

## 15. MEXICO

# EVALUATION USE AND ITS INSTITUTIONALIZATION IN THE FEDERAL EVALUATION SYSTEM IN MEXICO

**GABRIELA PÉREZ-YARAHUÁN**

Visiting Scholar, Center for Learning and  
Evaluation Research (CLEAR) Latin America, and  
Professor, Universidad Iberoamericana

### INTRODUCTION

A key element of improving the quality of a democratic government is the adequate performance of its public sector's interventions. In this respect, a country's evaluation capacities play a significant role, as evaluation is central to informing debate on policy decisions, to improving programmes' results and to enhancing public accountability (Chelimsky 2009, Independent Evaluation Office of UNDP et al. 2011). The Mexican Government and civil society have engaged in important efforts to consolidate and strengthen institutions for government evaluation, transparency and accountability during the past decade.

Though there are still important challenges, there has also been unquestionable progress. It is important, then, to point to fundamental characteristics in the development of the Mexican Federal Government's social programme evaluation system and to describe why and how evaluation studies have affected programmes' changes and decision makers' perceptions of evaluation importance and its use.

### THE MEXICAN SOCIAL PROGRAMME EVALUATION SYSTEM

The first nationwide and internationally well-known social programme evaluation studies in Mexico were those of the Programme for Education, Health and Nutrition, today known as Oportunidades. This was one of the first conditional cash transfer programmes implemented

on a national scale in Latin America. National and international experts were involved in the evaluation design and study. Several documents regarding this programme's evaluation have circulated extensively.<sup>72</sup>

The fluster generated by the Programme for Education, Health and Nutrition's external evaluations triggered a national interest in the evaluation of social programmes in Mexico within an environment of increasing demands for government accountability. Access to information and government evaluation became newly acquired undertakings for the new party in government in 2000. But it also became an issue of interest for the former political elite, then the opposition, as there were new incentives to search for mechanisms for control and oversight.

In 2001, the Annual Federal Budget Bill included the requirement that all federal subsidy programmes present an annual external evaluation to serve as an assessment of the programme's implementation and its compliance to its operation rules, an analysis of the results on its stated objectives and a cost-effectiveness analysis. From 2002 to 2006, 326 evaluations studies were conducted, an average of 80 programmes a year. However, the use of the evaluation reports to improve on programme design and operation was largely ignored or undocumented.

The General Law for Social Development, enacted in 2004, contained several guidelines regarding evaluation use. According to the law, the purpose of evaluation was to periodically review the fulfilment of social programmes' objectives, targets and actions, in order to correct, modify, reorient or suspend the programmes. In its article 80, the law stated that, based on evaluation results, the National Council for Social Development Policy Assessment (CONEVAL) was to elaborate suggestions and recommendations to the Federal Executive's programmes, and that these suggestions were to be made public.

The Annual Federal Budget Bill established that evaluation studies were to be used for the process of analysis and discussion of the Budget Bill. However, there was no precise mechanism on how the information was to influence budget discussions. Furthermore, there was no incentive to motivate the use of evaluation reports to promote any programme change. It is important to say that evaluations varied greatly in their quality, extent, information and methods—and even in the issues that were discussed and analysed.

In 2006, the new Federal Law of Budget and Financial Responsibility gave permanence to many of the established guidelines of the Annual Budget Bill regarding evaluation implementation and procedures. With respect to evaluation use, the new law was equally brief and ambiguous, establishing only that agencies were to follow up on the recommendations of evaluations and link to the Performance Evaluation System and budget decisions.

In March 2007, the Department of Finance, the Department of Public Service and

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72 For example: (1) Coady, David P. 2000. "Final report: The application of social cost-benefit analysis to the evaluation of PROGRESA". November. Report submitted to PROGRESA. Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute. (2) Behrman, Jere R., and Petra E. Todd. 1999. "Randomness in the experimental samples of PROGRESA (education, health, and nutrition program)". February. Report submitted to PROGRESA. Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute. (3) Gertler, Paul J. 2000. "Final report: The impact of PROGRESA on health". November. Report submitted to PROGRESA. Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute.

CONEVAL jointly issued the General Guidelines for the Evaluation of the Federal Public Administration Programmes. These established a set of rules with the intention to clarify and give a more permanent and viable structure to the programme evaluation system. The guidelines served to clarify three important aspects regarding evaluation and its use. First, the document established different types of evaluation studies that were to be conducted for federal programmes; it also established the obligation of the federal government to issue an annual evaluation programme that enumerated types and subjects of evaluations assigned within the federal administration's programmes. Second, it established the requirement for evaluation dissemination and publication by all federal agencies in charge of programmes subject to evaluation. And third, it confirmed the compulsory use of evaluation results by federal agencies on those aspects conducive to enhancing programme performance.

Since then, a new focus on evaluation use has been evident in the legal and administrative frameworks. Aspects such as communicating and publishing evaluation results are present, as well as the intent to make evaluations more applicable and relevant to programme improvement. However, even though the General Guidelines for Evaluation issued in 2007 confirmed the required use of evaluations, there was no clear process to make this requirement effective. One of the main problems perceived was that evaluations' recommendations entailed the joint efforts of diverse actors within federal and state governments, which most often did not take place. It is also important to recognize that there is a clear need for evaluators and other stakeholders to interact in order to transform evaluation findings into real programme improvement.

Independent academic research that used a sample of social federal programmes between 2002 and 2008 found little relationship between changes in a programme's operational rules and evaluation improvement recommendations (Pérez-Yarahuán 2012).

