

24. SOUTH AFRICA

REFLECTIONS ON THE SOUTH AFRICAN EXPERIENCE WITH EVALUATION AND THE USE OF EVALUATIVE EVIDENCE TO ORIENT PUBLIC POLICY FORMULATION

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BACKGROUND

South Africa has a semi-federal system with three spheres of government (national, provincial and local). Therefore, M&E has to be applied at all three spheres.

EVALUATION PRIOR TO DEVELOPMENT OF THE NATIONAL EVALUATION SYSTEM

Prior to 1994, rigorous M&E activities started in South Africa in relation to donor support for non-profit organizations. The New Public Management Approach that gained popularity in the 1990s and the results-based management paradigms of the 2000s brought in demand for a greater hierarchical alignment between activities and different levels of outcomes. A 2007 study by the Public Service Commission noted that M&E was generally conducted in an “isolated or vertical manner” and not integrated into a comprehensive system (Government of South Africa 2007b).

During the 2000s, there was a growing interest in M&E and pressure mounted to introduce a more coherent approach to government-wide monitoring and evaluation. In 2005, the cabinet approved a plan for the development of a government-wide M&E system. This system was envisaged as a 'system of systems', in which each department would have a functional monitoring system, out of which the necessary information could be extracted. The policy framework to guide the overarching government-wide M&E system was published in 2007 (Government of South Africa 2007a).

The government that came to power following the 2009 elections faced a number of service delivery challenges, resulting in a greater willingness to be frank about the quality of public services, corruption and other governance problems. There was a political consensus to improve government performance, including through a greater focus on M&E. In 2009, a Ministry of Performance M&E was created in the Presidency; a Department of Performance M&E was created in 2010.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN NATIONAL EVALUATION SYSTEM

South Africa's M&E work in the 2000s focused on monitoring, although some departments did undertake evaluations. The findings of the Department of Performance M&E's first round of implementation of the Management Performance Assessment Tool indicated that only 13 percent of the 103 national and provincial departments were conducting evaluations.

In 2011, a study tour to Columbia, Mexico and the United States led to development of a national evaluation policy framework, adopted by the Cabinet in November 2011. The strategic approach that has been taken focuses on important policies, programmes and plans; those selected are embedded in a national evaluation plan approved by the Cabinet. The focus has been on utilization, the public availability of all non-confidential evaluations, and the existence of improvement plans (which are then monitored). This approach emphasizes learning over punitive measures, building evaluation into the culture of departments rather than promoting resistance and malicious compliance.

Several types of evaluations are envisaged, including diagnostic, design, implementation, impact, economic and evaluation synthesis. These types may be combined for specific evaluations. This means that evaluations are not only undertaken at the end of an intervention, but can be conducted at any stage in the life cycle—before (diagnostic), during (implementation) or at the end of a phase (impact). An economic evaluation can be performed at any stage.

Evaluations are implemented as a partnership between the department(s) concerned and the Department of Performance M&E (which partially funds the evaluations). An Evaluation and Research Unit (supported by a cross-government Evaluation Technical Working Group) has been established in the Department of Performance M&E to drive the system and provide technical support. Guidelines were developed for standards for evaluation, competencies for programme managers, M&E staff and evaluators, and training courses started in September 2012. Five courses were developed and are being rolled out.

In June 2012, the cabinet approved the first national evaluation plan, with eight evaluations. The second national evaluation plan, with 15 evaluations planned for 2013 to 2014,

was approved in June 2012. In total, 24 evaluations have been commissioned and three have been completed at the time of this paper.

USING EVALUATIVE EVIDENCE TO ORIENT PUBLIC POLICY FORMULATION

The Department of Performance M&E recently commissioned an audit of evaluations conducted for the government between 2006 and 2011. The evaluations reflect a range of uses:

- Revising policy (e.g. Diagnostic Review of Early Childhood, Impact Evaluation of the Reception Year of Schooling);
- Revising plans and priorities (e.g. Schools that Work, Report on the State of the Environment, Overview of Health Care, Impact Evaluation of the Reception Year of Schooling);
- Changing funding regimes (e.g. Child Support Grant);
- Changing programmes (e.g. Mid-term Review of the Expanded Public Works Programme); and
- Increasing the knowledge base (e.g. Profile of Social Security Beneficiaries).

THE DEMAND FOR EVALUATIVE EVIDENCE

What evidence of demand is there?

