

# 1. ENCOURAGING THE EFFECTIVE USE OF EVALUATIONS TO IMPROVE PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT AND DESIGN

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## INTRODUCTION

Around the world, universities, research centres, multilateral agencies, public administration officials and others are rapidly increasing the production of information and knowledge about public policies and programmes. In many countries, recurring subjects of applied research into public policies include education and public health programmes, income transfer programmes and actions to fight hunger and poverty. These research efforts mobilize sociologists, economists, statisticians and other monitoring and evaluation (M&E) professionals. The number of academic journals that are dedicated to this theme and the conferences that deal with M&E matters (e.g. two international conferences on national evaluation capacities held in Morocco and South Africa) highlight the relevance of public policy information and knowledge.

However, although M&E systems have produced vast amounts of empirical evidence and comprehensive and rigorous evaluation studies on such policies and programmes, it seems additional efforts are necessary to ensure that the information and knowledge produced is effectively used to formulate public policy and to improve routine programme activities.

Public programmes are complex systems that involve various processes and activities. So, in general, specific and rigorous public policy information and knowledge are dense and difficult to understand—even by the staff involved in formulating and coordinating programmes. Programmes involve many different agents in their daily operations,

with many different skills and learning capabilities. Depending on the country, resources and programme coverage and complexity, thousands—or even hundreds of thousands—of agents contribute to management, preparation and delivery of products, services and benefits. Agents can make a difference to programme improvement if they can understand the information and knowledge produced by M&E systems.

Although policymakers, managers and programme staff do not need exhaustive data or studies about their programmes, they do need information that is clear, consistent and relevant to decision-making. Data should be organized geographically and by operational issue, answer questions relating to the programme's implementation stage, and include information on costs, deliveries, outputs and outcomes. Good and relevant information and knowledge is customized to the different needs at the formulation, monitoring or summative evaluation stage of public policy and programmes.

The main idea this paper discusses is that, given the operational complexities of programme management and its need for innovation, the effective use of evidence depends largely on the relevance of information and knowledge to the formulation, decision and managing processes. This dependency holds whether the data was gathered by monitoring panels, evaluation surveys or studies. Effectiveness also depends on the strategies used to disseminate information and knowledge to personnel involved in the programme, from the field or street-level bureaucrats to the strategic decision-makers. Dissemination strategies of customized information and knowledge to all technical staff involved in public policy can make the difference to the challenge of incorporating changes into programme design and operations.

This paper presents the argument that innovation in public programmes (through effective use of information and knowledge), seems to depend less on the technical sophistication and independence of evaluation study and more on the clarity and objectivity that the information and knowledge responds to the specific needs of technical staff and managers. This does not deny the importance of robust evaluation studies. However, if studies do not answer the most crucial demands for information from the perspective of those involved, there is a risk that the resulting data and information will be of minimal use.

This paper is organized into two sections. It begins with a more conceptual discussion of M&E systems and their integration into the policy and public programme cycle. The extent to which managers and staff are interested in—and actually use—the information and knowledge produced in an M&E system depends on the adequacy of its design and purpose to answer those questions that the programme team and officials consider relevant to improving the programme. Therefore, the nature of the questions the M&E system answers and the choice of instruments (e.g. monitoring indicators, implementation studies, impact and results surveys) determine managers' and technical staff's involvement and interest in using the system's products. Besides credibility and independence, evaluation studies must be relevant to their potential users.

The second section of this paper is dedicated to the different strategies used to disseminate monitoring tools and evaluation studies for public users of the M&E system. Information and knowledge produced in this environment can be complex and not easily assimilated by

managers and technical staff. It is insufficient to merely produce an extensive research report or to have an informative online application with multiple functionalities. Lectures, publications and courses need to be tailored to their audiences, seeking to present them with an evaluation study's most relevant and interesting aspects.

### PRODUCING INFORMATION AND KNOWLEDGE RELEVANT AND USEFUL TO MANAGEMENT AND PROGRAMME IMPROVEMENT

M&E systems have many conceptual definitions in specialized literature, which, according to MacDavid and Hawthorne (2006), Mackay (2007), Owen (2007), and Cunill and Ospina (2008), can be broader or more operational. Using these concepts, M&E systems can be defined as a set of articulated processes for raising, organizing, analysing and disseminating information and knowledge about public policy and programmes. These processes vary according to the different needs of decision makers and operational managers, extend over the policy and programme life cycle, and include diagnoses of the social problem, the formulation and design of programmatic solutions, actual implementations in the field and overall evaluation stages. Processes aim to support improvements to a programme's design and management, to ensure greater transparency of government action, and to provide evidence on the merits and effectiveness of policies and programmes.

