SRI LANKA: COUNTRY LED NATIONAL EVALUATION SYSTEM
INDEPENDENCE, CREDIBILITY AND USE OF EVALUATION
CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

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★ This paper should be read in conjunction with NEC conference papers published in 2009 and 2011 by the same author.

1. Introduction

The Government of Sri Lanka has given high priority to ensure value-for-money in the public management. As a result, concepts such as Managing for Development Results (MfDR) , Development Evaluation, Performance Audit are getting very high focus in the public management.

The recent circular issued in August 2012 by the Presidential Secretariat makes it mandatory for all line Ministries to set out a medium term Strategic Plan with well defined outcome based key performance indicators (KPIs) with baseline and medium term targets. Further, to enable His Excellency the President to monitor and evaluate progress of the Ministries, six outcome based

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KPIs have been set for each Ministry in the medium term. The achievements have to be reported on KPIs through a scorecard with traffic light signal based dashboard. In this context, the MfDR has been institutionalized in the Sri Lankan public sector but need to be further broadened and deepened. The Public Service Commission is upgrading and developing an indicator and rating based staff performance appraisal system that links individual performance with institutional performance within the overall MfDR framework. The national evaluation systems are also being strengthened to support these expectations.

Country led national evaluation system

Paris Declaration endorsed in 2005 followed by Accra Agenda for Action (AAA) in 2008 focused on aid effectiveness. The Busan Declaration in 2011 shifted the focus from aid effectiveness to development effectiveness. Accordingly, there was a parallel shift from evaluating aid to evaluating development effectiveness which requires country based national evaluation system.

In Sri Lanka, development policy and programms evaluations are undertaken by the line Ministries, Department of Project Management and Monitoring, Auditor General's Department, and development partners. In early 1990s, most of the evaluations were driven by donors and were heavily confined to aid funded projects thus focused on accountability rather than learning. Following the Paris Declaration, there were greater emphasis on country owned, country led and country managed development efforts and as such the national ownership and leadership were recognized as overarching factors for development outcomes. In this context, country led national evaluation systems were recognized, supported and strengthened.

Institutionalization of Evaluation in Government

In early 1990s, on the request of Government of Sri Lanka, development partners such as UNDP and Asian Development Bank assisted the Government in the establishment of country owned, country led post evaluation system.

Presently, at the central level, the Department of Project Management and Monitoring of the Ministry of Finance and Planning undertakes on-going, ex-post and impact evaluations of selected mega projects. In selecting projects for evaluation, criteria such as policy relevance and usefulness, problem projects, innovative intervention, projects of a replicable nature and projects which may throw light on new or upcoming policy initiatives are given due consideration. Moreover, when there is a demand for evaluation of public policy by the policy makers or other stakeholders, due consideration is given to such requests. Similarly the requests of the planning and budgeting authorities are also considered in the selection of policies and programmes for evaluation. In particular, when new programmes are formulated, the national planning authorities and line ministries like to know the outcomes of the previous similar programmes including factors of success and failures. Under such circumstances, consideration is given to such learning based demands which significantly help to improve the planning and

design of new public programmes and policies. The details of the central evaluation functions have been discussed in the papers published in 2009 and 2011.

Commissioning and conduct of evaluation

In addition to the central agency, the line ministries which are responsible for the overall execution of the development programmes and public policy also undertake evaluations selectively. The monitoring and evaluation units of the line ministries are responsible for commissioning and conduct of such evaluations. These units are independent from other management, operational and programme implementation related functions and report directly to the Chief Accounting Officer who is the Head of line Ministry. For the purpose of routine evaluations, an independent expert evaluation team is appointed with representation from Department of Project Management and Monitoring and independent sector specialists, academia and research institutions. Similarly, in the case of evaluations of a special nature where capacity constraints are there, the study is outsourced to an independent academic or research institution.

