

Encouraging the effective use of evaluations to improve management policies and programmes

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1. Introduction

There has been a rapid worldwide growth in the production of information and knowledge about public policies and programmes. Information is produced by universities, research centres, multilateral agencies and by public administrations. Education and public health programmes, income transfer programmes and actions to combat violence are among the recurring subjects of applied research into public policies in many countries. The research mobilizes significant groups of sociologists, economists, statisticians and other monitoring and evaluation professionals. It has also revealed how academic journals and conferences deal with the subject, such as two international conferences on national evaluation capacities held in Morocco and South Africa.

Despite vast amounts of empirical evidence and comprehensive and rigorous evaluation studies on such policies and programmes, a need still seems to exist for additional efforts to ensure that knowledge can be used more effectively to improve routine public action processes. Public programmes are complex systems involving various work processes and activities. Budgetary resources are designed to produce results for defined target beneficiaries and to have a positive impact on society. Depending on the country, budgetary resources, the scale of coverage and complexity of programme design, thousands or even hundreds of thousands of agents contribute to management, preparation and effective delivery of products, services and benefits to the population.

The thesis for this paper is that, faced with operational complexity and innovation in programme management – i.e., incorporating changes of a programme's format and operations or, better still, the effective use of evidence from monitoring and surveys – assessment depends largely on the perceived utility as well as on the strategies used to disseminate information and knowledge to all personnel involved in the programme, from the field to the strategic management level.

The argument is that innovation in public programmes by the effective use of monitoring and evaluation tools seems to depend less on the programmes' completeness, technical sophistication and rigour than on the clarity and objectivity with which they respond to the

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specific needs of technical staff and managers. Without denying the importance of research and relevant and robust evaluation studies, the fact is that if they do not respond to the most crucial demands for information, from the perspective of those involved, there is a risk that the resulting data and information will be of minimal use. Policy makers, managers and programme staff do not need data, research or exhaustive knowledge about their programmes. They need information that is clear, relevant and consistent. Information should be organized geographically and by operational issue. It should be relevant for decision-making, and include information on costs, schedules and, above all, it should answer questions relating to the programme's implementation stage.

This text is organized in two sections. It begins with a more conceptual discussion of Systems Monitoring and Evaluation (SM&E) and its integration in the policy and public programme cycle. This aims to show that the extent to which managers and staff are interested in, and actually use, the information and knowledge produced depends on the system's adequate design: that it is fit for purpose. The nature of the questions answered by the SM&E, the choice of instruments – monitoring indicators, implementation research, evaluation of results and impacts – determine the involvement and interest of managers and technical staff in the use of the system's products.

The second section is dedicated to the different strategies used to disseminate monitoring instruments and results of evaluation studies for different public users of the SM&E. The information and knowledge produced in these environments can be complex and not easily assimilated by managers and technical staff. It is not enough merely to produce an extensive research report, or to have an informative online application with multiple functionalities, because those involved with public policies and programmes management can readily read and grasp the relevant aspects that can improve their performance. Also, professional qualification courses must be appropriate to the level of training and experience of staff, and the same applies to the dissemination of monitoring and evaluation content. Lectures, publications and courses need to be tailored to their audiences, seeking to bring the most relevant aspects of the evaluation studies that may be of interest and relevance to them.

A final section summarizes key points from the preceding discussion.

2. Producing information and knowledge relevant and useful to management and programme improvement

SM&E has many conceptual definitions in specialized literature, broader or more operational, according to MacDavid and Hawthorne (2006), Mackay (2007), Owen (2007) and Cunill and Ospina (2008). Based on these concepts, but using the similarities from the systematization of science and technology information, SM&E can be defined as a set of articulated processes for raising, organizing and disseminating information and knowledge from the life cycle of public

policy and programme management. It aims to support the improvement of a programme's format and management to ensure greater transparency of government action, or even to provide evidence on the merits and effectiveness of policies and programmes.

This definition makes clear that, in addition to providing information for analysis of the 'delivery' of products and services and to correct any failures of government action, M&E systems are also designed to produce knowledge about the impacts of policies and programmes, as well as about costs of production. By definition, M&E systems are important mechanisms for ensuring greater transparency in the use of public resources. They also contribute to decisions relating to the merits and relevance of policies and programmes.

