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EVALUATING SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN BRAZIL: ANALYSIS OF THE CYCLE OF PRODUCTION AND DISSEMINATION OF EVALUATION STUDIES BY THE MINISTRY OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND FIGHT AGAINST HUNGER

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OVERVIEW

This paper presents an analysis of the cycle of production and dissemination of evaluation studies by the Brazilian Ministry of Social Development and Fight Against Hunger (SAGI/MDS). It aims to describe and contextualize institutional advances and the standards involved in the evaluation of Brazil's far-reaching social programmes over the last decade, a period when the country's social progress was accompanied by the creation of a secretariat responsible

for the evaluation of many of the country's new social policies. This paper explains the steps involved in determining how and when social programmes should be evaluated, in specifying the research methodology and theoretical perspective and in contracting external evaluation institutions. The paper also discusses how the ministry, through its Secretariat of Evaluation and Information Management (SAGI), monitors and qualifies the conduct of research and knowledge dissemination. The discussion contributes to the understanding of how the creation of credible public institutions and the mix of internal and external evaluation studies can foster the progress of an evaluation culture and can enhance the efficiency of public policies, particularly in developing countries.

NINE STEPS FOR PRODUCING AND DISSEMINATING EVALUATION STUDIES

Evaluating public policies is an important function for improving and qualifying decision-making by public officials by bringing empirical evidence that allows more rational and objective choices. Weiss (1998, p.10) notes that objective information on programme implementation and results can bring "more sensible choices" to public fund allocation and to programme planning. Weiss also highlights that evaluation can and must be used as a way to guarantee accountability, with emphasis on the objectives reached to the internal public and the comprehension of social intervention by the external public (Weiss 1998, 26–28).

With the creation of MDS in 2004, which incorporated actions on nutritional security, cash transfer, social assistance and later on productive inclusion, it became necessary to organize a structure capable of producing relevant and timely information to help the design, implementation, focus and reordering of public policies under its purview. SAGI answers this demand. Vaitsman, Rodrigues and Paes-Souza (2006, 15) consider it an innovation in Brazilian public management, because there was no structure in Brazil with an evaluation organization that shared its hierarchical level of the evaluated units. To reach its goals, SAGI, through its Department of Evaluation (DA/SAGI) uses mainly external evaluation studies, contracting research institutes, private research companies, individual consultants and research groups through the Brazilian Council for Scientific and Technological Development.

After almost 10 years of work, SAGI has produced more than 130 evaluation studies, contemplating a wide group of actions, programmes, benefits and services under the responsibility of MDS. DA/SAGI uses varied methods to evaluate programmes, because the choice of methodology depends on the evaluation questions and the phase of the programme's implementation (Jannuzzi et al. 2009).

This model of evaluation, using evaluators that do not belong to the ministry's structure, can be considered what Worthen, Sanders and Fitzpatrick (2004, 289) define as a mixed evaluation, because it combines the advantages of an internal analysis (e.g. knowledge of programmes, capacity of dialogue with public officials, better comprehension of the organizational culture and the decision-making dynamic) with the advantages of an external analysis (e.g. greater autonomy, external credibility, the possibility to bring specific knowledge on some methodologies). DA/SAGI staff members monitor the attendance of the research schedule and keep a constant dialogue with both the contracted institute and

the officials responsible for the evaluated programme, ensuring the quality of the results in terms of theoretical and methodological consistency. DA/SAGI also reaches out to those that will use the evaluation in order to assess their knowledge demands. Through this method, SAGI aims to accomplish the difficult task of ensuring both the independence and credibility of the research itself, and that the evaluation will be actually used to the qualification of public policies (a common Achilles' heel of evaluation studies).

To achieve the amount of research studies and guarantee the qualities previously described, SAGI has systematized its actions in nine steps that range from validating demand through to the publication of microdata on the Internet.

Step 1: Discussion

Tapajós et al. (2010) note that the nature and the object of the studies that will be done is a result of a collective debate among many sectors of MDS. The debate considers whether a programme has been evaluated yet, the evaluation objectives, appropriate methodologies for the reaching evaluation goals, budgetary constraints and the existence of previous studies done by other institutions. Discussion also considers the needs identified through the periodical review of programmes under the MDS umbrella.

