

BENIN: CAPACITIES ON EVALUATION OF NATIONAL PUBLIC POLICIES

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INTRODUCTION

The modes of government intervention to drive the development of States have changed considerably in recent decades. Out of concern for efficiency, public entities have modernized their approach to integrate a greater portion of the management process. In this regard, the results-based management approach is promoted to ensure better-quality public policy, and also to ensure its effectiveness in relation to its objectives.

Evaluation as a management practice and tool, which has developed during the same period, is now an important function related to development. Governments facing the challenge of demonstrating accountability and efficiency promote evaluation to meet this challenge and enrich knowledge useful for improving citizens' living conditions.

The Beninese government, like other developing countries, understands these issues and is committed to reforming government to make it more efficient and modern.

This paper describes Benin's experience in developing the evaluation function. It first presents the issues faced in developing evaluation, then summarizes the efforts undertaken in recent years to develop the function. Next it presents the results of the assessment of national evaluation capacities and introduces the prospects for their reinforcement and the types of support considered necessary.

ISSUES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF EVALUATION IN BENIN

Since 2003, Benin has been engaged in public administration reform by introducing results-based management. However, an assessment of the public administration showed that it still faces significant dysfunction. This results particularly from the poor capacity of public employees to manage records, as well as conflicts of interest and mismanagement or even corruption.

This situation hinders the efficiency of public administration and therefore interferes with efficient and effective implementation of development policies. In addition to the challenges of managing public policies, the administration is faced with conflicts of interest that preclude the active participation of stakeholders, particularly civil society and representatives of beneficiaries, in determining and driving public policy.

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Evaluation is now an essential tool for governance. It involves strengthening management systems by using the medium of public action evaluation. In an extremely volatile economic environment characterized by limited resources and the increasing needs and expectations of the people, priorities require:

- Streamlining the government's rate of expenditure;
- Ensuring the quality of public expenditure;
- Improving decentralized governance;
- Providing new solutions to the challenges encountered;
- Continuing to modernize the economy while responding sustainably to expectations.

The complexity of governance in the modern world requires officials to have more knowledge for optimal decision-making. Ensuring that public action responds to these challenges requires:

- Providing decision-makers with reliable information;
- Drawing lessons from the implementation of public policies;
- Informing all the stakeholders involved in driving public policy;
- Uniting stakeholders and beneficiaries around the agreed-upon objectives;
- Pledging credibility and good governance to the various partners of the State.

While recognizing the limitations of evaluative practice, it is expected to play a dominant role in enriching collective knowledge with a view to achieving changes and significant reforms. Knowledge contributes to the institutional reform process and to compliance with good governance and accountability in public action.

Three major challenges arise from these issues:

1. **Quality of assessments:** The objective at the national level is to define and promote methods, norms and standards to ensure the quality of evaluations and the usefulness of evaluation reports.
2. **Integrating evaluative practice into administrative organizations:** It is necessary to have a national regulatory framework that promotes the institutionalization and the practice of evaluation in order to ensure its usefulness, quality and permanence.
3. **Establishing an institutional framework that regulates and promotes evaluation practice:** The goal is to create an institutional environment that unites stakeholders to take part in the evaluation process by providing optimal conditions for their sustained cooperation and mutual reinforcement.

PRACTICE OF EVALUATION IN BENIN

The evaluation function was formally institutionalized in June 2007 with the creation of the Department of Forecasting, Development and Evaluation of Public Action. In June 2009 it became the Ministry of Forecasting, Development, Evaluation of Public Policy and Coordination of Government Action. This new assignment is consistent with the 2006-2011 Strategic Development Guidelines for Benin and is part of the reconstruction

of a development authority to serve the public interest and promote the private sector. All operations involving the government and the use of its resources, or any public funding that responds to development needs (policies implemented in the framework of the Growth Strategy for Poverty Reduction [la Stratégie de Croissance pour la Réduction de la Pauvreté], in particular), can be subject to an evaluation order.

Within the Department, the Office of Evaluation of Public Policy (Bureau d'Évaluation des Politiques Publiques, or BEPP), is responsible for evaluating national public policies and making them operational. The BEPP, which reports directly to the Minister of State Responsible for the Coordination of Government Action, addresses:

- Priority public policies;
- Programmes and major projects implemented by the central public administration;
- Professional practices;
- Activities of the public services or development agencies.

In the context of managing the public policy evaluation function, various documents have been developed to operationalize evaluation procedures. Evaluations of policies and strategies of priority economic sectors have also been conducted by the Office of Evaluation of Public Policy with the assistance of independent consultants.

To establish an effective national evaluation system enabling accurate and useful assessment of public policy, in April 2009 the Office of Evaluation of Public Policy, along with the UNDP Regional Evaluation Office for West and Central Africa, conducted a mission to identify the needs for development of the evaluation function. This mission permitted the collection of opinions and needs of national government organizations and institutions, local authorities, the private sector and civil society organizations. The analysis of the institutional mechanism for evaluation in Benin showed:

- Weak institutionalization of the evaluation function within the public administration, reflected, among other things, by the virtual absence of bodies with a clear evaluation mandate, poorly developed relationships between institutional stakeholders and a predominance of the control function (internal and external);
- The absence, until the establishment of the BEPP, of evaluation structures, whether independent or not, with responsibility for leading, creating or carrying out actions in the framework of the overall assessment of the public policies implemented;
- Absence of representation of local groups and decentralized services within the institutional evaluation system (the evaluation function is virtually absent at the decentralized level, at least vis-à-vis the State);
- Low demand for evaluation by the State, although it is quickly evolving. This finding is explained mainly by a lack of human and financial resources, the stakeholders' perception of the value and use of evaluation, the lack of political will or even the predominance of the control function;
- Strong and growing demand by donors in civil society organizations (a requirement for accountability of public action);
- Several opportunities for promoting greater institutionalization of the evaluation function (public reforms, decentralization, changes in the terms of public aid for development).

