

ETHIOPIA: EVALUATION IN ETHIOPIA: INSTITUTIONAL SETTING, EXPERIENCES, CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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INTRODUCTION

'Evaluation' is arguably one of the most vaguely defined words in development theory and practice. Many definitions are roaming around, though finding an all-inclusive definition is difficult. Hence, the concept of 'evaluating' development interventions, moving from policy to programmes and on to projects, has remained a slippery, debatable and sometimes divergent concept.

Since the 1980s, however, consensus has more or less been reached between least developed countries and development partners on the essentiality of evaluating the performance of development interventions so corrections can be made and lessons mainstreamed. The importance of doing so is multi-faceted. For the government, evaluation results can be instruments for measuring achievements, sorting out weaknesses, mobilizing local resources and maintaining popular legitimacy. For the citizenry, evaluation is a key way to hold the bureaucracy accountable. To development partners, evaluation is the way to track the effective, efficient and accountable use of resources in line with the envisioned objective of development interventions. Evaluation results also meet the needs of other stakeholders with varying interests.

Like other countries striving to instil democratic governance, ensure sustainable development and reduce poverty, Ethiopia has put in place a monitoring and evaluation system to follow up the progress of its development policies, sectoral development plans, programmes and projects. It has been operational since the 1960s. With the coming of the poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSP) process, the country has harmonized its development plans with the PRSP and Millennium Development Goal planning to realize an integrated system.

This has benefited the country in three important ways. First, the process has reduced the cost of managing development interventions by avoiding a separate institutional setting for

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each of the three interventions. Second, it has improved targeting of the poor by providing a multi-dimensional framework for addressing poverty and development. Last but not least, it has made the process of delivering public services slim, responsive, transparent and cost-effective.

That being the case, however, the country's monitoring and evaluation system has faced serious problems, and continues to. The problems range from inadequate attention to evaluation, overlapping institutional mandates, lack of strategic-level commitment, poor quality and relevance of evaluation information, lack of integration between systemic components and poor accountability structure.

This paper briefly reviews the institutional setting, experiences, challenges and prospects of evaluation in Ethiopia. It is limited to development interventions done solely by the public sector, by public-private partnerships or through collaboration of government and development partners. It first discusses the institutional set-up of evaluation, then deals with the evaluation experiences of the country. Next it addresses the major challenges facing the system and outlines future prospects before concluding with important reflections.

INSTITUTIONAL SETTING OF EVALUATION IN ETHIOPIA

Ethiopia was an African pioneer in adopting development planning as an instrument to ensure national economic growth, regional development and overall socio-economic well-being. To this end, national development plans have been employed in the country since 1960s. Nevertheless, the focus, methodical approach and institutional structure have changed with time.

The post-1991 situation is unique, however, in its more comprehensive approach to development planning. The Agricultural Development Led Industrialization (ADLI) was adopted as a guiding policy framework, with subsequent institution of other sectoral strategies. In terms of poverty reduction efforts, Ethiopia has implemented two PRSPs and is preparing the third one. The first PRSP, named Sustainable Development and Poverty Reduction Programme, lasted for three years, 2002/03 to 2004/05. Its successor, Plan for Accelerated and Sustained Development to End Poverty, spanning 2005/06 to 2009/10, is in its last year of implementation. In each of these, the government underscored a commitment to its foremost objective: poverty reduction. In general, the institutional structure of evaluation could be seen in terms of four major perspectives:

1. Evaluation of development strategies put in place by the governing party to guide the overall development of the nation;
2. Structural setting for evaluating the PRSPs;
3. Evaluation of sectoral development programmes;
4. Institutional structure for evaluating high-impact projects.

The ADLI document identifies 'continuous learning' and 'management of improvement' as two of the important focal points for ensuring the success of national development policies and strategies. For this, the governing party has instituted a three-tiered governmental structure under the federal government, including regions, zones and *woredas*. Local government is

designed so that sectors at every level can communicate with respective sectoral units at the higher tier. Hence, two-way communication machinery is put in place vertically, while experience-sharing platforms are instituted horizontally. Therefore, evaluation of policies is both a technocratic and a political task.