This definition makes it clear that M&E systems provide knowledge and information for analysing product and service delivery, correcting any failures of government action, identifying the impacts of policies and programmes, and determining the costs of production of programme delivery. By definition, M&E systems are important mechanisms for ensuring greater transparency in the use of public resources. They also contribute to decisions relating to the merits and relevance of policies and programmes.

However complementary, the three basic purposes of a M&E systems—information to help improve programmes, public transparency and budget merit evaluation—compete with each other over evaluative efforts and available human resources, and largely define the methods and techniques chosen for the work. Of course, the primary purpose, the evaluation focus and, consequently, the effective use of M&E products depends on where such a system is based. For example, if an M&E system is based in a sectoral ministry or programme agency, the creation of monitoring instruments and evaluation research will aim to provide the means to continuously improve the programme's implementation and results. If the M&E system is based in a public control body or parliament, the evaluative focus will be on producing and organizing information on the results and impacts of public policies and programmes on society. If a system is based in a body responsible for budget management and/or medium-term planning, it is natural that the processes and activities will be oriented towards producing studies on the cost-effectiveness and impacts of public programmes, and guiding public resource allocation.

Clarity over the evaluative focus of an M&E system is a key factor in ensuring that technical staff involved in policy and programme implementation, civil society, parliament and budget managers successfully and effectively use evaluative information and knowledge. The evaluative focus also helps to orient the main efforts and activities of M&E staff. This, therefore,

determines the choice of instruments and methods used to generate relevant and useful information and knowledge.

M&E systems that are oriented towards the needs of management and programme improvement (about which this paper is particularly concerned) are characterized by research designs, surveys, information systems or monitoring indicators that focus on specific aspects of programme implementation. Such systems generally depend on qualitative methodological strategies, such as discussion groups and in-depth interviews, taking field staff and programme beneficiaries as main sources of information. The aim is to generate rapid empirical evidence concerning the programme's management and any difficulties experienced during planned implementation.

As part of field evaluation, surveys may not need to be performed if the set of monitoring indicators, created from the programme management systems' database, is able to answer basic evaluative questions. Appropriate choices of key indicators with a detailed geographic and demographic focus may provide valuable, accessible information and can be used effectively by technical staff and managers. As 'thermometers', these indicators may diagnose 'fever' (or healthy status) at critical points in a programme's intervention model. This can help technical staff and managers make informed decisions on how to address problems or enable such staff to commission specific research (or 'clinical investigation', to continue the metaphor) to investigate the causes of implementation problems (or the fever's causes and the reasons for its persistence). (Jannuzzi 2011a)

Nationally representative sample surveys and research with a quasi-experimental design are certainly important tools and products of M&E programme improvement for sectorial ministries. However, the time and effort they require makes them more useful as ways for transparency and budget practitioners to appraise merit, legitimacy and impact; instead, M&E programme improvement staff should be involved in a broader technical agenda. Staff time and concerns cannot be captured by impact or national evaluation surveys.

It should be recognized that in order to legitimize the political priorities given to certain social issues, and in the interests of public accountability and efficient use of scarce public finances, quantitative research using probability samples (such as those conducted by national statistical agencies) and impact assessments with control groups and beneficiaries offer important measures of the adequacy of public programme design, coverage, beneficiaries, results and impacts, and distinctiveness. However, in deciding whether to maintain, modify or discontinue a policy or programme, evaluation studies are not the only inputs. Such decisions are not merely technical; rather, they are primarily political, because they have implications for the lives of beneficiaries and for the programme's institutional arrangements.

Large surveys, or those that are methodologically or operationally complex, can be justified at the outset of a policy or programme in order to define the situation the policy or programme seeks to address. Further surveys of a similar scale, however, should wait until after any problems in programme implementation have been identified and resolved (Rossi et al. 2004). Otherwise, implementation problems may cause evaluation studies to conclude that a programme's outcomes and impacts are minimal or absent. In turn, this may create a

hasty mistrust of public opinion regarding the public policy or programme's merits and may negatively impact officials' perceptions of the utility of M&E products and research. The fact is that, despite the prestige conferred by certain academic communities, quasi-experimental evaluation research is not the most legitimate scientific approach, nor is it the gold standard for programme evaluation (Worthern et al. 2004).