## INSTITUTIONALIZING EVALUATION USE

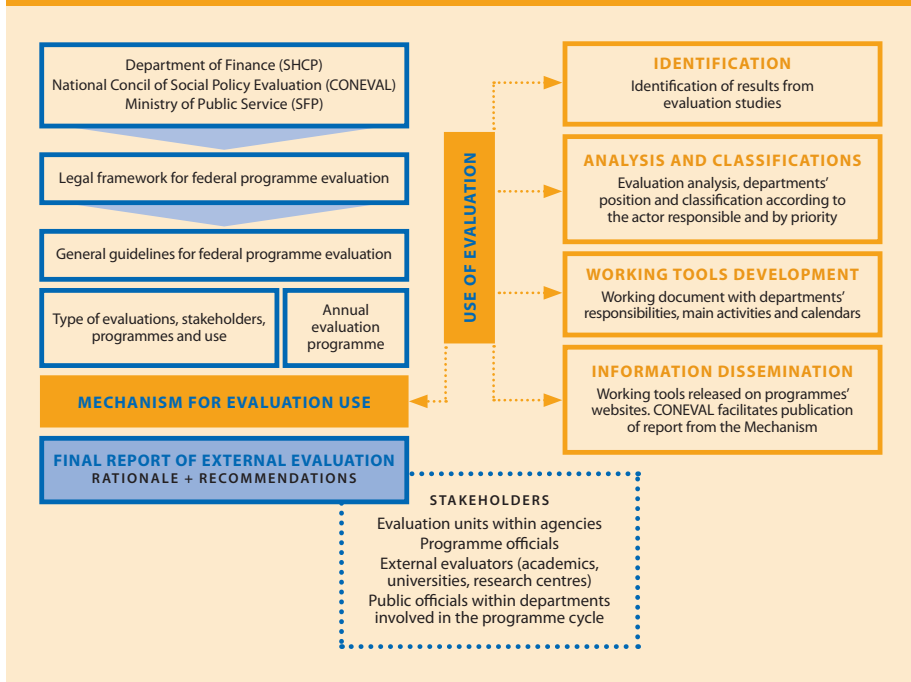
By October 2008, officials from the Department of Finance, the Department of Public Service and CONEVAL, aware of this problem, issued a formal mechanism for federal programmes and their corresponding agencies to follow up on programme evaluation reports findings.<sup>73</sup> This mechanism is a process by which the main evaluation stakeholders analyse and comment on the evaluation reports and findings and then propose specific actions to enhance programme performance. This process is public and transparent through the publication of documents on federal agencies' Web pages. CONEVAL publishes an annual report online that shows the agencies and programmes that followed up the process, the type of improvement actions that were to be undertaken and the stakeholders involved.<sup>74</sup> This report puts in motion actions that involve federal and state governments and that are reviewed in the Intersecretarial Commission for Social Development.

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73 SHCP, CONEVAL, SFP, *Mecanismo de Aspectos Susceptibles de Mejora*, 14 de octubre, 2008, Oficio No. 307-A-1981, No. VQZ SE 273/08, No. SCAGP/200/821/2008.

74 CONEVAL, *Informe de Seguimiento a los Aspectos Susceptibles de Mejora de los Programas y Acciones Federales de Desarrollo Social 2012/2013*. México, CONEVAL, 2013. Available at [web.coneval.gob.mx/Informes/Evaluacion/Informe ASM/Informe ASM 2012-2013.pdf](http://web.coneval.gob.mx/Informes/Evaluacion/Informe ASM/Informe ASM 2012-2013.pdf).

**FIGURE 1: MECHANISM FOR THE FOLLOW-UP ON PROGRAMME EVALUATION REPORTS FINDINGS WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE NATIONAL EVALUATION SYSTEM IN MEXICO**



The formal mechanism, renewed each year, puts in motion a process by which different stakeholders have to become familiar with the evaluation studies, have to engage in active debate regarding evaluation findings and have to propose specific courses of actions. This process permits a follow-up on evaluation findings.

Empirical research on evaluation use and public officials' perceptions shows that evaluation use has increased in Mexico and that federal public officials at different levels of responsibility are aware of government programme evaluations being performed each year by independent evaluators. Public officials have started to perceive evaluation as an instrument for specific programme improvement, but unfortunately less so as a public accountability instrument (Pérez-Yarahuán 2012). Evaluation use has improved in the government sector, particularly in the executive federal branch and in professional civil society organizations. But evaluation use needs to extend to congress and to the citizens in order for the evaluation effort to realize its full potential and purpose.

In this respect, the evaluation process needs to strengthen its communication strategies, particularly those focused towards other non-governmental stakeholders. Since 2008, CONEVAL's communication strategy has not had much change. In this respect, the

quasi-independent nature of CONEVAL (its budget and some of its appointments depend on the federal executive), may pose some obstacles to increasing its outreach and influence on policy debate, thus affecting potential use.

## CONCLUSIONS

During the past decade, the evaluation system in Mexico has been steadily institutionalized into a set of rules, organizations and procedures by which hundreds of programmes are effectively evaluated each year. Evaluation activity in Mexico has been perceived as a highly legitimate task under a political climate of democratic transition, and in which instruments for attaining accountability and control of those holding power is deemed a *sine qua non* for political change. An important challenge, then, is to assure that evaluation efforts are used in fact for different purposes, such as debating public policy, improving government programmes and enhancing public accountability.

This paper described the mechanism by which the federal evaluation system in Mexico has been formed and strengthened. Today, evaluation appears to be highly ranked as an instrument for government change among public officials in the federal government, particularly so for the change of rules and the acquisition of information about programme performance. This use is perceived by government actors within the executive. The perception of the use by actors outside the government, such as congress, beneficiaries or citizens, remains yet to be achieved.

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