

GUATEMALA: MULTI-STAKEHOLDER AND MULTI-SYSTEM EVALUATION SYSTEMS IN THE FIELD OF PUBLIC POLICY

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INTRODUCTION

For decades, evaluation tools have been indispensable in designing, implementing and developing public policies; in aiding institutions in overcoming their weaknesses; and in enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of institutional actions. These instruments were initially promoted by international organizations such as the UN, international financial bodies and aid agencies.

Analysis of the experience and results of monitoring and evaluation tool use suggests that the tools have lacked effectiveness and therefore have had a low impact on ensuring the sustainability of planning processes or achieving intervention targets.

The causes for poor use of evaluation tools include institutional weaknesses of public systems; reliance on international organizations in defining and promoting these mechanisms; lack of systemic evaluation procedures; lack of participatory processes in the definition, design, implementation and monitoring of evaluation tools; and lack of political will of the stakeholders involved with these instruments (including government, international community, international agencies and civil society).

In-depth, critical, objective and proactive discussion and debate about evaluation systems within the framework of public policy are necessary to help find solutions to major challenges and weaknesses countries face, particularly on sensitive issues such as public social investment. The analysis of the effectiveness and efficiency of the evaluation systems from a multi-stakeholder perspective at conferences such as the International Conference on National Evaluation Capacities will contribute to finding possible guidelines that help to clarify and refocus policies through consensus and capacities shared by all bodies and stakeholders

linked to these processes. Further work is needed to build strategic and long-term planning and evaluation systems, as well as to build the human and institutional conditions that will ensure the success of these instruments. Civil society can play a significant role in the field of public policy, primarily in social auditing processes and in pursuing transparency.

CONTEXT

Guatemala's socio-political and economic characteristics require objective conditions in processes related to issues such as the capacity to respond to issues related to democratic life, social stability, economic justice, participation and accountability.

The discussion in this review is based on several situational premises that are fundamental to a systematic analysis of the processes (e.g. measurement capabilities) that are promoted in the context of public policies and evaluation systems. These premises include:

- **Weak states:** In previous decades, Guatemala's political and economic systems have been highly exclusive; political and economic power was concentrated in a small sector of the population. This model led to sustained weaknesses of state institutions. Currently, states are "un-functional" and unable to respond systemically to the multifaceted problems of their populations and societies. Most Central American countries follow this pattern.
- **Vulnerable democratic processes:** Guatemala's socio-economic and structural problems led to civil strife, a constant risk of political crisis, and internal wars. Although most of these conflicts have come to an end, a culture of fear and terror and the persistence of different political powers and interests (along with the growing power of organized crime) continue to create a state of (un)governability. The state of democratic life is in a permanent state of vulnerability.
- **Growing structural problems:** Latin American countries are generally characterized by persistent and growing structural problems. The unequal distribution of wealth and income, coupled with inequitable access to basic social services, has led to more than 70 percent of the Central American population living in poverty or extreme poverty. This population is living with an extreme deficit in access to areas such as health; education; housing; social, civil and labour rights; leisure activities; social and citizen security; and political participation. Economic and social marginalization and exclusion is extraordinarily high. The indigenous population of Guatemala (which accounts for 65 percent of the population) remains the most vulnerable and affected by this problem, particularly children and women.
- **Externally-dependent economies:** Central American countries and most Latin American nations have been historically dependent on foreign economic and financial assistance, particularly from developed countries and international financial bodies. These countries are experiencing the persistent problem of ever-increasing external debt; economic dependency on agricultural exports; growing economic migration in recent years; and marginal foreign investment. These factors have deepened in recent years, particularly in the exploitation of natural resources and minerals.

CONCEPTS AND APPROACHES

In using evaluation systems to measure institutional capacities, there is a complex and diverse range of concepts and approaches that respond to heterogeneous interests and practices. In this respect, there is a lack of clarity of purpose in public policy and evaluation systems. The practical application of concepts or approaches is generally more related to a short-term vision and the specific political interests of the state or its various institutions. Implementing assessment tools has been driven more by obligation than by strategy, and the concepts and types of methodology are generally replicas of other experiences. Consequently, countries in the region have failed to generate proposals and initiatives that reflect the needs and context of each country.