There are several ethical conflicts and operational constraints on their realization that have been widely noted in international literature (Jannuzzi 2011b). Moreover, daily programme management requires packets of information and knowledge far beyond those produced by such research designs. Rather than producing evidence for a 'revolutionary innovation' as intended by impact assessments, it is necessary to have information that can contribute to the continuous improvement and incremental innovation of public action. Without denying the importance of empirical evidence that is nationally representative, collected with technical rigour and analytically deep, managers and technical staff involved in programme implementation need a more eclectic methodological approach to gathering information, as well as knowledge of the complexity of social problems and programme operations.

Misconceptions about the relevance of a mixed-method approach (rather than a quantitative and impact evaluation focus) have contributed to scepticism about the value of M&E tools among managers and technical staff in the public sector. Thus, in the context of scarce human and financial resources, M&E systems should focus on responding to management and programme needs, using a structure of centralized databases extracted from computerized management systems or from the countless spreadsheets and paper controls executed by programme managers. These M&E tools may include key programme indicator dashboards, logical framework processes or research recommendations on dealing with implementation issues. In situations of limited resources and time, it can be more useful and productive for programme management teams to use evaluation studies of secondary data, study reviews, international publications and meta-evaluations of similar programmes in other countries.

In addition to clarity of evaluative focus and appropriate choices of methodology, if an M&E system is to offer information and useful knowledge to improve programmes, it is essential that the system secures the participation of technical staff and managers in drafting instruments. If it is true that external teams can ensure technical credibility for an evaluation study (assuming that they are competent, reputable and committed to a multidisciplinary view and to a mixed-method evaluation approach), then the relevance and ownership of results depends on the extent of programme managers' and technical staff's involvement in evaluation processes. Though internal teams typically know more about a programme's most pressing problems and difficulties, they nonetheless often need technical support from specialized consultants (as well as information from field surveys) in order to properly understand the causes of such issues and to recognize appropriate resolution strategies.

Running field evaluation surveys or conducting evaluation studies based on secondary data requires skilled people and teams. However, it is worth noting that the professional market for evaluation consultants is far from perfect in many developing—and even some

developed—countries. It must be recognized that increased demand for the evaluation of social programmes has outstripped the availability of properly qualified private consulting firms and academic research groups. The pool of evaluators is dominated by companies specializing in public opinion and market research, areas where problems require less complex design and effort to understand compared to social programmes. Although these evaluators may have a good academic pedigree, the firms' or consultants' knowledge of the reality of public programmes is often limited. Social surveys, particularly those related to programme evaluation, can be more complex than market or academic research and therefore require a more robust, specific and responsible approach, particularly because the results will guide critical decisions about the design, results and merits of government actions.

In this context, it is necessary for the technical teams of the M&E system to intensely monitor the contracted evaluation study. Technical teams should not just leave the hired firm or consultant to design the survey sample, the questionnaires or the training and supervision of field staff. If programme managers want the answers to specific problems, the same managers must participate in all evaluation processes. Not all contracted companies appreciate the experience of having their technical procedures questioned or altered by internal teams. However, mixed teams of contracted and internal personnel can help achieve a synergy of internal knowledge management and external technical expertise. This can help create knowledge products by combining their respective areas of expertise, and may increase the overall legitimacy and relevance of the evaluation effort.

The credibility of results and the legitimacy of evaluation processes are two values that must be pursued jointly; making technical and political choices based on studies and knowledge that are limited in their operational survey and analytical scope is worse than not having information for decision-making. In some situations, it may be preferable to have no evaluation than to rely on misconceived, mishandled or rashly contracted research.

## **DISSEMINATING RELEVANT AND USEFUL INFORMATION AND KNOWLEDGE FOR MANAGEMENT AND THE IMPROVEMENT OF PROGRAMMES**

Formulating, evaluating and managing policies and programmes requires, like any other activity in human organizations, training of technical staff and managers that are involved in decision-making and those involved in providing services (i.e. field workers). Leadership, communication, ethics and response to the public are among the training topics for technical staff and managers, and are as important as project management and evaluation methodology development. Experience suggests that a significant reason that public programmes fail or lack impact lies in the difficulties in maintaining continuing education programmes for teams involved in policy development.