In order to avoid conflict of interest or undue pressure, checks and balances are in place such as management groups, reference groups and peer review systems. The management of the evaluation are done by the monitoring and evaluation unit, whereas the reference group comprises of broader stakeholder group with representation from Ministry of Finance and Planning, private sector representatives such as chambers, Civil Society Organizations, representatives of development partners, academia and research institutions. Peer reviews are undertaken by specialists who are trained in evaluation both within and outside Government. The monitoring and evaluation unit is expected to manage and undertake evaluations impartially free from bias. All evaluations require a TOR with methodological framework and draft evaluative questions based on OECD/DAC criteria of relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability. The draft evaluation framework with evaluative questions and design matrix is validated at the scoping session with all concerned stakeholders. This process helps to improve independence and minimize conflict of interests or undue pressure.

Reporting to High Level Management – Management Responses

The evaluation findings are presented at a high level progress review meeting chaired by the Minister. In such meeting, senior officials from the programme implementation agencies, representatives from Department of Project Management and Monitoring, Department of National Planning, Department of National Budget, Department of External Resources, Auditor General's Department and other concerned stakeholders are invited. The minutes of this meeting identifies "management responses" which needs to be implemented as a follow-up. Further, the findings and lessons are expected to be integrated in the formulation of new public policies, programmes and projects.

The findings and key issues set out in the evaluation reports are taken into the Auditor General's report as part of the annual report and tabled to the Cabinet of Ministers and Parliamentary Committee on Public Enterprise (COPE) and Committee on Public Accounts (COPA) and discussed at the Parliament. Therefore, evaluation findings and recommendations gets reported to the executive branch and legislative branch of the State.

Independence and Impartiality are fundamental Pillars

The evaluation to meet independence criteria has to be impartial throughout the whole process starting from commissioning to conducting to dissemination and feedback. There are possible biases in conducting evaluations such as spatial biases (Neglect of peripheries), project biases (fails to look non-project areas), persons biases (covers elite and not vulnerable), diplomatic biases (Failure to see bad conditions and based on itinerary prepared in advance) and professional biases (meeting better educated to discuss topics of interest). Further, there are also possible biases in undertaking evaluations such as perception that "experts knows best", failure to recognize "indigenous technical knowledge" (ITK). When evaluations are conducted by outsiders they sometime fail to understand the local context and fail to recognize the real problems. There is a need to conduct decolonized evaluations with the participation of local evaluators who have knowledge on the local situation. The national evaluation system recognizes these issues and are addressed at the scoping session.

Credibility

In Sri Lanka, the evaluations undertaken by the line Ministries, central agencies and development partners are conducted by independent evaluation professionals, research institutions and academia and in partnership with Government officials who are independent from the planning, designing, implementation, management and monitoring of the public policy or programme targeted for evaluation. The evaluation team should comprise of evaluation experts and sector specialists. In selecting the evaluators, the competencies, skills (analytical and methodological skills, writing and communication skills, management skills) expertise, ethics (maintain privacy and confidentiality of participants, sensitive to gender, beliefs, manners and customs of all stakeholders etc) and independence are given consideration. Degree of independence from policy, operation and management functions and conflict of interest are examined to ensure independence. The ability to work freely without interference and integrity, honesty, openness, sensitive to culture, customs, religious beliefs and values, gender and ethnicity are considered as important for evaluator. The credibility of evaluations is further strengthened with the setting up of management group, wider reference group and independent peer review. Moreover, through a wider scoping session the TOR of the evaluation, nature and scope of the evaluation, methodology, evaluation questions, evaluation design matrix with KPIs, methodology on data collection and source of data collection are discussed and validated. This process is a further

strengthened to enhance credibility. Moreover, the evaluation team is authorized and given access to all relevant information that is necessary to undertake the evaluation. Evaluator is recognized as a facilitator and negotiator of diverse options and issues and arrives at a judgment not based on his own perception but based on evidence as seen by the concerned stakeholders in a professional manner. Findings are based from the logical analysis rather than evaluators own perceptions.