In 2012, the Department of Performance M&E undertook a survey in order to assess the state of M&E in the national and in provincial governments (Government of South Africa 2013). In terms of culture-based barriers, more than half of the respondents (54 percent) indicated that problems are not treated as opportunities for learning and improvement. Other noteworthy responses indicated that senior management often failed to champion M&E (45 percent), M&E is regarded as the job of the M&E Unit rather than of all managers (44 percent), there is not a strong M&E culture (40 percent), M&E is seen as policing and controlling (39 percent) and M&E units have little influence. These all point to the challenge in using M&E as a strategic function to inform policy and decision-making.

In 57 percent of cases, M&E information had limited or no influence on decision-making. Nearly half of the respondents (46 percent) regarded integration with policy development as either non-existent or very limited. Just under half of the departments (48 percent) reported that integration of M&E with budgeting is limited. This lack of integration implies a poor environment for the demand and use of M&E evidence, since it is likely to be viewed as a stand-alone activity detached from other key management processes.

Encouraging demand and use

There are several elements of the national evaluation system that are explicitly designed to ensure that evaluations are demanded and findings are implemented. These include:

- Departments are requested to submit evaluations, rather than being told they will be subject to evaluations. This means they are more likely to want them and to want the results;
- The Cabinet approves the National Evaluation Plan, which means that there is at least some central high-level interest and awareness of the evaluations;
- Evaluation Steering Committees are chaired by the department requesting the evaluation, while the Department of Performance M&E provides the secretariat and is therefore able to ensure that the national evaluation system is complied with. Evaluation Steering Committees have significant power, including approval of terms of reference and reports;
- Provisions for a management response so that departments have the opportunity to respond to evaluation findings; and
- All evaluations must be followed by an improvement plan, which is monitored for two years.

Despite these elements, there is reticence among some managers, partly because the results of evaluations are made public and they are wary of being exposed (as indicated earlier, in most departments the identification of problems is not seen as an opportunity for learning). Other measures being undertaken to stimulate demand include:

- Making presentations at senior management fora;
- Developing a course for senior managers in Evidence-based Policymaking and Implementation; and
- Making parliamentary portfolio committees aware of how they can use M&E findings to support their oversight functions. This year saw the first portfolio committee (Mineral Resources) request a department to submit evaluations in the call for evaluations in 2014 to 2015. A capacity development programme to support the parliament's use of information from the Department of Performance M&E's is being planned.

While the Department of Performance M&E has been concentrating on the 15 evaluations per year in the National Evaluation Plan, it has also been stimulating the demand for evaluations more widely. It has piloted the development of provincial evaluation plans with the Western Cape and Gauteng Provinces, and three departments have now developed departmental evaluation plans. This aims to stimulate a wider use of evaluation than could be covered under the national evaluation plan, and also to stimulate departments and provinces to think of what they should cover themselves (as opposed to those with major national interest and covered in the national evaluation plan).

The Department of Performance M&E is also stimulating improved accountability by making evaluations publicly accessible. The audit of evaluations mentioned previously is being made available through an evaluation repository on the Department of Performance M&E website, and all evaluations undertaken through the national evaluation plan will be made public, once they have been submitted to the cabinet.

LESSONS FOR A UTILIZATION-FOCUSED EVALUATION SYSTEM

Supply of evaluation in South Africa has historically been weak, and there has also been limited demand (though with patches of excellence). In general, there has been insufficient evidence use across government, and a tendency for political judgement rather than political decisions informed by strong evidence. Since 2010 there has been an increasing supply of evidence catalysed by the Department of Performance M&E (initially monitoring evidence, with evaluation evidence starting to emerge). The Department of Performance M&E is also about to examine the roles it should play in promoting research evidence. The Cabinet's positive response to the Department of Performance M&E's systems for evaluation and its systems of management performance assessment and front-line service delivery monitoring point to the cabinet's receptivity for good evidence. There are issues, however, about the consequences of problems identified, which creates the incentives for addressing the challenges identified.

The design of the evaluation system is focused on utilization, seeking to build from a demand-driven system. As the 23 evaluations underway start to report from June 2013, and improvement plans are developed and monitored, it will be interesting to see how challenging findings are taken by departments and how far the findings are taken up in practice.

The next year, to mid-2014, will test the evaluation system and show how well the ambitious system that has been established is achieving what it intends to, where evaluations are informing significant changes to policy, decision-making and implementation. Key questions will be:

- How well is the Department of Performance M&E able to play its independent role, especially when evaluations are challenging?
- Can the 'learning as opposed to punitive' focus of the system be strengthened?
- Should the wider public be more strongly involved in the evaluation system, and if so, how?

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