The impact of public programmes would certainly be higher if those involved understood more about programmes' objectives, logical design and related activities, the role of each institution and staff member, and the characteristics of target beneficiaries. Although courses and operational training may have been planned for in the framework of many social programmes, they may not be fully adapted with materials, regulatory documents, classrooms and teaching staff to train multiple technical persons involved. In some situations,

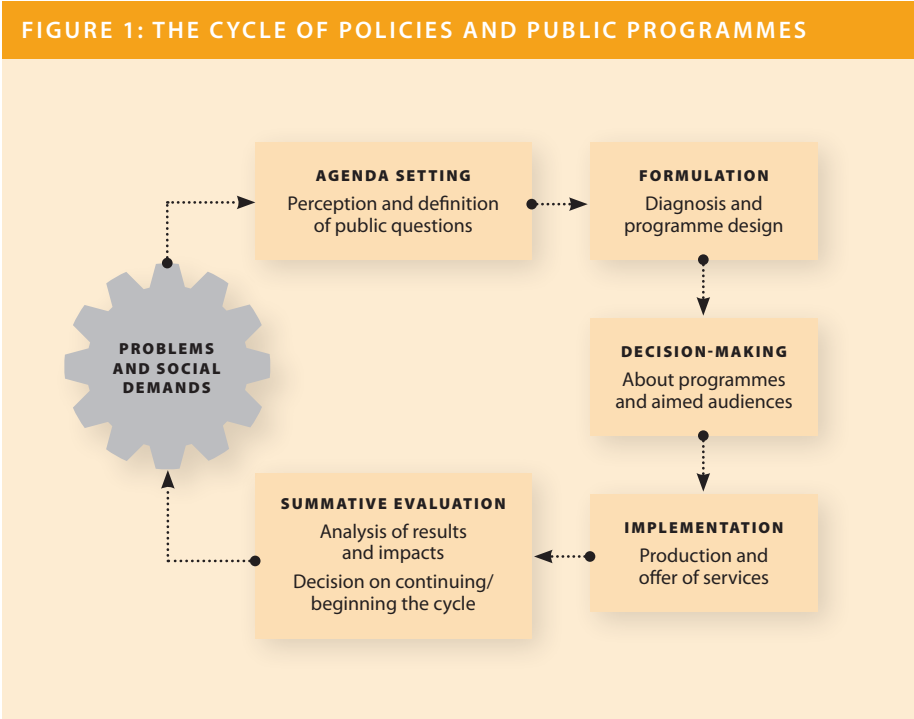
the trainees may not even be engaged or informed about the training. There is much to be done in terms of training human resources involved in public service delivery and management of public programmes (an issue beyond the scope of this paper). However, it must be a matter of concern for multilateral organizations, with the same emphasis attached to the dissemination of methods and techniques as to planning and evaluating social programmes and projects.

This section addresses two central issues: dissemination strategies in M&E and training on M&E tools. Both are important for enhancing the informed use of M&E products and studies, particularly those designed to improve public programmes. As with information in science, technology and innovation, information and knowledge in public policy are complex and require training programmes. Although indicators such as the infant mortality rate or monetary extreme poverty are part of the technical vocabulary of evaluators and the academic research community working on evaluation of social programmes, they are not necessarily part of the vocabulary of programme managers and technical staff. Similarly, evaluation reports and their results may be differently understood by evaluators and a programme's technical staff.

If the knowledge produced by M&E is to reach broader audiences, it is necessary to make its products (e.g. reports, indicators, evaluation studies) understandable and attractive to a range of public users. It is not enough to simply post all data sheets, indicators and evaluation reports on the Internet. Data production does not generate demand for knowledge. It is necessary to develop tailored products for targeted audiences of technical staff and managers by appropriately adapting format, content and complexity. Results from evaluations should also be disseminated through lectures or multimedia recordings, and they should be readily accessible to Internet users.

There are a number of Internet-based virtual applications that provide many interactive and visual resources and links to other documents. Executive summaries of evaluation reports, small datasheets (one-page papers) with the essential results with graphs, maps and descriptive reports may have a utility and aesthetic appeal greater than that of tables, dashboards or massive publications with content that is inscrutable for those without specialized training. Results of econometric models developed with evaluation data are frequently presented, but have limited capacity for diffusion to the uninitiated public. It is surely possible to make such outcomes more tangible and concrete for technical staff and managers who want to learn more about programmes.

