

The Use Of Evaluation In Decision-Making For Public Policies And Programmes

The use question in South Africa: Examples and lessons from the Public Service Commission (PSC) of South Africa

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1. Country context

South Africa is a middle-income country with a diverse population of approximately 50 million people. It is the newest democracy in Africa, having achieved democratic rule in 1994, followed by a Constitution in 1996. Given the legacy of colonialism and apartheid, it has a stark geographic and economic landscape which mirrors racial patterns. With democracy there have been high expectations from citizens that the democratic government would bring about economic and social transformation, and citizens generally look to government to lead and effect change. The model of a South African developmental State, one that is pro-poor, interventionist and transformative, has been working in the sense that policies and government programmes seek to ensure that political mandates are met.

In South Africa, the developmental State, and government as it is experienced by citizens in their daily lives, requires strong monitoring and evaluation (M&E) or oversight, to ensure that it has quality information on progress, so that it can intervene timeously. It is for this reason that the institutions supporting democracy, termed the Chapter 9 and 10 bodies in the South African Constitution, are prominent, and enjoined by the common purpose of upholding constitutional values and principles. Over the past 15 years, the newly mandated bodies have developed a sophisticated oversight infrastructure, which embraces most of the performance areas of government, and which work in the pursuit of good governance. Good governance is an amalgam definition which has 9 areas, many of which are similar to internationally accepted norms for good governance. These include issues of transparency, accountability and efficiency.

The country has a vibrant media, and issues of government performance are topical and very much a part of the South African discourse. The bodies mentioned in this paper contribute in part to such a discourse, largely by having produced some form of M&E, which enters different domains, and becomes the subject of debate. There is

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an active citizen and political interest in the performance results of government, which implies a high demand, thus creating good conditions for M&E to flourish. This paper focuses on what some of the results have been, by looking at the different evaluation purposes, in order to demonstrate the tangible benefit that stems from M&E.

2. M&E WITHIN THE OVERSIGHT ARCHITECTURE

South African democracy occurred parallel to the international movement over the past two decades of increased concern by citizens around the quality of the public service. The increase in M&E, more specifically as an activity, profession and function within government reflects a quest for credible and independent information on the performance of entities, in this case, government. It is no longer adequate for government to report on its own progress; independent oversight has become mandatory, and the results of such reviews and assessments must also be made available publically, without pre-release censorship.

It is for this reason that M&E has been appealing; it addresses a very real and direct public concern, as all citizens are in some way or the other interested parties (as taxpayers, voters etc.). Democracy necessitates that there be on-going engagement between government and citizens, which is a part of the accountability process, whilst policy makers require M&E for purposes of policy review, amongst others.

The most notable evidence that M&E is valuable may be seen in the following; the increased use of the term M&E as it relates to accountability, transparency and efficiency, the fact that policies and programmes are reviewed based on M&E evidence, and the fact that M&E has grown as a profession – and there are dedicated events where findings are discussed with a range of stakeholders. Achieving M&E uptake, as it relates to contributing to entrenching oversight, requires a multi-pronged approach which does the following:

- Clearly stipulates the evaluation framework, and through this the key performance questions that shall be asked
- Demonstrates how different evaluation frameworks articulate with each other. In this instance the different M&E actors needs to work in collaboration, rather than competition with each other
- Ensure that there is data integrity, by specifying norms and standards for data gathering, validation, use and storage
- Targeting different decision-makers with different evaluation results, and having a clear understanding of what is expected from a particular evaluation intervention
- Possessing the ability to report on uptake of findings and recommendations, so that there is a clear sense of the change (usually incremental) which oversight brings about
- Achieving all three M&E outcomes, transparency, accountability and learning, by recognising the dynamic and interrelated nature between M&E purposes
- Contributing to democracy by providing evidence for debate and engagement, thus preventing the abuse of power

The above must to be viewed in relation to the South African situation, which has many producers and users of oversight data, and which represent the supply and demand side of M&E. The production of oversight data (by M&E related bodies) would include the Public Service Commission (PSC), Public Protector, Auditor-General, National Treasury, the Department of Public Service and Administration and Statistics South Africa.

The Presidency, Department of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation, is an overarching structure which guides M&E in the country, and which is responsible for driving the Outcomes Approach of government. The information from the users above would complement the work of the Presidency, which has the highest political authority to act on results.

The users of information, would be those who are compelled to use it (departmental management), groupings which require it for their own oversight (Parliament), and grouping which would draw on the information for their own research or advocacy purposes (academia, citizens, the media etc.).

2.1 Nature of the Evaluation And Primary Purpose Of The Evaluations

The above indicates that given the strong national evaluation effort, evaluation serves many purposes. Each of the institutions in the country would employ a combination of strategies to ensure that their mandates are met. Thus it may be stated that the general evaluation system of the country is formal in that it forms part of the Constitution, government policies and strategies, and has become entrenched in the sense that there is a clearly defined evaluation purpose, with a plan, resources, outputs and dissemination plan. The primary purpose for all the oversight institutions remains accountability, which is in line with various constitutional provisions relating to good governance. The attendant benefit is transparency, one would assume that learning naturally occurs, even if it is difficult to discern in the short term.

