

EVALUATION CONNECTIONS

The EES Newsletter

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President's Editorial

Murray Saunders, EES President

Welcome to the third edition of Evaluation Connections. For me, as I near the end of my term, this is a time for reflection and looking forward. The EES enters the final months of my Presidency in reasonable financial health and with a firm membership base. Our intention is to grow vigorously in both areas. The plans and ideas for 2010 of the new EES Board led by Ian Davies, the forthcoming President, provide a basis for optimism. I would like to use this opportunity to contribute, from a personal perspective, to an important debate, concerning the change in the European evaluation landscape. What is most striking over the last 15 years has been the growth of evaluation societies and

associations within the European Union from two to nineteen.

Of course we must see this growth as a positive response to the potential role evaluative practices can play in social, economic and political processes. As the way in which systems and practices are governed within the great policy areas of Europe has shifted, so too have the relationships between professionals working within those domains and the political decisions on resources they have to address. Claims are made that evaluative practice is a form of public involvement in and between European institutions and the way they may account to European civic society.

The age of self-policing involving a form of social contract between the 'public' and professionals in which they endeavour to control and uncover the quality of their own practices, appears to have been superseded. We are now involved in the development of a more open, transparent and externalised set of processes and practices. These include evaluation designed to attribute value to the outcomes of public and private spending, independently from the 'experts' or 'civil servants' carrying out the work. While these independent systems and processes are increasingly put in place, their use and effects are much less understood, developed or systemically supported.

As recent events in the management of international financial practices suggest, there are many areas where this transparency and accountability has simply failed to either shape appropriate behaviour, socially-just decision making or actions appropriate to protecting the public interest. The regulation of financial practice, for example, did not uncover the vulnerability of the routine actions of international investment banking operations. In short, evaluative practice appears to operate most vigorously in those policy domains which do not have a strong and

influential history of independent action, unfettered by national boundaries. Those areas include social policy and developmental environments. We might argue that the same vigorous accountability systems might be applied to areas of practice, like the financial, that have now, by necessity, re-entered the social realm.

With the growth of evaluation societies in Europe, the diverse community of practice of evaluation has responded by forming a network to contribute to the exchange of ideas and practices with the intention of enriching evaluation

practice (Network of Evaluation Societies in Europe). It is important that links are made with all domains of evaluative practice to address and to help sustain more effective ways of encouraging the use and usability of evaluation outputs and the potency, independence and systemic legitimacy of our work.

Network of Evaluation Societies in Europe NESE Meeting 2009 in Muenster, Germany

Sandra Speer, EES Board member

This is a short report on the successful meeting of NESE in Muenster. There were some 14 societies and associations represented at the meeting and a full account of the discussions and debates will be placed on the EES WEB site in due course as will details of the on-line survey of societies in Europe. This report is intended to offer a flavour of some of the important issues the meeting addressed.

The meeting decided to change the name of the network from "national evaluation societies in Europe" to "network of evaluation societies in Europe." "National" has been superseded in order to allow for maximum flexibility because for example, we have instances where one

society covers two countries in the case of the DeGEval, which has members from Germany and Austria and in Belgium as well as in Slovakia where two networks exist in parallel.

NESE will be coordinated by one board member of the EES and one representative from another society. Until October the French Evaluation Society (SFE) had this role and the DeGEval will be the new coordinating partner together with the EES for the next two years.

After the founding meeting in Strasbourg 2008, another meeting took place in the same year in the advent of the EES Lisbon conference. This year's NESE meeting was hosted by the DeGEval Evaluation Society in

connection with their annual conference. In preparation for the exchange of experience, an online survey was conducted. The situation and interests of the societies and networks varies a lot according to their background. We have evaluation societies/networks from 8 members up to 950 members, some exist for years others are newly founded, like the Portuguese, the Slovenian and the Romanian society. So their activities vary as well – from organising fifteen standing topical interest groups, newsletters, to annual conferences, training sessions, and other open events, issuing press releases or press conferences etc.



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Evaluation in the Public and Non-Profit Sectors

Robert Picciotto, EES Board member

Whereas the market is the ultimate guide to performance in the private sector, the public and non-profit sectors must assess their performance in terms of the achievement of a social purpose not reflected in a revenue stream. For a government or nonprofit entity a well designed evaluation system should provide reliable proxies of the public value produced by the organization. In other words, evaluation is to the public and voluntary sector what the balance sheets and profit and loss statements are to the private sector.

