management varied. For example, descriptions of outcomes by CENTRAL managers were generally vague, while operational managers from BUNIT focussed largely on outputs with little consideration of the outcomes expected from the delivery of these outputs.

Responses from BUNIT managers were typically,

“The main outcomes are those of the government, their initiatives and their agenda. From my point of view that is client hours and budget”.

The closest that BUNIT managers came to describing outcomes came in the form of very vague comments such as

“Ensuring programs meet community requirements”.

CENTRAL managers typically described the desired outcomes as:

“Providing skills of relevance to clients and the community so as to address forms of disadvantage”;

“The major ones are within the realm of disadvantage faced by the client such as social and life skills or circumstances that may prevent them from gaining employment. We provide them with skills that are relevant to them and to their community and we manage that within our investment strategy”;

“Our outcome is to address some of those client disadvantages and barriers”.

At a broad conceptual level, it is reasonable to expect interviewees to have little difficulty in identifying outcomes. As expected, for most managers at CENTRAL it appeared relatively easy for them to describe outcomes at a general level or to explain the desires of the citizens of a community in broad terms. These initial responses suggest that while these managers appeared more confident in defining outcomes, in all cases CENTRAL managers referred only to the long range nature of outcomes of AGENCY’s programs. It is apparent from responses from BUNIT managers that their focus is largely centered on operational aspects of the agency’s service delivery with limited concern for the outcomes to be achieved.

To probe for deeper understandings of the outcomes of AGENCY, interviewees were asked how they might identify whether particular clients are “better off” as a result of receiving services from AGENCY. The purpose of this question was to elicit responses that might describe the changes in behaviours, skills or attitudes expected from clients as a result of receiving services. Hence, interviewees were asked to describe what “better off” would look like.

Responses from operational managers at BUNIT are typified as:

“I guess we would know if they were better off if they were happy with the service and they were a returned customer. I’d guess they would be better off if there was better management of the product”.

A manager from CENTRAL who is at the same level as those from BUNIT responded:

“By looking at successful clients as if they attained completions in the program, and in each part of the program. We look at the level of their completion and match that with what the community requires”.

Responses from more senior managers were more purposive. For example, one senior manager from BUNIT responded:

"What I would describe better off for our clients would be the impact that it has on their [circumstances]: Positive impact and personal impacts on their life. With our individual clients that would be their individual skills, their jobs, their skills and knowledge"

Senior managers from CENTRAL typically described "better off" as:

"[The] impact on the level of disadvantage; the impact of reported dysfunctions that get reported in different communities; the level of satisfaction of key stakeholders"

These responses suggest that CENTRAL experiences some difficulty in drawing clearer links between the services delivered by BUNIT and the incremental outcomes expected to be achieved by delivering these services. Operational managers at BUNIT, on the other hand, generally experience difficulty in "seeing" beyond what services they delivered to their clients. The concept of outcomes appears to have little or no relevance to BUNIT. While senior managers at BUNIT demonstrated a more purposive understanding of what "better off" might look like, when compared with their operational counterparts, their descriptions lacked specificity.

In short, interviews failed to gain more detailed descriptions of shorter term outcomes in terms of the behaviours, skills or attitudes that they would expect to change for the client as a result of receiving AGENCY's services. With a focus on the long range outcomes the very meaning of outcomes is rendered elusive. It is reasonable to expect, therefore, that such elusiveness would see managers from both CENTRAL and BUNIT being less inclined to shift their focus away from outputs and towards outcomes (Boland & Fowler, 2000; Greiner, 1996 in Halachmi & Bouckaert, 1996).

The adoption of techniques such as change maps to link AGENCY's outputs to outcomes should provide a mechanism for AGENCY to create a visual map of its pathway of change that would likely move individuals toward positive changes. This concept of creating a visual map of the AGENCY's performance story was presented to interviews in order to seek their reaction to the concept. At first, interviewees were questioned as to whether their work unit has "*established clear strategic objectives*" that clearly describe "*how it will contribute to these major outcomes*" and what outputs it will deliver to achieve the desired performance levels. Typical responses to this question from BUNIT managers were ambiguous in that they:

"Know where [their] business is [and they] know what [they] have to achieve [and] they are aligned to the objectives set by the agency"

When asked whether their work unit collects information that might help "*inform it about whether or not it is achieving these outcomes*", the general response from interviewees within BUNIT was:

"No we don't measure 'better off'. To do that we would need to go further down to the grass roots level and look at individual performance of what staff actually does in a program";

"I think maybe we could use other measures to determine whether we're successful or not. [However], I don't believe we know enough of the client – we don't capture all of the client information to be able to do that".