Efforts to electronically disseminate M&E content to technical staff and managers may be more effective when combined with continuing education, in either classroom or distance-learning settings. There are always technical staff and managers interested in deepening their knowledge of M&E but unable to find an appropriate, relevant course in a university or research centre. M&E training programmes should be organized for technical staff and programme managers interested in developing their skills and improving their understanding of monitoring tools, evaluation and the application of information and knowledge. The training programmes should be organized using the basic cycle of policy and programmatic processes (see Figure 1).



In classical political science textbooks, the public policy formulation process has been repeatedly presented as the cycle of successive steps, with a number of stages (Jann and Wegrich 2007). Despite long-standing criticism of the simplified way in which this diagram shows the political process as an empirical truth, the separation of steps demonstrates that the process gives different emphasis to programme planning, implementation and evaluation. This model lends itself well to teaching, particularly for the way it contextualizes the issue for technical staff and programme managers.

In this model, the first step, agenda setting, defines the political agenda and corresponds to the multiple paths and processes that culminate in recognizing a social issue as a public problem and the need for government action to solve it. In other words, it legitimizes the introduction of the issue on the policy agenda. The next step, formulation, refers to the processes and activities involved in developing possible solutions, legislation and programmes to deal with the defined social issue. In the next step, decision-making, crucial choices are made on the interventional model, institutional arrangements and the target audience—narrower or broader—considering the feasibility of alternative solutions and their budgetary implications. The fourth step, implementation, corresponds to launching the actions, allocating resources and developing processes to guarantee the delivery of public programmes. Finally, the summative evaluation of policies and programmes reviews the extent to which the work is



**TABLE 1: BASIC TRAINING PROGRAMME IN M&E**

COURSE	OBJECTIVE	TIMETABLE
1. Diagnostics for programme formulation	Develop capacity to use information sources from programmes and official statistics to diagnose a situation and propose a public programme.	20 to 40 hours
2. Tools and indicators for programmes monitoring	Prepare participants to use information systems and to develop methodologies to build indicators for public programme monitoring.	20 to 40 hours
3. Introduction to research methods and evaluation studies	Develop skills essential for the understanding evaluation results and methodologies, their potential and limitations.	40 hours

solving the defined problem. This step assesses any requirement to change the programme in order to ensure its effectiveness, to discontinue the programme if the problem is no longer part of the agenda or to adapt to a new reality, restarting the cycle.

It is appropriate to note that, as part of the cycle, evaluation takes place after implementation. It is a more reflective process that helps inform the decision to continue or stop the programme. It is distinct from M&E activities, which are characterized by indicators (among other things). However, such investigative tools can be used at any time during the cycle. Re-naming this decisive stage of the cycle to ‘summative evaluation’ could help to avoid confusion between these two distinct activities.

Although there are different ways to implement a training programme based on this cycle, it would seem appropriate to organize it into three modules, each of 40 hours. Its content should include diagnosis/formulation of programmes, research tools and M&E studies, with complementary objectives. The course will become gradually more complex, as envisaged in Table 1, dealing with construction of indicators in the beginning and the methodologies of social research used on evaluation studies in the final stage. In addition to presenting M&E concepts and methodologies, it will be important for programme managers and technical staff to submit case studies from their own experience that show the effective use of course content.

### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The effective use of M&E products and surveys depends very much on factors related to the supply of information and knowledge produced and to the demand from potential users. Evaluation can focus on the production of information to improve programme management, to produce data for public transparency and/or to inform budget decisions. Those evaluations are targeted at a range of users with different demands for information and knowledge.

Once the focus is established, the methods used to develop knowledge products must be appropriate in terms of content, costs and schedule so that they meet their users' needs. Information and knowledge produced by M&E systems are complex, and efforts should be made to disseminate them with the most proper strategies—as customized publications and training courses. As the publishing market has demonstrated, especially with the advent of the Internet, there are many different and creative ways to communicate simple or complex messages to a range of audiences.

There is certainly much to be done to maximize the effective use of public policy assessments. National experiences presented at the Third International Conference on National Evaluation Capacities in 2013, as those presented during previous conferences, have been showing how different countries are dealing with it. Let's share our experiences and challenges!

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