Without evaluation, managers of public and non-profit programs fly blind and cannot shape (and reshape) their programs to meet the challenges associated with a turbulent economic, political and social environment. Conversely, a well conceived and implemented evaluation system can help set operational goals, processes, instruments and partnerships that reflect changing demands. By generating the right signals evaluation helps to align authority with responsibility and to draw lessons of experience that can help improve organizational performance and avoid costly mistakes. As appropriate, evaluation can also serve to connect programs more closely to stakeholders and guide the deployment of organizational assets to achieve results.

Of course, such benefits do not materialize automatically. Indeed, they cannot be reaped unless evaluation processes are specifically designed to respond to three imperatives to: (i) increase the public value created by the program through accurate alignment of program goals to priority social needs; (ii) strengthen the legitimacy of the program; and (iii) guide the adaptation of program capacities to deliver results. Beyond its role as a fiduciary instrument, evaluation is most effective when it is designed and used to set and

implement public and non-profit sector strategies. The bulk of its benefits are reaped by helping to align program resources with the authorizing environment and a constantly evolving operating context.

Increasing public value

Results oriented delivery of public goods cannot be realized when incentives are distorted. The right framework of incentives for managers in the public and non-profit sectors requires a judicious selection of performance indicators. In turn these indicators should take account of the aspirations and needs of diverse constituencies and they should generate specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, time bound indicators (SMART) that are suitable for program monitoring.

This implies that monitoring cannot be effective without the prior identification of instrumental factors and drivers of program success, i.e. a program theory. Given plausible causal links between means and goals programs should be designed so that they are “evaluable” and so that progress towards program goals can be tracked through verifiable performance indicators as part of regular progress reports suitable for decision making.

The purpose of monitoring is to allow the timely tracking of inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes in ways that presage the likelihood of program level impact in order to ensure that adaptation of program designs takes place in a timely fashion to take account of implementation experience. But unless programs are evaluable and periodically evaluated the benefits of a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system are unlikely to be commensurate with the costs. These costs can be contained by embedding indicators in program management processes.

Strengthened legitimacy

Well selected indicators make social benefits concrete and credible. But beyond their technical quality, indicators should reflect legitimate goals and they should be used in ways that respect ethical values, protect stakeholders and respond to the governance imperatives associated with the program. Measurement of results is only useful against aims that are relevant to all program constituencies. Only then are M&E systems acceptable as management tools used to facilitate program adjustments geared to making public and voluntary services responsive to stakeholders’ needs through frequent adaptations of program objectives and periodic reshaping of program instruments.

Of course, all public sector and non profit program managers are bound by relationships with a wide variety of stakeholders who constitute their authorizing environment. Public sector managers are accountable to politicians as well as to community leaders and the broader public. Similarly, non profit sector managers must address the concerns of trustees, foundations and individuals that hold the purse strings as well as the direct beneficiaries of their activities. These stakeholders may have varied interests and perspectives. They all need to be kept up –to-date with a lot of information and they all want to be heard. Their views are not always coherent or consistent.

Despite these challenges both those involved with the funding and delivery of programs want to be part of a successful venture. This means ultimately that securing effective support for the program hinges on whether: stakeholders and the broader constituencies they represent are satisfied that program activities are achieving well documented and independently verified social benefits

and that program managers are continually learning from their successes as well as their failures.

Ultimately, a public sector or non-profit program will not achieve broad based legitimacy if it fails to respond to the needs of ordinary citizens. This means that evaluation should 'level the playing field', that is promote equity, by amplifying the voice of the powerless. In the content of its offerings, the style of its delivery and the direction of its outreach efforts, public sector and non-profit programs should contribute to improved welfare and institutional development in neglected zones and reach out to those who are not commonly heard in the corridors of power.

Such considerations have implications for the design of evaluation frameworks and processes. Specifically, evaluation ought to adopt participatory methods; act as transmission belts to all stakeholders and reflect the results orientation without which public support is bound to wither. Last but not least, evaluation should strengthen the legitimacy of the program by combining effective self evaluation and monitoring under program management control with an independent evaluation function that responds to the public interest, focuses on policy and strategy and reports to a supreme authority that is representative of all citizens. Together independent and self-evaluation achieve synergy.

Building new capacities

The mission, the values, the priorities and the instruments embedded in programs should be continuously adapted to evolving challenges. But vision without reality is hallucination and it is therefore critical that programs be grounded in objective assessments of what works and what does not work. This means that

programs should be designed upfront so that they can be evaluated not only in terms of the immediate reaction of beneficiaries but also in terms of learning (the increase in knowledge or capability), the extent of behavior and capability improvements and the results that are experienced by program beneficiaries.

This means that the unit of account of evaluation should be the entire program rather than only the individual activities that the program comprises. It also means that the obstacles associated with the diverse contexts within which a program is implemented should be explicitly considered in assessing performance. This is because outcomes and impacts are often dependent on the actions of many individuals and/or agencies so evaluation should seek to attribute successes and failures to program participants.