The evaluation efforts cover a spectrum of areas and within these, a wide range of issues and priorities. The evaluation of policy, programmes, projects, specific interventions, initiatives and other areas are evaluated by the different institutions. These generally occur against standards of accountability, transparency, relevance, public interest (such as anti-corruption initiatives), representivity and human resource practices, to name a few. The evaluation of *poverty reduction projects* has received much attention, but most pronounced has been the *evaluation of service delivery*.

Service delivery has been evaluated using different methodologies, and results triangulated drawing from other evaluations sources (non-government sector etc.). The assessments have been against principles for *Batho Pele (People first)*, which is a normative set of what citizens can expect, and the methods to gain such insights include compliance assessments, audits, citizen forums, inspections, appraisals, etc. There is an impressive body of data on service delivery in sectors, according to different units of analysis (national, provincial and local), which allows for effective intervention. The results are made publically available for engagement, and also customised for management action, which is thereafter followed up by the PSC.

3. CONSTITUTIONALLY DRIVEN M&E

There is a distinct advantage of having a constitutionally driven M&E, the main being that it enjoys the status and respect of all. It also means that M&E is not an option, which often results in it being marginalised. The constitutional provision for M&E, which the Public service Commission is tasked with, and which it is supposed to conduct in a manner which is fair, without fear, favour or prejudice, means that it enjoys access and authority.

As this paper will show, the PSC has translated its Constitutional mandate into a differentiated M&E system, which has provided it with the following:

- The ability to communicate confidently about the source, need and purpose of M&E across the country. This has resulted in a clearly defined M&E programme, which has also helped to galvanise support for M&E.
- The ability to choose evaluation issues, given its mandate to act on request or own accord. This has reinforced its independent stance, and also means that the PSC is not viewed as a political structure, but one that serves the country as a whole, as it reports directly to Parliament.
- The 9 values and principles for public administration are extensive in scope, and addressing each one of these, let alone all, is a complex task. The PSC has managed to define each of these specific performance terms (by producing sub-sets of indicators, standards, methods for data collection, scoring and reporting systems, thus making the often lofty and intangible values and principles “real and concrete”. It is through the results for each area, generated for departments or entities, that one is able to see the principle in practice.
- The mandate has allowed the PSC to engage with a range of role-players with the common purpose of advancing M&E, and this has resulted in the growth of the South African Monitoring and evaluation association (SAMEA), thus building M&E capacity in the country.

The main advantage of a constitutionally based M&E is the guaranteed independence, which also leads to high levels of credibility.

4. DIFFERENTIATED M&E PROGRAMME

It is accepted that M&E should lead to the attainment of some purpose or goal. In this case, the national development plans would include the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), within which are clear targets that the country needs to achieve. The work of the National Planning Commission (NPC) will become important, as the diagnostic analysis of development issues is important for tracking purposes, so as to assess the extent to which policy and other interventions work in ameliorating problems. The Outcomes Approach of the Presidency also clearly defines goals to be achieved, thus making it possible to monitor and evaluate progress over time. The country has several frameworks for measuring critical elements that make up development; the efficient and effective use of the budget, human resource

management, service delivery, corruption measures and the quality of public participation. Evaluations have addressed these areas.

4.1 Citizens

The PSC has taken a deliberate approach to ensure that citizens engage on the performance of government. The most accessible system is a Toll Free facility, which operates 365 days a year, on a 24 hour basis in all 11 official languages. It serves as an accountability tool, and the over 9000 cases that have been referred to it thus far, are categorised and sent back to departments for attention. In many of the cases the PSC intervenes directly in the form of investigating. Through this system the PSC has helped to recoup South African Rands 100 million.

The information from this system does assist in decision-making, as it provides in the first instance departments with a reflection of what is taking place within them. It thus has an accountability function, as there is also an obligation for the political and administrative leadership to report on actions taken to address referred cases. The aggregated information enters the public domain, thus providing the basis for debate, and generally this system provides the basis for more empirical data to be generated on issues relating to corruption. Other studies have indicated reporting of incidents is really reporting of allegations, which need to be tested. Often there is a discrepancy between the reporting and actual instances of corruption, and when this data gets used it shall be possible to move towards evidence based decision-making.

The use of announced and unannounced inspections has provided a means for assessing how services are experienced. Service delivery inspections conducted around clinics, police stations, courts etc. have resulted in action-oriented reports which have been presented to the political and administrative leadership for action. There has been much evidence of service delivery improving in sectors where inspections have been conducted. The PSC has been able to triangulate this data with data from its other M&E work, and there is now a solid body of work which reflects how citizens perceive and experience government services.

4.2 Parliament

As a key user of M&E, parliamentary relations between oversight bodies and itself are important. Parliament has the power to summons, which it has used effectively. More recently, the work of the PSC has been used in different committees of Parliament. In practice it means that there is a critical client, with the power to call to account, and thus there is an important demand. Any Parliament faced with the rich oversight information generated by the PSC and Auditor-General, for example, is able to direct political and administrative leadership more effectively.

