

# NATIONAL EVALUATION CAPACITY: LESSONS LEARNED AND A CONCEPTUAL SCHEME

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses development of an enabling environment for evaluation capacity at the national level. Based on lessons drawn from national evaluation capacity experiences and discussions in the literature, it presents a conceptual scheme and discusses ways to support the development of national evaluation capacity.

## LESSONS LEARNED

The lessons learned presented in this paper are based on the author's direct involvement in national evaluation capacity during three decades of work in Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe. They aim to address in a realistic and constructive way the factors leading to an enabling environment for national evaluation capacity and to identify appropriate ways to support it.

1. **Evaluation capacity must be 'unbundled':** Different evaluation capacities should be taken into account, allowing for specialization and division of labour. It is important to distinguish between the capacity to manage evaluations and the capacity to conduct them, as the former does not imply the latter, and vice versa. This has been particularly important since the 1990s, when governments began contracting out and managing evaluations rather than conducting them. It is also important to acknowledge that conducting evaluations involves both production and communication/dissemination. Last but not least is the capacity to use evaluations. As in the case of surveys, the capacity to manage and conduct them does not imply the capacity to use them.<sup>49</sup> These are all different capacities; it is not practical to lump them all together under the single term 'capacity'. It is important to highlight the need to unbundle them, to understand better the different situations at national level and to design more appropriate ways to support the enhancement of national evaluation capacities.

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49. On the use of evaluations and the capacity to use them, see Feinstein (2002).

**2. Individual training to conduct evaluations is neither necessary nor sufficient for development of national evaluation capacity:** For quite some time evaluation capacity was reduced to ‘the capacity to carry out evaluations’, and to a certain extent this continues today. However, as indicated by lesson 1, this is inappropriate because there are several important evaluation capacities. Furthermore, this approach has an important limitation in that it addresses the level of the individual rather than that of the organization. Experience shows that enhancing individual capacities without strengthening the organization and the NEC environment can result paradoxically in weakening the organization, and NEC itself. Without an improvement in the environment, the concerned individual(s) may decide to migrate to other organizations or even to other countries.<sup>50</sup>

**3. The focus should be on national—not just governmental—evaluation capacities:** Though the government’s evaluation capacity is an important component of NEC, civil society capacities are also crucial. Parliaments and other civil society organizations can (and sometimes already do) use evaluations to become informed about issues on which they hope to influence decision-makers. To do this they need to have the capacity to use evaluations, which includes being aware of their existence and knowing how to search for them. Furthermore, in some countries, such as Chile, the legislature is consulted on the evaluation agenda. In Ghana, efforts have been made to develop the assessment capacities of civil society.<sup>51</sup>

Civil society use of evaluations can enhance the quality of democracy by providing citizens with information that allows them to assess government performance and influence the decision-making process. One remarkable experience comes from India, where report cards were developed to help civil society in assessing public services, an experience that has been replicated in other regions.<sup>52</sup> Some civil society organizations, such as think tanks, are well placed to conduct evaluations. Their capacity to do so may be developed through a learning-by-doing process if they are given the opportunity to perform evaluations.

**4. Different types of evaluation capacity gaps should be identified:** The practice and the literature on evaluation capacity refer frequently to supply and demand.<sup>53</sup> While this is useful, it is better to consider not only actual supply and demand and the gap between them, but also (i) ‘potential’ evaluation supply, such as professionals

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50. At a recent national roundtable on the UNDP Assessment of Development Results for Chile, it was forcefully stressed that a set of evaluation capacity-building activities aimed at the individual level did not result in strengthening the concerned organization, because after the activity was completed the trained individuals left. It should also be mentioned that the ‘capabilities’ approach, pioneered by Amartya Sen, is also focused on the individual level (though it can be eventually extended to take into account ‘social capabilities’).

51. See Mackay and Gariba (2000).

52. See Paul (2002).

53. For example, see Boyle & Lemaire (1999).

in the country who could conduct evaluations but have not had the opportunity; (ii) 'potential' evaluation demand, such as demand for evaluations that is not expressed due to lack of funding; and (iii) 'latent' evaluation demand, such as demand for information that has not been articulated as a demand for evaluation because there is no clear awareness or understanding of evaluation.

These three concepts help in identifying the following gaps during a NEC diagnosis, which is important for designing appropriate support: (i) a gap between potential and actual supply of national evaluation capacities, which may lead to opportunities for 'potential' evaluators to become 'actual' evaluators; (ii) a gap between potential and actual demand, which may require a funding mechanism, such as an evaluation fund that can be tapped to commission evaluations or a consultation mechanism that enables parliament to participate in defining the agenda; and (iii) a gap between actual and latent demand for evaluations, which may require the development of the capacity to use evaluations.

A complementary set of evaluation capacity gaps relates to the different types of evaluations. Some years ago an influential paper was circulated in development evaluation circles about the so-called 'evaluation gap'.<sup>54</sup> The paper, focused on impact evaluation, pointed out an important evaluation gap that had implications for evaluation capacity. But other types of evaluations are also missing or lacking in quality. This can lead to additional evaluation gaps (for example, self-evaluations, process and outcome evaluations), and the corresponding capacities to undertake them.