Attribution is necessary to allow for the necessary realignment of the accountabilities and obligations that bind program partners together. Thus, evaluation can be an instrument of partnership design and a results oriented approach focuses attention sharply on the social purpose of programs and on the ways in which partners and stakeholders can be mobilized to contribute to the realization of shared goals.

Conclusions

Increasingly, accurate measurement of the social outcomes and impacts of public and non profit sector activities is expected as an essential feature of public accountability. Score cards limited to concrete outputs have the enormous advantage of clarity and simplicity. But managing for results cannot avoid tackling the contentious issue of social value assessment.

There is no ready made solution to this challenge given the combination of

primary and secondary effects associated with most programs and the prevalence of unintended consequences. But diverse evaluation methods are available to produce persuasive accounts of program impacts in the public sphere.

Rating the most relevant dimensions of program interventions can help point to instrumental factors of success. Participatory techniques can bring to the fore indirect and unintended effects. Systematic benchmarking can be used to import good practices from similarly situated programs. Use of evaluation panels and contestability processes can provide evaluation managers with quality assurance safeguards in real time. In a few instances, randomized control trials are feasible. But it is rarely a matter of importing a system wholesale from outside the program. A tailor made approach is required.

In sum, the evaluation tool kit is adequate. Well used it can help ensure that public and non profit sector strategies and evaluation are closely connected. Indeed, both functions should be shaped together in order to align program assets with evolving public needs while respecting the imperatives of the authorizing environment. To ensure efficiency, M&E indicators should be built into program management processes. And to ensure effectiveness the evaluation system should be owned by the highest and most representative authority under the aegis of which the program is implemented - as well as by those who manage and implement the program for the benefit of the citizenry.

What Gets Measured Gets Done: Well, not Necessarily

Ian Davies, Consultant, Ian C. Davies Conseil Inc.

This article summarises the keynote presentation given by Ian Davies at the Danish Evaluation Society annual conference on September 12, 2008, in Kolding.

Introduction

Over the last 25 years or so, public management reforms in governments worldwide have had measurement as a centrepiece of their approach.

Performance monitoring, use of indicators and targets, are but a few ways in which measurement is employed. This is the case for reforms in Canada, the UK, the US and Denmark, among others, and it is especially prevalent in international development.

However, this attention to measurement is rarely accompanied by a corresponding focus on management and more broadly on organisational effectiveness. There appears to be an assumption among proponents of measurement, particularly evaluators, that, in the context of reform, the development and use of evaluative tools will necessarily lead to improvements in performance.

This article challenges the assumption that measurement, or, broadly writ, the evaluative enterprise, contributes necessarily to improving performance, i.e. to getting things done. It goes further and argues that, in some cases, the evaluative thrust can actually be detrimental to performance. Finally, the article discusses what evaluation, and evaluators, can do about it.

Context

The remarks that follow concern reforms in the public sector generally but draw more specifically on public administration reform initiatives at different levels of government: national, regional and local. Performance is understood as a causal construct from organisational and programme perspectives.

Performance management is defined as management and, as such, is different and distinct from performance measurement. Management is

understood as the manipulation of production processes to realise performance. Performance management is making changes in processes of production in order to best meet the intended results, i.e. varying outputs to best achieve outcomes.

Assumption

An unmistakeable indication of the assumption that “what get measured gets done” is the way in which, both in literature and in practise, the terms performance management and performance measurement are used interchangeably.

Another sign of this assumption is the fairly typical reaction, when performance does not improve, i.e. the reform does not “take” or change does not occur, to look immediately to “shortcomings” in measurement. In the world of development, it is common practise to respond to lack of progress of reforms, i.e. in performance of programmes and institutions, with calls for more and better indicators, targets, and monitoring and evaluation.

This is a little bit like calling for better weight scales and more weighting when one does not lose (or gain) the desired weight. Focusing on measurement to affect performance, without dealing with management, is like pushing a string.

Reasons

So where do the reasons lie for little or no change in performance? To a large extent they are rooted in the organisational and operational environments, i.e. the management universe, rather than in the evaluative world, i.e. the measurement domain.

The reforms that are suggested by the New Public Management (NPM) paradigm aim to bring about fundamental shifts in the culture of institutions. These changes can be significant, because of their nature and depth, when undertaken in procedurally focused bureaucracies.

Cultural shifts are about sustainable and effective changes in collective behaviour that are usually long term and possibly generational. These behaviours respond to a host of factors other than

measurement information, such as incentives, leadership, working environment, career perspectives, etc.

Fit

The prevailing view of this article is that, in the context of performance management in the public sector, the evaluative enterprise pays insufficient attention to organisational and operational determinants of collective behaviour.