RELATIONSHIPS: STATE, PUBLIC POLICY AND EVALUATION SYSTEMS

Analysis of the experience of measurement capabilities must begin with the relationships among state functionality, the rationale of public policy operations, and the instruments and tools available to promote evaluation processes.

- Public policy systems have been consistently absent or weak. Further, there is no clear identification or definition of what public policy should be. Though the government makes public policy, other bodies (e.g. academia and civil society) propose policies.
- State institutions have a poor capacity to define or implement systemic approaches to monitoring and evaluation. State initiatives often follow a sectoral logic, lack a systemic view of performance, and fail to incorporate monitoring and evaluation processes into project and programme design. Further, state institutions generally do not foster comprehensive relationships among design, development, planning and implementation of public policies.
- Public investment budgets are limited, which relates to a lack of national development plans, low levels of investment and the influence of political parties and sectoral interests. In many cases, corruption and lack of transparency frequently hamper public investment efforts.
- These factors translate into the absence of a genuine culture of democracy and governance, which is essential to securing the effective political, economic and social development of a country.

COMMON PRACTICES IN THE DEFINITION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF PUBLIC POLICY

The starting point of analysis is understanding public policy as a means to mitigate social and economic inequalities and to promote equality and social justice. A viable and functional evaluation system should respond in an integrated manner to ensure effective and efficient public policy decision-making and programme implementation. Within this conceptual framework, some recurring issues are repeatedly manifested in the development of public policy in most Central American countries.

- Countries typically lack standards as to how incorporate a country approach, a state vision and real prospects for sustainability into public policy.
- Weak (and in some cases non-existent) indicator systems limit effective public policy creation and implementation.
- In practice, public policies lack measurement indicators, have no budget, are short-term and present problems in reaching consensus among different political and economic powers.
- In general, public policy is not seen as a complex process that is systemically linked to a variety of interrelated situations, issues and institutions.
- Government responses tend to seek immediate results in order to prevent political reprisals from society. These actions imply the abandonment of more strategic and sustainable processes that address the identified problems.
- Public investment needs more organized processes, more strategic planning, improved efficiency and effectiveness of spending, increased quality and impact of spending and a focus on long-term sustainability.
- Citizens are demanding greater participation in governance processes, increased efficiency in addressing their demands and programmes that address their social needs.
- Applying evaluation processes to public policy and expenditure has traditionally addressed issues such as short-term responses, criteria influenced by partisan issues, lack of systemic planning, lack of an operating budget, lack of an institutional framework, insufficiently qualified human resources, lack of political will, external technical dependence, lack of a holistic-systemic approach in state operations, and exclusive and non-participatory processes.

COMMON PRACTICES IN THE DEFINITION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF EVALUATION SYSTEMS

The evaluation process can be defined as a series of systemic actions to assess progress and effectiveness in the use of identification tools, design, implementation and outcomes of government interventions in response to a country's social, economic and policy projections and problems. An objective and subjective evaluation system improves decision-making in terms of efficiency, sustainability and durability of results. An evaluation is a basic and strategic tool to improve governance and should be based on a national and long-term vision.

- Political (rather than technical) challenges pose the greatest bar to implementing an efficient and innovative monitoring and evaluation system.
- Evaluation should be understood as an institutionalized culture that enhances the operation, quality, impact and sustainability of social spending.
- There is no culture of public policy evaluation and, as a result, there are no institutionalized evaluation systems. Evaluation processes are not prioritized, as reflected in limited budgets to drive these processes.