However complementary, these basic purposes of an SM&E – information to help improve programmes, public transparency and budget merit evaluation – develop evaluative aims, available human resources and largely define the methods and techniques chosen for the work. Of course, the primary purpose, the evaluation focus and, consequently, the effective use of SM&E products depends on where such a system is based. If it is based in a sectoral ministry or in a programme agency, the creation of monitoring instruments and evaluation research will aim to provide the means by which the programme's implementation and results are continuously improved. If the SM&E is based in a public control body or in a parliament, the evaluative focus will be on producing and organizing information on the impacts of public policies and programmes on society. If it is based in a body responsible for budget management and/or medium-term planning, it is natural that the processes and activities are oriented to the production of studies on the cost-effectiveness and impact of public programmes, and to guide the allocation of, and debate over, available public resources.

So, clarity over the evaluative focus of SM&E is a key factor in ensuring the successful and effective use of information and knowledge by technical staff involved in policy and programme implementation, civil society, parliament or budget managers. The evaluative focus helps to orientate the questions in an SM&E. That therefore determines the choice of instruments and methods used to generate information and knowledge that is relevant and useful to the user. SM&Es oriented to the needs of management and programme improvement (henceforth SM&E-OP, i.e., SM&E Oriented towards Improvement) are characterized by research designs, systems or monitoring indicators that focus on specific aspects of programme implementation. Such research generally depends on qualitative methodological strategies, such as discussion groups and in-depth interviews, aimed at field staff and programme beneficiaries. It aims to generate rapid empirical evidence concerning the programme's management and any difficulties experienced in its planned implementation. Part of this research may not need to be performed if the set of monitoring indicators, created from the programme management systems' database, is able to answer basic evaluative questions. These questions may cover the extent to which financial and human resource allocation, procurement of services, and staff recruitment are being performed on schedule and in the proper way, and if the products, services and benefits are reaching the intended target audience and society generally. Appropriate choices of key indicators, with a detailed geographic and demographic focus, may provide valuable and information that is accessible and can be used effectively by technical staff and managers. As

'thermometers', these indicators may diagnose 'fever' at critical points in a programme's implementation. That can help technical staff and managers to make informed decisions on how to address the problem. Or they can hire research – or 'clinical investigation', to continue the metaphor – to investigate the fever's causes and the reasons for its persistence (Jannuzzi, 2011a).

Nationally representative sample surveys or research with a quasi-experimental design are certainly important tools and products of SM&E-OP of sectoral Ministries. But the time and effort they require makes them more useful as ways for transparency and budget practitioners to appraise merit, legitimacy and impact. To legitimize the political priority given to certain social issues, and in the interests of public accountability and efficient use of scarce public finances, quantitative research using probability samples, such as those conducted by national statistical agencies, and impact assessments with control groups and beneficiaries, offer important measures of the adequacy of public programme design, coverage, beneficiaries, results and impacts, and the programme's distinctiveness. They are important, but not unique, inputs. The decision to maintain, modify or discontinue a policy or programme is not merely technical, but primarily political. That is because such a decision has implications for the lives of beneficiaries and for the programme's institutional arrangements.

Large surveys, or those that are methodologically or operationally complex, can be justified at the outset of a policy or programme to define the situation it seeks to address. Further surveys of a similar scale, however, should wait until after any problems in programme implementation have been identified and resolved (Rossi et al., 2004). Otherwise, a conclusion may be drawn that the outcomes and impacts are minimal or absent, which will create mistrust in the government over the merits of the policy or programme and, consequently, in stakeholders' perceptions of the utility of SM&E products and research. The fact is that, despite the prestige conferred by certain academic communities, quasi-experimental evaluation research is not the most legitimate scientific method, nor is it the gold standard for programme evaluation. The core value of the SM&E-OP should not be disputed (Worthern et al., 2004).

There are several ethical conflicts and operational constraints on their realization, which have been widely noted in the international literature (Jannuzzi, 2011b). Moreover, daily programme management requires packets of information and knowledge far beyond those produced by such research. Rather than produce evidence for a 'revolutionary innovation' intended by impact assessments, it is necessary to have information that can contribute to the continuous improvement or additional innovation of public action. Without denying the importance of empirical evidence that is representative, has been acquired with technical rigour and analytical depth, for managers and technical staff involved in programme implementation, the fact is that complex social realities and programme operations have demonstrated a need for more eclectic methodological approaches if the information needs of programme managers are to be met.