Reform initiatives typically nod at the organisational level in the areas of planning, e.g. developing strategic plans, and of measurement, e.g. identifying indicators, but that’s about it. Outside of monitoring and evaluation considerations, little, if anything, is done at the operational level, i.e. how activities are managed.

For evaluators working in the context of performance based reforms, the key message is that, for evaluative information to make a relevant and useful contribution to performance, it has to take into account organisational and operational conditions.

In other words, the evaluator should acknowledge, identify and assess the organisational and operational environments to fit the level of measurement, i.e. of evaluative processes, to them. There’s little point in developing performance measurement if there’s no management use or demand for the information, i.e. the string needs to be pulled rather than pushed.

Developing evaluative processes and mechanisms in the absence of corresponding management demand, not only wastes resources, but draws attention away from organisational and management issues that should be addressed to improve performance. When this happens, the evaluative enterprise is not only useless, it is detrimental to performance.

Operational and Organisational Conditions

To distinguish between operational (or programme and project) characteristics and organisational (or institutional)

attributes, it is useful to apply the term results-based management to the former and performance management to the latter.

What key conditions should exist in programmes and projects to allow for results-based management?

First, there should be sufficient management autonomy. The manager of the programme or the project should have the ability to control the production processes to the extent that outputs can be modified. In other words, authority should be commensurate with responsibility.

A public health programme has as its intended outcome the reduction of infant mortality due to malaria. There are various ways to contribute to the outcome such as impregnated mosquito nets, prophylactic medication, insect repellent, parental education, drainage of stagnant water, etc. To the extent that these can be done by the programme they can be considered outputs. Management consists, among other things, of finding and producing the optimal mix of outputs to achieve the intended outcome.

However, if the only option is the purchase and distribution of mosquito nets, the manager of the programme does not have the required autonomy, i.e. the authority or the ability, to choose the outputs or their mix. In this case, the relationship between the output and the outcome, i.e. the effectiveness, of the programme is determined.

When there is insufficient management autonomy, e.g. when outputs are prescribed, results based management is simply not possible.

Second, accountability for results is the expectation that management be based, among other things, on meaningful information about the extent to which outputs are achieving outcomes. Accountability means the ability and obligation for management to show that decisions affecting the programme are made by keeping one's eye on the outcome ball. Only then can management be fully understood and its quality assessed.

Two principles underlie this view: no one is expected to achieve the impossible and one can only be held responsible for those things over which he or she has control.

Third, there has to be a clear distinction between operational (programme and project) performance, and individual employee performance which is a different construct. Bundling the latter with the former is a fundamental, and unfortunately common, mistake. Performance assessments of programmes and projects contribute to operational learning, i.e. programme theory, and constitute a different and distinct level of analysis from that of individual performance assessments.

What are the organisational considerations for performance management?

Organisational environments tend to be more complex and difficult to circumscribe and assess than programme environments. As such, there are no absolute conditions that need to be met; rather, there are attributes that are known to be related significantly to questions of organisational performance and these should be considered.

Some considerations are: An effective organisational or corporate governance function that provides overall and strategic direction to the organisation.

Leadership that articulates and communicates management direction clearly so that staffs understand where the organisation is going and how, and what they are meant to contribute. Quality of the working environment including professional development, job satisfaction, retention and turnover, workplace safety, gender equity, quality of human resource management, career development, etc.

Are incentives consistent with principles of results-based management? For example: Is the organisation clear that pay for performance is a poor incentive? Is control adapted to organisational learning? Are mistakes seen as learning opportunities or reasons to punish? Does the organisation recognise and value professional judgment? Is the organisation risk-averse? Change should be managed. Change costs money. Are there resources dedicated to change and change management particularly in the context of reform?

Is there a clear accountability framework for the organisation (who is accountable to whom for what, when, where and how)? Are performance measurement and reporting, evaluation and performance audit used

appropriately? Is there meaningful external reporting on organisational performance?

What can evaluation and evaluators do?

In the contexts of performance management or results-based management, evaluators should expand their evaluative scope to include assessment of operational conditions and considerations of organisational attributes.

There are at least three ways in which evaluation and evaluators can do this:

A. By refocusing the debate away from the relative merits of performance measurement vs. evaluation vs. performance audit, to how to use and combine these different evaluative approaches under different programmatic conditions and organisational configurations.

B. By providing managers with information and knowledge not only about the measurement processes that form part of performance and results-based management, but about the relationships between the latter and the operational conditions and organisational characteristics of their environment.

C. By creating opportunities to learn about management and performance through case studies, formative evaluations, etc., by encouraging and supporting pilots and disseminating information on good practices.



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