- The evaluation instruments that are applied address specific or short-term processes (e.g. government reports and mandatory international reports such as Millennium Development Goal Reports). However, these reports typically lack indicators to measure the quality of these assessments.
- There is not enough qualified staff to implement systemic evaluation processes, creating a dependency on experts that generally come from international bodies; the necessarily national capacities are not being developed.
- The current evaluation system is underdeveloped; it is limited to a control perspective, and is not situated to become a functional means for efficient management or enhanced public social investment.
- The Latin American experience exhibits conflicting views and practices. The decision-making dynamics of immediate administrative or political pay-off does not incorporate factors such as the need for efficient, effective, strategic and sustainable processes.
- Politicized practices characterize policy evaluation processes.
- There are no viable legal or operational procedures for the participation of various sectors and powers in the social, economic and political life of a country (e.g. civil society, media or academia). There is political distrust between state institutions and social stakeholders.
- There are no standards to regulate or create a functional evaluation system; not all public investment entities are integrated into evaluation processes.
- No effective information systems (e.g. national accounting systems) contribute to the implementation of evaluation processes. A permanent system that identifies and generates statistics and qualitative and quantitative information needs to be established and regulated to provide feedback for these processes.
- Increasingly, citizens are calling for states to be more democratic and their institutions more effective.

CHARACTERISTICS OF AN EFFECTIVE EVALUATION SYSTEM

Several characteristics define the application of systemic logic to public governance processes.

- An evaluation system should be understood as an instrument that ensures a democratic system, social justice and development. To achieve these goals, evaluation systems should go beyond simple control-effectiveness relationships of public governance; evaluation should be seen as an institutionalized culture that promotes appropriate social spending, quality, impact and sustainability over time.
- Good governance is a fundamental condition for effective and efficient public policies with achievable goals over the short, medium and long term.

- For an evaluation system to be effective and fulfil its mandates, it must have the political and legal support of the state, its powers and political parties and the general public.
- The state should be responsible for public policy evaluation systems.
- Achieving transparency, one of the greatest challenges to good governance, increases trust, co-responsibility and society's involvement in democratic processes.
- An evaluation system should be impartially governed, without interference by political interests. This will promote objectivity, transparency, consistency between the problems and actions, and the accurate and determined establishment of performance indicators.
- In order to ensure that countries do not overly rely on specialized international bodies for evaluation processes, it is necessary to generate national institutional frameworks, provide staff with extensive training experience and build country-specific organizational, administrative and territorial capacities.
- Evaluation systems, methodologies and procedures should be highly participatory and include stakeholders and sectors from civil society and the state. Consensus-building should be used to establish common goals and to promote the requisite responsibility and social solidarity that are inherent to a democratic culture of evaluation.
- Evaluation must span a set of linked systems: public policy, planning, reporting, monitoring and follow-up. This set of systems requires institutional strengthening which entails improvements in budgeting, organization, qualified human resources and political will.
- A sustainable systemic process demands appropriate methodological instruments to generate quality and effective performance indicators (e.g. impact, outcomes, coordination) to allow for timely decision-making, prevent gaps and limitations in achieving progress limitations and guide required interstate coordination of institutions, agencies and related bodies.
- Information systems (e.g. national accounting systems) that effectively contribute to the implementation of evaluation processes should be established or strengthened. A permanent system to identify and generate statistics and qualitative and quantitative information should be regulated and established. There should be a comprehensive system for managing information in each instance of governance.
- The evaluation system should ensure the generation of timely, reliable, accurate and publicly available information on its processes. Developing a system of indicators will help formulate public policy and improve evaluation system implementation. Evaluative processes should be established for programme design and development, implementation and execution, and feedback and follow-up to generate lessons learned.

CONCLUSIONS

- Citizens are increasingly calling on states to be more democratic and for increased effectiveness of state institutions. The construction of sound, functional, democratic states requires building certainty, confidence, good governance and democratic legitimacy.
- An evaluation system should seek to generate political awareness about the country context. It should be a guide for building consensus from a diversity of approaches and proposals, and should be seen primarily as a great responsibility in terms of promoting efficient and sustainable solutions to deeply rooted and growing problems that generate inequality, poverty and underdevelopment.
- Experience demonstrates that in order to achieve sustainable results and advance capacity-building, states must have a systemic vision, legal certainty, strong political commitment, planning, management, monitoring and evaluation tools, and efficient, quality technical capacities.