However, there are real opportunities in the Beninese context that should enable better anchoring and a more mature practice of evaluation, in particular:

- Clear political will;
- Human resources, particularly within the private sector, that are available but not yet organized professionally (no code of ethics);
- Decentralization as well as gradual changes in the terms of development aid (more emphasis on the use of national systems and mechanisms through implementation of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness);
- Civil society organizations and development partners that have accumulated significant experience with evaluation.

These consultations have resulted in significant opportunities to improve the civic dialogue on government policies and increasing acceptance and commitment of stakeholders to implement public policies. To this end, the Office of Evaluation of Public Policy has established an institutional framework for evaluating public policies that should contribute to the development of a national evaluation system by making assessment a national priority.

The institutional framework for evaluation has identified all relevant public and civil society institutions and partners at national level. The institutional framework aims to eventually lead to a national evaluation programme that provides useful information on the impact of public policies, the effectiveness of their implementation and the population's involvement in defining policies that fulfil their aspirations.

The BEPP is the core of the institutional framework, which includes:

- Advisory or oversight bodies;
- Government organizations (central, sectoral and decentralized);
- Associated organizations at local level;
- Technical and financial partners;
- Non-government stakeholders (civil society, associations, networks of evaluators, NGOs, universities).

The BEPP is preparing to make the institutional framework operational. A National Evaluation Council is also planned to serve as a framework for cooperation among institutional organizations. In addition, the Office of Evaluation of Public Policy has undertaken (with financial support from UNDP) a diagnostic study of evaluation capacity in Benin with the objective of:

- Proposing the best institutionalization scenarios to make the evaluation function permanent in Benin;
- Improving the office's intervention strategy by adapting it to the national context and the government's vision for evaluation;
- Establishing a national programme to develop evaluation capacity in government and partner institutions.

DIAGNOSTIC STUDY ON THE ASSESSMENT OF NATIONAL CAPACITY

A team of international and national consultants was recruited by UNDP Benin to conduct the diagnostic study, which is now in its final phase. This study aims to:

- Provide a baseline for comparing the situation in Benin with that of other countries in West and Central Africa in terms of sharing experiences;
- Provide the BEPP with an intervention strategy for evaluation of public policies;
- Prepare for implementation of a programme to strengthen national evaluation capacities.

The intervention strategy and the programme to strengthen evaluation capacities should promote the dissemination of evaluation practices throughout the development process, through both planning and implementing development actions, programmes and policies.

The first results of the diagnostic study confirmed the analysis by the mission to identify needs. They further noted:

- Absence of a national evaluation policy and an incentivizing regulatory framework;
- Weak management capacity of the government;
- Low participation of non-government stakeholders in the evaluations;
- Inadequate monitoring by management;
- Insufficient incorporation of the results of evaluations in implementation of programmes, projects and policies;
- Difficulty of translating recommendations into operational measures;
- Little use of evaluation results;
- Insufficient funding to implement the recommended measures;
- Lack of specific budgets and organizations for evaluation;
- Predominance of project and programme evaluations over policy evaluations;
- Weak national capacity, particularly in human resources;
- Lack of specialized training on evaluation.

OUTLOOK

These results demonstrate the importance of evaluation to state reform. It is important for modern management to be implemented in public administration in Benin and for evaluation to be part of this modernization effort. The BEPP's mandate is therefore to evaluate public policies, while playing an advisory role to administration evaluation bodies to ensure quality. The BEPP also acts as the principal intermediary for technical and financial partners in matters of adopting the use of evaluations in accordance with the Paris Declaration and the Accra Agenda for Action.

To strengthen human resources, a specialized evaluation training programme should be established for staff with evaluation responsibilities and people who wish to increase their

knowledge in the field. Under the coordination of BEPP, this training could be developed in a modular form in compliance with international standards. The programme will be subject to professional certification or academic accreditation in connection with the universities of Benin and in coordination with key evaluation stakeholders in Benin.

Capacity building should also emphasize management and supervision of the evaluation function, since most evaluations are conducted according to the 'make do' approach.

Therefore, the priority actions to be supported by multilateral and bilateral partners within the framework of South-South cooperation are:

- Promote results-based management;
- Develop a national evaluation policy;
- Strengthen the capacity of the BEPP;
- Strengthen the BEPP's public policy evaluation process;
- Develop and disseminate a practical guide to evaluation in Benin, including quality norms and standards;
- Inventory and periodically update evaluations in Benin and disseminate an annual schedule of evaluations;
- Coordinate with technical and financial partners and ensure their systematic participation in evaluation processes.

Other medium-term actions can be planned, namely:

- Support demand for evaluation by establishing an evaluation support fund (documentary resources and financial support);
- Strengthen the BEPP's advisory support and quality assurance role;
- Increase lobbying for mandatory government accountability.

CONCLUSIONS

Evaluation is a consistent scientific approach that is essential to the management process. The findings in Benin reinforce the government's will to develop this little-used link.

Evaluation establishes important learning channels that stimulate demand for change. A national evaluation system should be established in Benin to create, through the evaluation of public policies, new synergies concerning the definition and implementation of public action. These synergies will help achieve the government's policy objectives and ensure the well-being of the population, which is the main target of public action.

This is therefore a major challenge for democracy and governance. It is important to develop South-South partnerships to learn from similar policies and promote replicable examples. It is also essential to engage with national and regional stakeholders by developing a framework for dynamic and open discussions.

In recognition of the importance of the field of evaluation and its usefulness as a development tool and its contribution to knowledge, Benin intends to elevate the rank of evaluation to a national priority.