Interviewees were then asked whether they thought it was important to develop a “chain of results” for developing performance expectation. A further question also sought opinions on “*whether a hierarchy of measures should be used that somehow are logically linked*”. The following comments were typical:

“Um... I suppose a chain of results can help you analyse the business can't it? [It is] much better. Outcomes are really what you're supposed to do and if you have that chain of results you can do a better analysis”;

“I wouldn't disagree with that. Like if you start with what they are going to achieve and then work down”;

“Um that would be meaningful if we had the tools to collect that data. It's all very well and good to be able to say we know what contributes to what but collecting the data is a problem”;

“That is a logical approach that we could take and we could measure things quite easily. But whether we capture the full depth of the activities and the quality would be questionable”.

While most interviewees generally agreed with the principle of developing a logically linked ‘chain of results’, some queried the degree to which it should be done. For example, interviewees commented that:

“You need to look at something like that. [However] you need to clarify exactly at what level you go down”;

“How far down do you go when you start delving into resources?”

“It is probably done in an ad hoc way. Program measures are developed at an output level and we know how it is linked to government outcomes. It's done at a high level but it is not unpacked at a lower level”;

“There is a disconnect[ion] between the MFO level and the operational level. The Managing for Outcomes at the operational level becomes somewhat vaguer”.

It soon became obvious to the interviewer that the level of commitment by managers was limited to pursuing the notion of developing a chain of results. It seemed apparent that, without a clearer direction and intention from AGENCY to venture down this path, managers would be unlikely to take the initiative to develop such links.

Given AGENCY's requirement to collect outcome indicator information for collation by central agencies, evidence was sought of the extent to which AGENCY uses appropriate types of indicators that are suitable for measuring the success of outputs in achieving desired outcomes. The types of performance information expected should include outcome indicators and measures of effect so as to report progressive achievement of desired outcomes. A review of AGENCY's Strategic Plan found the document to be extremely scant on how it will measure its progress towards achieving outcomes. The review showed that in this document AGENCY reports against one quality measure of output, namely, “*satisfaction rates*”; one activity measure, namely “*participation rates*”; and one long term indicators of outcome, namely, “*change in employment status*”. While AGENCY states that it contributes to “*improved access to and opportunities for achieving a better quality of life*” for its clients, the review of

the Strategic Plan finds that indicators that would permit such an assessment are absent from the document. Further, it is evident that appropriate measures of effect are not reported by AGENCY in its Strategic Plan. Such measures should be reported to assist in assessing whether the client is “better off” as a result of receiving the agency’s services. Such measures should enable assessment of the performance within the bounds of the agency (Pizzarella, 2004: p 635).

Having regard for the meagerness in reporting of indicators in AGENCY’s key document, interviewees were subsequently questioned about the performance information that they regularly collected and that they found of greatest use to them in reporting against their services. Some operational managers from BUNIT, for example, noted that they are collected “*only at a certain level*” but were unable to specify the level at which information is collected. Senior BUNIT managers identified its measures as those limited to “*client hours and budget*”; while CENTRAL generally identified those measures documented in the MPS, with little acknowledgement of the content of the Strategic Plan. It is quite apparent that BUNIT, the operational arm of AGENCY, is strongly focused on expenditures and only on the quantity of services being delivered; while, CENTRAL managers showed more concern for budgeting information. This finding is consistent with that noted by Wholey & Hatry (1992) and suggests that these BUNIT managers feel a sense of disassociation from the performance measurement process.

It is also clear from responses that BUNIT’s management are firmly of the opinion that decisions concerning the type of performance information that are used are decided by CENTRAL. This view is evidenced by the following comment:

“The type of performance measures we prefer to use is way outside of [BUNIT’s] scope at the moment anyway”. “We work on a system that gives us a certain allocation ... and [BUNIT] does not think management can make decisions to change [their] course [of action]”;

“The way that we’ve been working and looking at the performance measures are that, which [CENTRAL] has and by aligning with that. And we’re reporting back on what it wants”.

These comments strongly suggest that a top-down approach is employed by AGENCY in selecting performance measures. Such a top-down approach to developing measures may affect the motivation of managers of BUNIT since there is a risk that it is viewed as “a command of central management or as a reporting device to outside agencies” (Pizzarella, 2004: p 647). These views may potentially lead to a compliance-based attitude by those within BUNIT (Poole et al.: 2000). There is evidence of this particular risk to AGENCY by way of the following comment by a CENTRAL interviewee:

“In terms of MFO in the actual title I’d say it’s working at the MPS level, which is reporting upwards at the department but below the level at once a year there’s a mad rush to report against those performance measures.”

