Reflections on the South African Experience with Evaluation and the use of evaluative evidence to orient public policy formulation

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Abstract

Government M&E systems in South Africa have historically been focused more on monitoring. A significant step change occurred in 2010 with the creation of a Department of Performance M&E (DPME) which has moved very quickly to establish a range of M&E systems, including a national evaluation system (NES). DPME has explicitly focused on trying to create a utilisation-focused and demand-driven evaluation system. A National Evaluation Policy Framework (NEPF) was approved by Cabinet in November 2011 and there are now 24 evaluations completed or underway at different stages, with many beginning to report from June 2013. The next year will see how departments respond to challenging findings, and how far evaluation findings are translated into improvement plans which are implemented, and influence policy, programming and decision-making.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

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

1.2 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 Not-for-Profit Organisations (NPOs). The New Public Management Approach that gained popularity in the 1990s and the results-based management paradigms in the 2000s brought in demands for a greater hierarchical alignment between activities and different levels of outcomes. A study by the Public Service Commission (PSC) in 2007 noted that M&E was generally conducted in an ‘isolated or vertical manner’ and not integrated into a comprehensive system (Public Service Commission, 2007).

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, Cabinet approved a plan for the development of a Government-wide Monitoring and Evaluation System (GWMES). The GWMES was envisaged as a ‘system of systems’ in which each department would have a functional monitoring system, out of which the necessary information can be extracted. The Policy Framework to guide the overarching government-wide M&E System was published in 2007 (Presidency, 2007).

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

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improve government performance, including through a greater focus on M&E. In 2009 a Ministry of Performance M&E was created in the Presidency, and a Department of Performance M&E (DPME) in January 2010.

2 Development of the SA National Evaluation System

South Africa’s M&E work in the 2000s focused on monitoring, although some departments undertook evaluations. The findings of DPME’s first round of implementation of the Management Performance Assessment Tool (MPAT) indicated that only 13% of the 103 national and provincial departments were conducting evaluations (DPME, 2012c).

In 2011 a study tour to Mexico, Colombia and the US led to development of a National Evaluation Policy Framework, adopted by Cabinet in November 2011. A strategic approach has been taken focusing on important policies/programmes/plans, and those selected are embedded in a National Evaluation Plan (NEP) approved by Cabinet. The focus has been on utilisation, all evaluations being made publically available unless confidential, and they must have an improvement plan, which is then monitored. The approach emphasises learning rather than a punitive approach, so as to build evaluation into the culture of departments and not promote resistance and malicious compliance.

Six types of evaluations are envisaged, while specific evaluations may combine these – diagnostic, design, implementation, impact, economic, evaluation synthesis. This means that evaluations are not only undertaken at the end of an intervention, but at any stage in the lifecycle – before (eg diagnostic), during (implementation), end of phase (impact), while economic can be at all stages.

Evaluations are implemented as a partnership between the department(s) concerned and DPME, and DPME part-funds the evaluations. An Evaluation and Research Unit has been established in DPME to drive the system and provide technical support, supported by a cross-government Evaluation Technical Working Group (ETWG). Guidelines have been developed; standards for evaluation; competencies for programme managers, M&E staff and evaluators; and training courses started in September 2012, with a suite of 5 courses under development and being rolled out.

The first National Evaluation Plan with 8 evaluations was approved by Cabinet in June 2012. The second National Evaluation Plan with 15 evaluations in 2013/14 was approved in June 2012. In total 24 evaluations have been commissioned and three completed.

3 Use of evaluative evidence to orient public policy formulation

DPME has recently commissioned an audit of evaluations conducted for government from 2006-11. These show a range of uses:

- Revisions to policy – eg Diagnostic Review of Early Childhood (ECD), Impact evaluation of the reception year of schooling (Grade R);
- Revisions to plans and priorities – Schools that Work, Report on the State of the Environment, Overview of Health Care, Impact evaluation of the reception year of schooling (Grade R);
- Changes to funding regimes – Child Support Grant;
- Changes to programmes – Mid Term Review of the Expanded Public Works Programme;
- Increasing knowledge base – Profile of social security beneficiaries.
4 The demand for evaluative evidence

What evidence of demand is there?
DPME undertook a survey in 2012 to assess the state of M&E in national and provincial government (DPME, 2013). In terms of culture-based barriers, more than half of the respondents (54%) indicated that problems are not treated as opportunities for learning and improvement. Senior management often fails to champion M&E (45%) and M&E is regarded as the job of the M&E unit rather than all managers (44%), there is not a strong M&E culture (40%), M&E is seen as policing and controlling (39%) 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% of cases M&E information had limited or no influence on decision-making. Nearly half of the respondents (46%) regard integration with policy development as either non-existent or very limited. Just under half of the departments (48%) 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 standalone activity detached from other key management processes.

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

- Departments are requested to submit evaluations, rather than being told they will be subject to evaluations. This means they are likely to want them, and want the results;
- Cabinet approves the National Evaluation Plan. This 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 DPME provides the secretariat and so is able to ensure that the systems of the NES are complied with. Evaluation Steering Committees have significant power including approval of terms of reference and reports;
- Provision for a management response so that departments have the opportunity to respond to evaluation findings;
- All evaluations must be followed by an improvement plan, which is monitored for two years.

Despite this there is reticence amongst 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 Policy Making and Implementation which will be piloted in November 2013;
- 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 for 2014/15. A capacity development programme to support Parliament to use DPME’s M&E information is being planned.

While DPME has been concentrating on the 15 evaluations per year in the National Evaluation Plan, it is also 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 evaluations than can be covered under the NEP, and also to
stimulate departments and provinces to think of what they should cover themselves, as opposed to those of major national interest covered in the NEP.

DPME is also stimulating improved accountability through making evaluations publically accessible as well as the understanding of parliamentary committees. The audit of evaluations mentioned previously is being made available through an evaluation repository on the DPME website, and all evaluations undertaken through the National Evaluation Plan will be made public, once they have been to Cabinet.

5 Lessons for a utilisation focused evaluation system

South Africa has problems in supply as well as demand. Supply of evaluation has historically been weak, and there has also been limited demand, 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 DPME (initially monitoring evidence, with evaluation evidence starting to emerge) and DPME is also about to look at what role it should play in promoting research evidence. The positive response by Cabinet to DPME’s systems for evaluation as well as for its systems of Management Performance Assessment and Front-Line Service Delivery Monitoring point to a receptivity by Cabinet for good evidence. There are issues however about the consequences around problems identified which create the incentives for addressing the challenges identified.

As outlined previously, the whole design of the evaluation system is utilisation focused, 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 be a real test of the evaluation system, and show how far the ambitious system that has been established is achieving what it intends to, whereby evaluations are informing significant changes to policy, decision-making and implementation. Key questions will be:

- How far is DPME able to play an 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 brought in in a stronger way into the evaluation system, and if so how?

References

DPME documents are available from: www.thepresidency-dpme.gov.za
DPME (2013): “A survey of 96 national and provincial departments on the state and use of M&E in the public service”. (Not yet published), Pretoria, DPME.