The misconception that this kind of research is at the heart of SM&E in ministries has contributed to scepticism about the value of SM&E among managers and technical staff. Thus, in the context of scarce human and financial resources, SM&E should focus on a response to

management and programme needs, using a structure of centralized databases extracted from computerized management systems or the numerous spreadsheets available to managers. These may include key programme indicator dashboards, logical framework processes, or research recommendations on dealing with implementation issues. In situations of limited resources and time, it can be more useful and productive for programme management teams to use evaluation studies of secondary data, study reviews and international publications, and meta-evaluations of similar programmes in other countries.

As well as the clarity of evaluative focus and appropriate choices of methodology, if SM&E is to offer information and useful knowledge with which to improve programmes, the participation of technical staff and managers in drafting instruments is essential. If external teams can ensure greater technical credibility of the evaluation study, and if they are competent, reputable and committed to a multidisciplinary view and a multi-method evaluation of public programmes, the credibility and ownership of results will depend on the extent of involvement of programme managers and technical staff in the evaluation process. Internal teams typically know more about a programme's most pressing problems and difficulties, but they need technical support from specialized consultants as well as from research to properly understand the causes of those issues and the resolution strategies. In addition, the way that programme databases and dashboards are organized by programme staff and specialized consultants can help to create products that are both useful and reliable for SM&E-OP users.

It is worth noting that the professional market of evaluation consultants is far from perfect in many developing countries. Hiring field researchers or conducting evaluation studies based on secondary data requires skilled design and proper monitoring so that results are consistent and useful for management. It must be recognized that increased demand for the evaluation of social programmes has outstripped availability of properly qualified private consulting firms or academic research groups. The pool of researchers is dominated by companies specializing in, for example, public opinion. Although they have a good academic pedigree, they often have limited knowledge of the reality of public programmes. Social surveys, particularly those related to programme evaluation, can be more complex than market or academic research. Therefore they require a more robust and specific approach, because their results guide critical decisions about the formats, results and merits of government actions.

In this context, very intensive monitoring is necessary by contracted technical teams who guide and deal with unforeseen situations. They must also oversee compliance with technical requirements. Not all contracted companies appreciate the experience of seeing their technical procedures questioned or altered by internal teams. Mixed teams of contracted and internal personnel can help to achieve a synergy of internal knowledge management and external technical expertise. This can help create products by combining their respective areas of expertise, and may increase the overall legitimacy of the exercise.

The credibility of results and the legitimacy of the evaluation process are two values that must be pursued jointly. Worse than not having information for decision-making is to make technical and political choices based on studies and knowledge that are limited in their operational survey

and analytical scope. In some situations, it may be preferable to have no evaluation than to rely on misconceived, mishandled or rashly contracted research.

3. Disseminating relevant and useful information and knowledge for management and the improvement of programmes

The formulation, evaluation and management of policies and programmes require, like any other activity in human organizations, training of technical staff and managers involved in decision-making as well as in the provision of services (field workers). Leadership, communication, ethics and response to the public are among the training topics for technical staff and managers, and are as important as project management, evaluation methodology development. Experience suggests that a significant reason for the failure or lack of impact of public programmes lies in the difficulties in maintaining continuing education programmes for teams involved in policy development.

There is no doubt that the impact of public programmes would certainly be higher if those involved understood more about, for instance, the programmes' objectives, the logical design and related activities, the role of each institution and member of staff, and the characteristics of the target beneficiaries. Although foreseen in the logical design of new social programmes, courses and operational training may not be fully adapted with materials, regulatory documents, classrooms and teaching staff to train multiple stakeholders. In some situations, the trainees were not even engaged or informed about the training. There is certainly much to be done in terms of training human resources involved in public service delivery and management of public programmes. This is, of course, an issue that goes beyond the scope of this text. However, it must be a matter of concern for multilateral organizations, with the same emphasis attached to the dissemination of methods and techniques for planning and evaluating social programmes and projects.

