Institutionalization and Use of Evaluations in the Public Sector in Nepal

Prepared for the
3rd International Conference on National Evaluation Capacities (NEC)

São Paulo, Brazil

from 29 September to 2 October 2013

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Overview

In Nepal, efforts to institutionalize evaluations of development interventions started especially since 1990 though the formal planning process was started in 1956. National Planning Commission (NPC) is the apex body to facilitate monitoring and evaluation (M&E) in the country. The monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system has been embedded in the national planning processes and also in all stages of project cycle management. Similarly, starting from July 2002, Nepal has been making efforts to institutionalize Managing for Development Results (MfDR) approaches in its planning processes designing results frameworks and standardizing results indicators both at the sectoral and project levels. Since 1995, NPC conducted on-going and post-completion evaluations of 29 projects of various sectors engaging third parties. This paper aims to briefly review the use of evidences generated from those evaluations in planning and decision making processes.

Literature review

The use of evaluations of development interventions depends on many things though they provide evidences useful for policy or decision making processes. As per Cracknell (2005) feedback of evaluations can be used at the project, program, institutional, sectoral and policy or strategy levels. In addition, evaluations can be used in trainings and also by beneficiaries or anyone interested outside the agency. However, as per Weiss (1999) policymakers rarely base new policies directly on evaluation results. The writer gives two main reasons behind the low use of such evidences in policy making processes; (i) due to the competing pressures of interests, ideologies, other information and institutional constraints, and (ii) because many policies take shape over time through the actions of many officials in many offices, each of which does its job without conscious reflection (Weiss, 1999).

An independent evaluation system that ensures the quality of the report is equally important for the effective use of evaluations. However, there is a need to strike a balance between independency and the internal relevance of evaluations. Gaarder and Briceno (2010) ‘want a system that is independent in order to achieve external credibility and social legitimacy, but not so independent that it loses its internal relevance’. Moreover, management responses on evaluation reports provide a useful basis to ensure the effective use of evaluations by addressing recommendations along with identifying responsibility and timing of implementation. Bamberger and Segone (2011) argue that management responses are a practical means to enhance the use of the evaluations to improve action. The writers also argue for proper dissemination of the report identifying both direct and indirect users of the evaluation to ensure effective utilization of the findings and conclusion.

Methodology

Review of documents including the 29 evaluation reports, five medium-term plan documents and some policies were done to assess the use of the evaluations in Nepal. In addition, Key Informant Interviews (KII) were conducted with nine individuals --3 from NPC, 2 from the Ministry of Finance and 4 relevant officials from the line ministries directly relevant with development

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1 Available at www.npc.gov.np
activities – in order to generate information on the use of evaluation findings. Due to the strict limit of the length it is possible to include key portion of the data and the analysis in this paper.

Findings of the review of the use of evaluations

As an apex planning, monitoring and evaluation agency, NPC facilitates evaluations engaging third parties hired through competitive processes. Each year, couple of programs or projects is selected for evaluation using specific criteria from among the candidature projects received from the line ministries. Steering committees formed for each evaluation to facilitate the processes right from the beginning approve the TOR, select the right evaluators, facilitate evaluation processes and maintain quality of evaluations and reports. During the period from 1996 to 2012, NPC has conducted evaluations of 29 programs/projects. More than 50 percent (16) of those evaluations were from agriculture sector including irrigation and land reform sub-sectors. It is noted that from the irrigation sector alone 9 evaluations were done. In addition, the sectoral disaggregation also shows that 8 evaluations were from social sector, 3 from infrastructure and 2 from the economic sectors. Out of the 29 evaluations, only 60 percentages have the baseline data whereas rest 40 percent projects used recall method create baselines. Further, the evaluation reports mostly focus on the processes of implementation and the outputs delivered rather than the upper hierarchies of the result chain especially the outcomes. Methodologically, all studies reviewed in this paper were mostly quantitative in nature though attempts were made to use some qualitative tools. However, proper triangulations have not been done on the tools both in the design of instruments and interfacing the data in the analysis stages. The evaluations have collected rich sources of data but the analyses of some evaluations have been weak so that there are concerns on their quality. The NPC has established practices to disseminate evaluation findings inviting broad range of stakeholders including policy makers from the line ministries and relevant partners in addition to the uploading of the reports in the website.

While reviewing the evaluation reports and assessing their uses in the planning processes, it is found that the results have been used instrumentally or directly in the following purposes: The recommendations have been used to formulate or refine policies and make decisions whether to continue, upscale or replicate or modify the project and its implementation modalities. In addition, the results have been used in the discussions and decisions of annual programs and budget to projects. Moreover, the findings and results of the on-going evaluation of projects have been used in the amendment of programs and also in requesting more funds during the fiscal year. Line ministries have also used evaluation results as evidences when they have to respond concerns raised in the legislature in the debates of budget allocation to sectors or projects. Further, evaluation of the projects are also documented and used to review and evaluate the medium-term plans and also relevant policies. However, none of the reports are used so far to ensure accountability of those who were engaged in the implementation processes even in cases the projects were not implemented well or have not been operating in a way to realize the theory of change initially developed.