The process of engaging with parliament means that there is greater respect accorded to evaluation reports. Departments are aware that reports shall be escalated to these structures, and the PSC has observed a greater seriousness now given to evaluation exercises. The process of presenting findings to parliament, and the provincial legislatures and committees, also means that the information enters

the public domain, which once again helps advance transparency and use. Some of the more successful endeavours have been when particular reports, like the one on the Department of Human Settlement was debated in terms of the findings, and where the leadership of the departments have been asked to comment on the recommendations provided. The key translator of evaluation findings into action is thus Parliament and its committees, and the good relationship enjoyed by the PSC has helped advance M&E in the country.

4.3 Departments

There are different ways in which the PSC engages with departments, which are key units of service delivery. It is here that policy gets translated into plans, and budgets are expended. The manner in which the performance of staff is managed also a key factor in the overall performance of departments.

The PSC engages with departments in all of the areas mentioned, and also produces comparative data which indicates how departments perform in areas such as grievance management, managing financial misconduct and performance management. The most comprehensive assessment of departments is done through the Public Service Monitoring and Evaluation System, which has thus far assessed 150 departments, and produced provincial and sector specific reports. The system allocates a score for each of the 9 focal areas, termed the constitutional values and principles for public administration, and produces the basis for engagement on performance. Whilst it draws on performance information from other oversight bodies, it does generate primary data on performance. The process of engaging with results is also empowering. Through the processes meant to solicit cooperation, such as presenting draft findings, engaging with the management of departments on the results, and making and tracking the implementation of recommendations, the process is meant to promote an M&E culture in departments.

This PSC system is in the process of review, to make it more flexible to cater for the different sectors, and also increase the diagnostic and evaluative element. The initial system was standards based, and focused more on departmentally provided information, and tried to reduce evaluator discretion. There was also a greater emphasis on compliance. With the evolution of the public service, it has been decided to allow great flexibility for diagnosis, and also ensure that the administrative information on performance is validated through visits to actual service delivery sites. The aim would be to gain a more comprehensive assessment of departmental performance. This shall in time include greater collaboration with other central M&E agencies, to ensure for example that there is no duplication of effort, and issues such as outcomes are considered.

4.4 Broader society

There would always be perceptions that the evaluation function is not sufficiently independent, and could be “captured” by some interest groups. This can and has been addressed by working actively with stakeholders, so that the value of the diverse becomes a factor to ensure that findings are indeed irreproachable, and the

independence is respected. The PSC has engaged actively with a cross-section of society to ensure that it is perceived as genuinely advancing broad social dialogue on the evaluation of government.

Some of the strategies that have been used, and which has helped to generate the collaboration across society includes the use of hearings, inspections, round tables, seminars, talk shows, radio call-in, TV interviews, debates and conferences. The collaboration with academia, the media, research institutions, non-government bodies and M&E professionals has also assisted in improving M&E use. This can be noted in the increase in citations of PSC work. The PSC is exploring new age technology as a means to accelerate its dissemination of reports.

5. EVIDENCE OF USE, TOWARDS RESULTS BASED DECISION-MAKING

Through a systematic tracking system, the PSC is able to track all of its recommendations, from the point at which it leaves the PSC to the point where it reaches departments. The purpose of tracking is to ensure that recommendations do not enter a black hole. The fact that there is a very deliberate dissemination strategy which forces reaction to findings by decision-makers, prevents this from happening.

It should be remembered that all reports do not necessarily require a response. In such instances, these would contribute to knowledge generation. What is important is that the intention of each report be known upfront. However, in most instances the evaluation reports require a management response, and it is thus necessary to realistically establish what this means in practice; by whom, by when and when a response would be viewed as valid. The PSC through its tracking system learnt that it not adequately directed in its earlier recommendations, but through a centralised tracking system, the uptake of recommendations has improved, as has the quality of recommendations generated.

There are now several instances where it can claim change has come about due to an evaluation. Examples include policy review (the term of appointment of Heads of Department) are adjustment to overarching programmes related to rural development. More specifically, at a departmental level, the PSC can track change, as a part of the process to establish what happened. The follow-up on inspected sites of service delivery has also shown that there has been improvements, which once again demonstrates how a proactive M&E approach can assist. The more M&E units are called upon to make presentations, the greater is the receptiveness to acting on results. This clearly helps to deepen the accountability framework.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper has shown how a comprehensive M&E approach is required to ensure use. It has indicated the importance of an enabling environment, where there is an appetite for evaluation results. This has taken place in South Africa, due in part to the urgency for social change and the historic circumstances. It has also indicated that there are several M&E players, all of which contribute to the oversight infrastructure. What is important is how they collaborate, so that there is no evaluation fatigue.

Critically important, is that there must be a directed M&E effort, and this means delineating the actual and potential clients in order to establish what the individual and collective needs are, and then addressing these through customised evaluation products, approaches and services. In conclusion, as all evaluators will know, they compete for decision-makers time and attention. This requires strategic and strong communication, so that there is eventually evidence that M&E leads to evidence based-decision making.