This section addresses two central issues: content dissemination strategies in M&E, and training on M&E content. Both are important for enhancing the informed use of SM&E products and research, particularly those designed improve public programmes. As with information in science, technology and innovation (CTI&I), information and knowledge in public policy (ICPP) is complex and require detailed knowledge and understanding. Indicators such as infant mortality rate or monetary extreme poverty are part of the technical vocabulary of evaluators and the academic research community working on evaluation of social programmes, but they are not necessarily part of the vocabulary of programme managers and technical staff. Similarly, evaluation reports and their results may be differently understood by evaluators and the programme's technical staff.

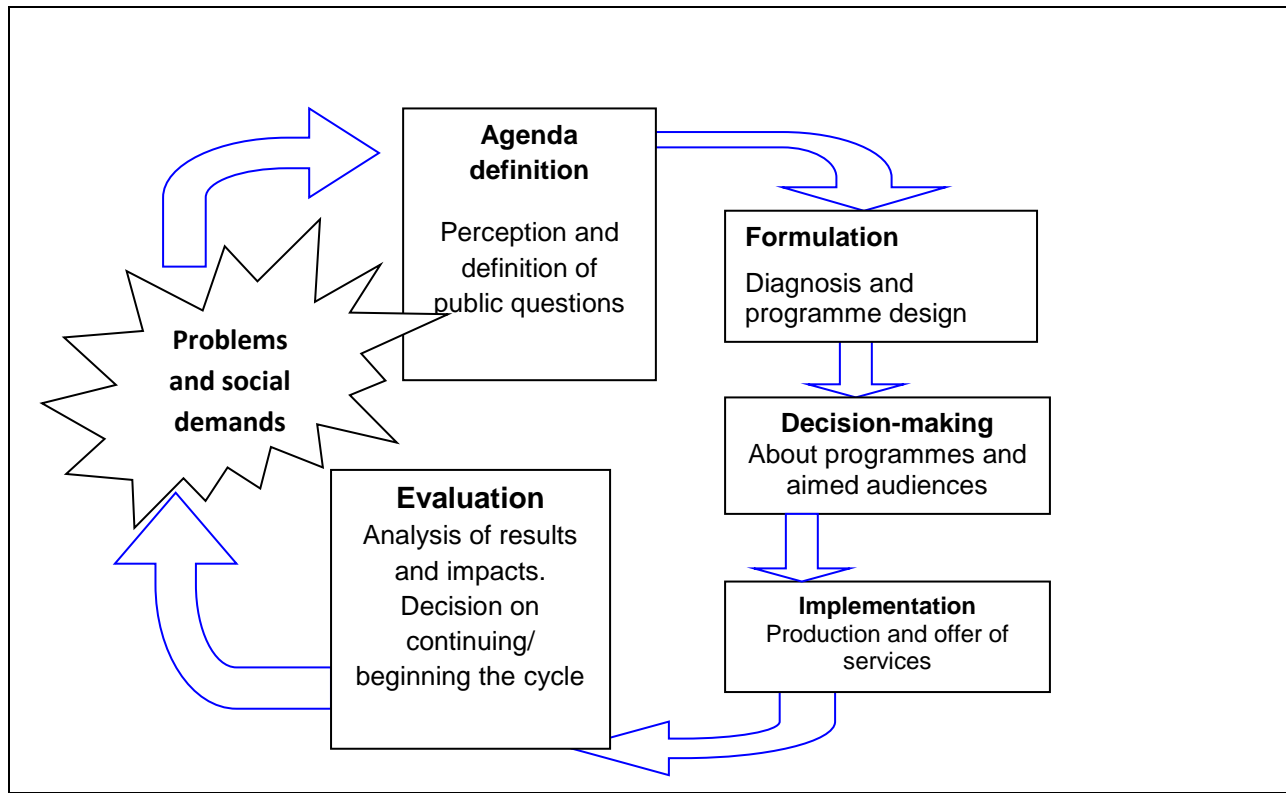
If the knowledge produced by an M&E is to reach broader audiences, it is necessary to make its products – reports, indicators, evaluation studies – understandable and attractive to a range of public users. It is not enough to simply post all data sheets, indicators and evaluation reports on the internet. Production of data does not generate demand for knowledge. It is necessary to

develop 'tailored' products for targeted audiences of technical staff and managers by appropriately adapting format, content and complexity. Results should also be disseminated through lectures or multimedia recordings, so that they are readily accessible to internet users.