There are some explanations behind the low use of evaluation recommendations in planning and decisions making processes. Firstly, evidences indicate that the usage of the evaluations demanded by the line ministries useful for their decisions have been well owned and used than those which were initiated by the NPC. Secondly, it is found that timing-wise policy recommendations outlined in the evaluations were mostly addressed in the successive medium-term plans so that in some cases the recommendations were used even after four years. Thirdly,
some of the evaluations were done before the full development of the program or project without having anticipated results delivered. In such cases, the evaluations were not used well since they were not able to recommend convincing measures to influence the policy decisions regarding the projects. Fourthly, the quality of evaluations and the recommendations have been considered as an important factor behind the effective use of the reports. The review found that majority of evaluations though was methodologically sound and did capture lots of facts; cases were observed where the recommendations were not based on rigorous analysis consequently affecting their quality and uses. When asked about the quality concerns of the reports with the concerned policy maker in the NPC he responded, ‘it is the unhealthy competition among the evaluators that they bid very low amount to get the assignment even if their proposal is not technically sound.’ Moreover, a policy maker in a line ministry responded ‘it is due to low capacities of both the parties who facilitate or conduct evaluations’.

The Government of Nepal has institutionalized the practice of evaluations of public sector projects though they have not been conducted systematically and with clear definition of the purpose that is either for lessons learning or ensuring accountability or for both of these purposes. Unless and until the agencies who facilitate evaluations do not have pre-determined ideas about the use of the evaluation or the decisions for which the evaluation provides evidences, the report will not be used effectively. Without the clarity of the objectives of the evaluation it is not easy to frame specific evaluation questions to provide evidences in areas where the policy makers are interested. Even more, in the absence of clear-cut evaluation policies and periodic M&E plans inconsistencies were found in conducting and using the evaluations. Whatever evaluations have been done the use of the reports is not encouraging.

The review findings of the policy papers and the KIIs clearly tell that the usability of the evaluations depend on the commitment and demand of policy makers for the immediate or medium-term needs, timeliness and the quality of the reports. The policy makers in upper echelons are not always clear about the value for money allocated to conduct impact evaluations. A high level M&E official in a line ministry clearly said. 'Time and often questions come from the policy makers about the benefits of investing resources for evaluations arguing that issues in project implementation and the results are visible in the surface so that there is no need to pour resources in studies'. Reluctances like this at the higher levels naturally affect the demand and use of evaluations in the public systems. Policy makers have different options in addition to evaluation reports to take as reference or feedback, thus it is not always right to expect one to one relationship between recommendations and policies. Similarly, the user of the evaluations range from the policy makers in the planning agency, budget agency, line agencies, project managers and sub-national level policy makers as well. So, the usability of evaluation reports have been found dependent on the clarity of recommendations addressing to the particular agencies where it can be implemented along with the action plan to implement them. Nepal’s experience shows that the users of the evaluation reports need to be identified right from the beginning, that is, in the design phase to effectively use the recommendations.

The usability questions heavily depend on quality of the reports which rely on the capacity and independent work of the evaluators. Quality concerns can come on the theory of change of the intervention, methodologies and on the analysis. In some of the evaluations, the evaluators did neither find the theory of change of the projects nor the indicators already defined to evaluate
results. In such cases, the evaluators were not found clear on the program or project theory of change especially impacts or outcomes rather focused only on the outputs delivered.

**Issues and lessons learnt**

The findings show that there are several issues in the use of evaluations in Nepal. The main issue is the concern of taking evaluations as a driver of policy or programmatic changes. It is because time and often questions have been raised about the continuity of funding to the weak performing projects in terms of results generated from evaluation studies. Moreover, there is absence of clear and coherent evaluation policy that drives systematic selection, conduction and use of evaluations. Even more, there are weak capacities of demanding, facilitating and conducting impact evaluations resulting in low quality studies and use of recommendations. Similarly, disseminating the reports in local languages and properly documenting them have been lacking in the country. Further, evaluations though have been using in learning lessons have not been used properly in ensuring accountability due to the weak performance management system in the government.

Based on the review following lessons can be drawn. Firstly, evaluation policy framework that makes mandatory provisions to institutionalize evaluation as a core function in the public agencies is crucial to improve the use of evaluations. Secondly, sectoral result frameworks with baselines and defined theory of changes are urgent for quality evaluations. Thirdly, well designed mixed methodology using range of techniques of quantitative and qualitative nature is important to improve the quality and uses of evaluations. Fourthly, more advocacy is needed at policy making levels to demand and use evaluations. Fifthly, dissemination of findings and preparing management responses are important pre-conditions to improve the use of evaluations.

Finally, Nepalese experiences show that usability of evaluations heavily depend on the quality of the recommendations which itself rely on the capacities and independent work of the evaluators. Hence, strengthening capacity of government personnel who facilitate and local evaluators who conduct evaluations is extremely important improve the quality and uses. Moreover, in-country, regional and international community of practice or knowledge networking is important for cross-learning and institutionalizing effective use of evaluations.
References