Guided by the ministry's strategic planning, the work group of monitoring and evaluation is the institutional forum that enables the discussion of priorities to take place and organizes the evaluation agenda for the next year. In addition to SAGI, all other MDS secretariats, the Deputy Minister's office and the Ministers Cabinet participate in the working group.

Step 2: Terms of reference

Specifying the objectives of the evaluation and its methodology requires a technical discussion with the demanding area of MDS. This process makes it possible to identify research questions and information demands that can be supplied through other means and strategies, such as the organization of existing databases or the creation of historical series through the manipulation of existing indicators. The type of evaluation study is then defined, along with its objectives, methods and data sources. After the object of study is defined and refined, the Department of Evaluation writes a terms of reference to hire the research team and to specify technical, methodological and administrative requirements to ensure the quality of research.

Step 3: Contract

The hiring of an external evaluator is based on the most advantageous proposal sent to the administration through a process of public bidding, which guarantees wide competition among interested parties. Bidding is usually conducted through an electronic auction (*pregão eletrônico*). It is important that the terms of reference is as detailed, specific and clear as possible. Some questions that do not impact the budget may still be clarified at the first meeting of the research team and SAGI.

Step 4: Dialogue for study operationalization

The first meeting between the research team and SAGI is the time and place for an open dialogue. At the meeting, SAGI and the secretariat interested in the evaluation discuss the administrative terms included in the signed contract, the methodological rigour, the theoretical quality and knowledge expectations that the finalistic area put on the study. External researchers get a better idea of the 'essentials' and 'peripherals', which improves the focus of their analytical effort. This process continues throughout the research schedule, with many discussions occurring as preliminary data is sent to SAGI.

Step 5: Monitoring the study

Research groups or individuals are never solely responsible for executing research activities; SAGI follows each step, giving substantive contributions on each one of them. As any research enterprise is a complex matter, this technical involvement is crucial to identify problems and guarantee the quality of final results. Furthermore, it is important that monitoring is done by a very qualified staff, so that the debate may be kept on a high level with respected academics and researchers. This process also creates a cycle in which SAGI staff are constantly qualified by the close contact with good (and bad) researchers. A true account of the monitoring process must allow for and cope with bad researchers, not suppress their existence. Furthermore, good researchers may do bad research on some cases, as generating new knowledge is always complex and may not be necessarily done within the time frame expected by government officials. The monitoring of researchers and the institutional learning of SAGI allows for quick identification of problems and avoids the worst consequences of good research gone bad.

Step 6: Final results

Once the research is done, a cycle of technical discussions begins with the proposition of a table plan and the presentation of partial results. It often involves, in addition to the research report to be done by the external research group, technical studies written by the Department of Evaluation staff or by an external consultant. As customary and recommended with any research, the analysis aims at the research objectives but frequently reaches out to new and diverse aspects found during fieldwork, giving a rich interpretation of the data that goes beyond the original intent.

Step 7: Dissemination of results

The results are then presented to the finalistic secretariat for a technical discussion and deepening of the analysis. This process may or may not involve the external research team. After discussing the results internally, SAGI may organize public seminars to disseminate the study among stakeholders in government, academia and civil society. It is also common for SAGI to present studies in academic and governmental seminars.

Step 8: Publication of results

The publication of results is a fundamental step that guarantees accountability and gives credibility to SAGI and the MDS. It is important to acknowledge that the results of any study that is done with public funds must be public and open to societal inquiry. The use of the Internet is a powerful tool in this regard, giving the option of a low-cost investment with a great return. The publication involves an executive summary, a research report and a technical paper, in addition to other research papers that may come from the original data, and eventually books. SAGI also organizes a periodical and *Cadernos de Estudos* (study brochures) to publicize its research.

Step 9: Publication of microdata

The publication of microdata is the final step and gives the research community an opportunity to do its own analysis of the data. By institutionalizing this procedure, SAGI became a credible source for statistical data on social policies. Publishing microdata also strengthens research in this area and gives SAGI a central role in the research evaluation epistemic community.

CONCLUSIONS

The nine steps done by SAGI to guarantee the quality of evaluation studies is a case of good management of the evaluation process. The steps combine the advantages of internal and external evaluations and allows for multiple methods and perspectives. The objective of this short paper will be met if this presentation helps other countries and institutions qualify their own processes, strengthening evaluation culture and qualifying the public policies examined.

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