There are a number of virtual applications on internet platforms with many interactive and visual resources, and with links to other documents. Executive summaries of evaluation reports, small datasheets (one-page papers) with the essential results plus graphs, maps and descriptive reports may have a utility and aesthetic appeal greater than that of tables, dashboards or massive publications with inscrutable content for those without specialized training in those subjects. Results of econometric models developed with evaluation data are frequently presented, but have limited capacity for diffusion to the uninitiated public. Is it possible to make such outcomes more tangible and concrete for technical staff and managers who want to learn more about the programmes?

Efforts to disseminate M&E content electronically to technical staff and managers may be more effective in combination with their continuing education – either classroom-based or by distance learning. There are always technical staff and managers interested in deepening their knowledge of M&E, but they have not found an appropriate, relevant course in a university or research centre. An M&E training programme for technical staff and programme managers, which aims to develop skills and improve understanding of monitoring tools, evaluation and the application of information and knowledge should be organized using the basic cycle of policies and programmes processes (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The cycle of policies and public programmes



In classical political science textbooks, the public policy formulation process has been repeatedly presented as the cycle of successive steps ('cycle of policies'), with a number of stages (Jann and Wegrich, 2007). Despite longstanding criticisms of the simplified way in which this diagram shows the political process as an empirical truth, the separation of steps demonstrates that the process gives different emphases on a programme's planning, implementation and evaluation. This model lends itself well to teaching, particularly for the way it contextualizes the issue for technical staff and programme managers.

In this model, the first step – definition of political agenda ('agenda definition') – corresponds to the multiple paths and processes that culminate in recognition of a social issue as a public problem and the need for government action to solve it. In other words, it legitimizes the introduction of the issue on the policy agenda. The next step – formulation of policies and programmes ('formulation') – refers to the processes and activities involved in the development of possible solutions, referrals and programmes to deal with that defined issue. In the decision-making step ('decision-making'), the choice of which implementation model to adopt is made. Step four – implementation of policies and programmes ('implementation') – corresponds to the implementation of the action, allocation of resources and development of procedures. Finally, the assessment of policies and programmes ('evaluation') reviews the extent to which the work is solving the defined problem. This step assesses any requirement to change the programme

to ensure its effectiveness, or to discontinue it if the problem is no longer part of the agenda, or to adapt to a new reality, restarting the cycle.²

Although there may be different ways to implement a training programme based on this cycle, it seems appropriate to organize it into three modules, each of 40 hours. Its content should include diagnosis/formulation of programmes, research tools and monitoring and evaluation studies, with complementary objectives. The course will become gradually more complex, as envisaged in Table 1. As well as presenting M&E concepts and methodologies, it will be important for programme managers and technical staff to submit case studies from their own experience that show the effective use of course content.

Table 1: Basic training programme in M&E in three courses

Course	Objective	Timetable
1. Diagnostics for programme formulation	Develop capacity to use information sources from programmes and official statistics to diagnose a situation and propose a public programme.	20 to 40 hours
2. Tools and indicators for programmes monitoring	Prepare participants to use information systems, and to develop methodologies to build indicators for public programme monitoring.	20 to 40 hours
3. Introduction to research methods and evaluation studies	Develop skills essential for the understanding of evaluation results and methodologies, their potential and limitations.	40 hours

² It is appropriate to note that evaluation, as part of the cycle, takes place after implementation. It is a more reflective process that helps inform the decision to continue or stop the programme. It is distinct from monitoring and evaluation activities, which are characterized by indicators, among other things. Such investigative tools can be used at any time during the cycle. Re-naming this decisive stage of the cycle as 'added evaluation' could help to avoid confusion between these two distinct activities.

4. Final Considerations

The effective use of M&E products and surveys depends very much on factors related to the supply of information and knowledge produced and to the demand from potential users. Evaluation focuses on the production of information to improve programme management, public transparency, while merit evaluation helps to inform budget decisions. All are targeted at a range of users with different demands for information and knowledge.

Once the focus is established, the methods used to develop knowledge products must be appropriate in terms of content, costs and schedule so that they meet their users' needs. As the publishing market has so clearly demonstrated, especially with the advent of the internet, there are many different and creative ways to communicate simple or complex messages for a range of audiences.

There is certainly much to be done to maximize the effective use of public policy assessments. National experiences will be presented at the Third International Conference on National Evaluation Capacities in late 2013. As in previous conferences, this is an excellent opportunity to move this important subject forward.

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