This research suggests that although performance information is collected and reported by AGENCY, through its work unit CENTRAL, the reality for AGENCY is that the MFO policy is “essentially undertaken out of a sense of compliance rather than a belief in its virtues” (Moynihan, 2005: p 219). The suggestion is that the primary goal is to account for its use of public funds.

6. Conclusion

This paper put forth two questions requiring investigation:

- i. What approach should public sector agencies adopt to clearly establish a link between the strategic direction of the agency and its programs such that it can explain that it is contributing to the Government's desired outcomes and to the desired changes in conditions of the community and its residents?
- ii. Is there support for these theoretical propositions in the Queensland public sector? And if so, to what extent are these proposed PMP adopted and applied by the case study agency selected for this research?

The theoretical proposition argues that in order to reduce the gap in performance information AGENCY should in the first instance describe how outcomes change over time and how its services contribute toward these outcomes. Using a change map will strengthen the PMP of AGENCY since it will better define "what they are trying to accomplish, the early and intermediate outcomes that must be reached to be successful, how all of the outcomes will be measured, and what actions they are going to have to take to bring all of this change about" (Anderson, 2005: p 9). When this theoretical principle was posed to the critical group of practitioners, their responses were supportive. Analysis of documentation and information provided from central agencies also provided evidence in support of the proposition, although the methods by which agencies might undertake linking of outcomes are not clearly evident.

While evidence indicated support for the theoretical proposition in the Queensland public sector results from examining the extent to which the proposed model is adopted and applied by the case study agency selected for this research is less than encouraging. A review of AGENCY's Strategic Plan, considered the primary document that describes its key directions, identified information gaps in outlining how AGENCY plans to achieve its long term outcomes. The gap is largely because AGENCY's planning document lacks specificity. The far-reaching and vague nature of objectives will make it difficult to assess whether specific objectives have been or will be achieved (Baldwin, 2000: p 19). The analysis of AGENCY's Strategic Plan also found a lack of a hierarchical arrangement of indicators. The Plan was extremely scant on how it will measure its performance with no indicators established that assist in reporting against short term or intermediate outcomes. Measures of effect which enable the reporting against short term and intermediate impact are not defined or reported against. The result is a gap in performance information. The implication is that the reporting of performance by AGENCY, in general, will be error prone and ineffective (Alter & Murty, 1997: p 104). As such, the measurement of performance will be of limited value where there is no consistency in the story behind what is measured (Wholey, 1999; Behn, 2003).

Interviews with participants from the two work units within AGENCY generally failed to articulate the desired short term and intermediate changes in the skills, behaviours or life circumstances of target client groups that would move these individuals closer towards achieving the outcomes desired by government. For most managers at CENTRAL it appeared relatively easy for them to describe outcomes at a general level or to explain the desires of the citizens of a community in broad terms. However, in all cases CENTRAL managers referred only to the long range nature of outcomes of AGENCY's programs. It is somewhat apparent from responses from BUNIT managers that their focus is largely centered on operational aspects of the agency's service delivery with limited concern for the outcomes to be achieved.

Interview responses suggest that CENTRAL experiences some difficulty in drawing clearer links between the services delivered by BUNIT and the incremental outcomes expected to be achieved by delivering these services. Operational managers at BUNIT, on the other hand, generally experience difficulty in "seeing" beyond what services they delivered to their clients. The concept of outcomes appears to have

little or no relevance to BUNIT. It soon became obvious that the level of commitment by managers was limited to pursuing the notion of developing a chain of results or to describing what “better off” might look like for their client groups. It seemed apparent that, without a clearer direction and intention from AGENCY to venture down this path, managers would be unlikely to take the initiative to develop such links.

In terms of the types of performance indicators and measures used by AGENCY to report, it became quite obvious that BUNIT, the operational arm of AGENCY, is strongly focused on expenditures and only on the quantity of services being delivered; while, CENTRAL managers showed more concern for budgeting information, that is output information. Interview results suggest that a top-down approach is employed by AGENCY in selecting performance measures which may potentially lead to a compliance-based attitude by those within BUNIT.

Findings from this research raise concerns about the degree to which OBPM and in particular PMP in the Queensland Government can change given that the reporting for government decision-making apparently remains unaltered and focused on budgeting processes (Wildavsky, 1992; Carlin, 2004). With such a focus it seems difficult to conclude that the Queensland Government, in its current state of implementation, is in a position to know whether or not its residents or its communities are “better off”.

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