5. **Experience sharing can help develop national evaluation capacities:** Sharing of experiences is an important tool for developing national evaluation capacity among developing countries. For example, Chile provided support to Mexico to develop its national evaluation performance system and the capacities to operate it. Mexico could also contribute assistance to develop Chile's evaluation capacities in social sectors.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, in most countries national evaluation capacities have not been developed countrywide, so it is an important challenge to develop sub-national evaluation capacities. This has already begun in some countries, such as Brazil (Belo Horizonte), India (Andhra Pradesh) and Mexico (Queretaro).
6. **National and regional evaluation networks can contribute to NEC:** In recent years several regional and national evaluation networks have been created.<sup>56</sup> As shown in Sri Lanka and other countries, these networks can play a role in expanding NEC and in reducing gaps between potential and actual supply as well as between latent and actual demand.

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54. See [www.cgdev.org/section/initiatives/\\_active/evalgap/about/](http://www.cgdev.org/section/initiatives/_active/evalgap/about/)

55. The evolution of the innovative Mexican evaluation system is described in Feinstein and Hernandez Licona (2008).

56. See Feinstein and Beck (2006) and Morra-Imas and Rist (2009).

### A CONCEPTUAL SCHEME FOR DEVELOPING CAPACITY

Efforts to develop evaluation capacity at the national level have been going on in all regions for more than 30 years, though some are neither well known nor appropriately documented. The lessons presented in the previous section are an attempt to draw on some of this rich experience. Building on them, the conceptual scheme shown in table 1, anchored in a NEC matrix, may be useful both for a diagnosis of NEC and for considering how to support its enhancement. The matrix combines the different types of evaluation capacities mentioned in lesson 1 with the different ‘principals’ and ‘agents’ mentioned in lessons 3 and 4.

The Roman numerals within the cells are used to facilitate reference to the matrix’s cells. Thus, I is government’s capacity to manage evaluations, IV is government’s capacity to conduct evaluations, and so on.

This matrix allows consideration of different actual and possible scenarios. Thus, during the 1970s and 1980s, the emphasis was on conducting evaluations. They were carried out by governments, sometimes with support from international organizations (so IV was the dominant cell of the matrix). In the 1990s, some developing countries (Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico) started to develop government-based evaluation systems. Governments contracted out most of the evaluations while playing a management role (shifting from cell IV to I).<sup>57</sup> There has never been much involvement of parliaments or civil society in evaluations (weak second and third columns, except V). Early in the 21st century think tanks and universities have become more and more involved in conducting evaluations (cells III, VI and IX are almost empty in most countries, whereas V has become significant).

The NEC matrix can be used to think about appropriate national evaluation systems, taking into account national realities and the capacities needed to run those systems. For

**TABLE 1. NATIONAL EVALUATION CAPACITY MATRIX**

NATIONAL EVALUATION CAPACITIES	GOVERNMENT	UNIVERSITIES, THINK TANKS, CONSULTANTS	PARLIAMENT
Managing evaluations	I	II	III
Conducting evaluations	IV	V	VI
Using evaluations	VII	VIII	IX

57. See Grau, Nuria and Ospina (2008). As part of the process of creating and legitimizing M&E systems, some countries, like Colombia, have laws and decrees mandating evaluation, which could contribute to an enabling environment for NEC. However, as stated in Mackay (2007), “a law or decree on its own does not ensure that the considerable efforts required to build an M&E system will be undertaken”. Cunill & Ospina (2008) refer to the Brazilian and Chilean cases as two examples where systems were consolidated without a legal foundation. Taken together, these cases indicate that a legal framework is neither necessary nor sufficient for the development of an M&E system, though it may be help to create an enabling environment for it, and for the enhancement of NEC.

example, in some countries it may be desirable and feasible for the government to manage the process while think tanks/universities conduct the evaluations. These evaluations are used by parliament or civil society, corresponding to cells I, V and IX, the diagonal of the matrix, which would be the critical national evaluation capacities needed to ensure that the system would function.

### SUPPORTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL EVALUATION CAPACITY

Rather than proceeding with ready-made recommendations on how to support NEC, it is important to carry out a NEC diagnosis for a specific country, for which the conceptual framework presented in the preceding section may be helpful.<sup>58</sup> The following activities may be appropriate to support the development of NEC, though their suitability should be assessed case by case:

- **Information:** Support in the search for relevant experiences in developing and enhancing NEC, taking into account different contexts, as well as for potentially useful reference materials, such as diagnosis guidelines;
- **Networking:** Support in linking with or establishing networks of evaluation practitioners;
- **Funding:** Support for training of individuals, including training of trainers, through scholarships, and also for contracting national teams to conduct evaluations or funding study tours and knowledge sharing among developing countries.

These three lines of support could be facilitated by international cooperation, thus contributing to an enabling environment for national evaluation capacity, in line with the recommendations in the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, ratified in the Accra Agenda for Action, concerning the reliance on country-based systems.<sup>59</sup>

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58. In addition, Mackay (2007) provides examples of M&E country diagnosis. See also Morra-Imas & Rist (2009) and Feinstein (2009).

59. See Picciotto (2007).

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