Stakeholder Consultation and Quality Assurance

In the conduct of evaluations, beneficiary feedback is obtained. All concerned stakeholders are consulted and this process increases the credibility of the evaluation findings. Variety of data collection methods such as focus group discussions, community interviews, key informant interviews, intensive review and analysis of existing secondary information and documents, beneficiary surveys and opinion, field observations are used to triangulate and enhance the validity of the data and findings which helps to improve credibility.

Further, the evaluation also follows the OECD/DAC quality standards for evaluation. Standards are followed in the conduct of evaluations (process) as well as in the submission of reports (product). Stakeholder Consultation Meetings are held to validate the finding and the draft report.

In such stakeholder workshops the stakeholders are given the opportunity to comment on findings and conclusions which makes the process more transparent, balanced, impartial and credible. The strengths and weaknesses and the successes and failures are discussed and reported in the findings, making the evaluation a credible exercise. Evaluation must cover both "Positive" and "Negative" messages. The public policies and programmes are rated as highly successful (HS), successful (S), partly successful (PS) and unsuccessful (US). Such rating approach also contributes to enhance credibility.

Use of Evaluation

Utility of any evaluation is a prime criterion for judging the worth of evaluation regardless of the technical, practical and ethical merit. Evaluation to have an impact, needs to be disseminated and communicated – to ensure behavioral changes and action.

Evaluations are done for both accountability and learning. Evaluation to have an impact on decision making, it should be relevant to the needs and interest of the stakeholders and be useful and presented in a clear and concise manner. Evaluations conducted by the central agencies and line ministries cover various stages of a public policy or programme. Ex-ante evaluations are conducted as soon as the programmes and projects are prepared to see whether the programmes and project are bankable and viable. On-going evaluations are conducted during

implementation for mid-course corrections. Ex-post and impact evaluations are conducted to assess outcomes, impacts and for learning.

Demand driven policy relevant evaluations

It is important to identify the information requirement of the policy makers and involve them at an early stage in the evaluation so that their needs will be taken care and the evaluations will be more demand driven and responsive to the policy makers needs.

In Sri Lanka, under the country led evaluation system, the public policies and programmes are selected for evaluation to a greater extent through a demand driven process. As such the findings of such evaluations are likely to be more effectively utilized as against the supply driven evaluations.

Readable and timely report with actionable recommendations

In order to enhance the use of evaluation findings, the evaluation reports should be clear, concise, readable and not technical. The report should not be voluminous similar to academic reports. The findings should be differentiated according to different audience and users. The findings must be used and made available in time appropriate for decision-making.

Evaluation should find answers to all the evaluation questions. Results should follow clearly from the evaluation questions, analysis of data with clear line of evidence. Findings should be based from the logical analysis. Recommendations and lessons learned are relevant and targeted to intended users. The evaluation recommendations should be actionable to ensure effective usage.

Systematic dissemination

In Sri Lanka, evaluation reports contain an executive summary to give a synoptic overview of the findings and recommendations to the policy makers. It is important to link evaluation findings to future activities to planners, policy-makers and programme implementing agencies.

Evaluation to be effective need to be responsive to the needs of different users (demand driven and client orientation), tailored to different audience and users, timely, accessible, user friendly, avoid information overload and promote follow-up.

Mechanism to promote evaluation feedback

To ensure effective feedback both dissemination mechanisms and institutional feedback mechanisms are important. Dissemination mechanism should identify the means by which evaluation information is prepared and directed to client groups (eg. abstracts and summaries, feedback seminars, evaluation reports, evaluation information system.)

Institutional mechanisms are important to link evaluation units with other agencies such as planning agencies, budgeting agencies and policy making agencies. Eg. Link evaluation to project concept and project submission of the planning agency.

Management Response
In order to ensure implementation of the evaluation recommendations, it is necessary to identify management responses whereby the management agrees to implement the recommendation within a timeframe through responsible focal point.

The evaluation report must research the primary target group or key actors such as planners, policy makers and donors who are expected to take action on findings. Similarly, the evaluation finding must also reach the secondary target group such as watchdog agencies, media and CSOs who will influence the key actors to act on the evaluation.

There are difficulties experienced in drawing inference of a general nature from one–off project evaluations. Projects are clustered by sectors to analyze common general evaluation findings if recurred in several places to draw broad conclusions. Such broad conclusions and cluster / sector findings are more effective to the policy makers in the formulation of public policies.

Timely submission of evaluation findings to meet the demand
Evaluation adds value only if its findings are used. Evaluators must guide decision makers, policy makers and managers to do the right thing. It is important to determine what information is needed by the decision-makers and information users and then formulate TOR, evaluation questions, design matrix to meet the requirements of the decision makers.

The policy makers require information at appropriate time to cater to their planning and budgeting cycle. The synchronization of evaluation findings to the planning, budgeting and policy making cycle is vital for the effective use of evaluations. Therefore, the evaluators should be time conscious and apply appropriate methodology such as rapid methods or rigorous methods to ensure the availability of evaluation information in time. They need to balance between time and rigor are important.

Issues, Challenges and Solutions
Many countries including Sri Lanka face challenges in the effective use of evaluation. The courses for such challenges have been discussed below:

Weak institutional linkage between evaluation and planning – make feedback difficult
Evaluation institutions and planning institutions seems to functions in isolation and do not have effective formalized feedback arrangements to integrate lessons into the planning and design of

new public policies and programmes. An effective institutional feedback mechanism should be established to strengthen the institutional linkages.

Lack of demand for evaluation

It is necessary to create local demand for evaluation. Policy makers, planners and other stakeholders (media, CSOs) need to be sensitized.

Supply side constraints in evaluation

This includes lack of skills, methodological issues, data systems, manuals and guidelines and national evaluation capacities. It is important to provide technical support to strengthen the national evaluation capacity and ensure independent, credible and impartial evaluations are undertaken for effective usage.

Inadequate evaluation information

Absence of country level evaluation information in the website has been a challenge. Countries need to develop web based evaluation information systems on a sector-wise basis identifying findings, key issues, and recommendations. Sector level evaluation synthesis should be made available for effective policy feedback.

Joint evaluations to replace donor-driven evaluations

Donor driven evaluations undermine the development of national ownership and country led evaluation systems. It is important for the donors to undertake joint and collaborative evaluations so that it will help to build national capacities on one side and strengthened the country led evaluation systems which will help to enhance the use of evaluation in decision making.

Institutionalizing evaluations at national and sub-national level

Evaluations are not fully institutionalized at national and sub-national level. More funds and efforts are mobilized for monitoring. Wider awareness, sensitization has to be done on the importance of evaluation and special budgetary provisions need to be made for evaluations. The institutional arrangements needs to be strengthened and must report to the highest level of decision makers.

Evaluations should expand to policy, sector and thematic evaluations

Project evaluations may not have demand at very high levels at policy making. Therefore, it is important to undertake sector synthesis, policy evaluations and thematic evaluations to enable wider usage of the evaluations at policy level.

Conclusion

Sri Lanka recognized these issues and has taken action to address some of the issues with the technical assistance of the development partners such as UNDP and ADB. The UNDP has supported the institutionalization of Managing for Development Results and evaluation in Government. Independence, credibility, impartiality and effective use of evaluation is fundamental for successful institutionalization of evaluation in Government. Effective use of evaluation cannot be achieved without independent, credible and impartial evaluations as they are closely interrelated. Such evaluations will only be heavily demanded by users and can only contribute to the development effectiveness. A successful institutionalization of evaluation requires the findings and recommendations of evaluation to be closely linked to the planning, budgeting and policy making process. It is necessary to create the demand for evaluation from policy makers and other stakeholders. Also the supply side of evaluation has to be strengthened through supporting enabling environment, institutional strengthening and individual capacity development. Management responses are key to successfully implement the evaluation recommendations and to establish effective feedback.