The planning structures that bind the tiers of governments also integrate them operationally to evaluate policies. But at the end of the day, the viability of policies is decided by the higher political decision-making body of the governing party. Thus, the role of local governments is to implement the policy in collaboration with each other and with their respective references. Nevertheless, local governments are also constitutionally mandated to plan, implement and evaluate their own development plans autonomously, yet in tandem with the policies and strategies adopted by the federal government.

It can almost be said that this part of the institutional structure of evaluation is more a political machinery than a technical one. Meanwhile, there is a strong backward and forward linkage with the other three institutional settings of evaluation. Even more important in this regard are the stringent reporting and feedback mechanisms between *woredas* and zones, zones and regions, and regions and the federal government through the many other cross-cutting platforms of communication.

The second institutional structure of evaluation in Ethiopia is the evaluation of medium-term development plans, or PRSPs. The system was built on the welfare monitoring system programme led by the welfare monitoring unit of the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development (MoFED), established in 1996. Information is generated by the Central Statistical Agency and MoFED, using surveys and analytical studies tailored to provide precise socio-economic data. Sectoral ministries and NGOs are also part of the system. To have strong capacities in information generation, the government established a national medium-term statistical programme and a national strategy for development of statistics. The strategies foresee development of an efficient and sustainable statistical system. A central data bank is being established, aiming for one-stop access to information in a user-friendly way.

An important milestone in terms of data accessibility was establishment and strengthening of the ETHIO-INFO database. In this regard, support from development partners under the umbrella of the Development Assistance Group has been paramount. The outputs of the process at this level of evaluation are annual progress reports. They have been of vital importance in grasping lessons, informing stakeholders, mobilizing resources, strengthening inter-institutional collaboration and, most important, measuring the performance of plans. The reports have created a learning environment for the government, development partners, the community and other stakeholders.

Supplementing the annual progress reports, intensive evaluation studies have been undertaken on selected sectors, interventions and strategies, allowing evidence-based adjustments. Such studies have covered agriculture, small and medium-size enterprises, urban development and civil service capacity. The coordination of MoFED, Central Statistical Agency, sector ministries and development partners concerning evaluation at this level has been commendable. Yet this does not mean it has been without problems. Though it might be unrealistic to say that evaluation results have to be value free, it is indubitable that they shall be credible. For this to hold true, the independence of the evaluating units must not be compromised.

The first problem of the country's evaluation system at this level emerges from the fact that it is supply-driven, top-down and self-serving. This has put the credibility of evaluation results under question. The second problem is poor collaboration among systemic components, overlapping mandates and time lag in disclosing results. Poor coordination between line ministries and regional bureaus has remained the major obstacle to generating and compiling essential evaluation information on time. As a result, there is a lag of up to one year in disclosing evaluation information, a serious hindrance to developing timely corrective policy measures. The third and most important problem is the lack of evaluation capacity. This is a factor in all federal, regional and local implementing agencies. It has laid its shadow on the quality of evaluation results. Last but not least, the incomprehensibly varied demands of diverse development partners have burdened the system.

The third component of the system relates to sectoral development programmes. These programmes, part of the national medium-term development plans, are owned and administered by sectoral agencies. Among these programmes are the education sector development programme, administered by the Ministry of Education; health sector development programme, by the Ministry of Health; and small and medium enterprises development programme, by the Federal Small and Medium Enterprise Agency. The evaluation of these sector development programmes is a collaborative effort of the ministries, regional bureaus and development partners. Yet, through the sectoral annual performance reports, this level is integrated with the previous one. Meanwhile, it is unique in involving many independent evaluations conducted by international development agencies, bilateral cooperation agencies and international financial institutions, in accordance with their respective interests. In spite of its strengths in terms of stakeholder participation and responsiveness, this level of evaluation shares most of the problems mentioned in the previous level.

The last and arguably messiest level of evaluation in the country is project-level evaluation. Despite long years of experience in project-based interventions, the country still does not have an integrated project evaluation system. Specifically, ex-post evaluation and impact evaluation are the forgotten ends at this level. The government has not given sufficient attention to integrating project-level evaluation with the above-mentioned three levels of evaluation. As a result, a huge hole exists in the nation's overall policy evaluation framework. The absence of a standardized project evaluation mechanism in the public sector has made the playing field so messy that everyone evaluates and no one learns. Although finance and economic development units at federal (MoFED), regional and *woreda* level are responsible for project evaluation, the system has not been integrated. In addition, the overall evaluation framework is facing a huge challenge in terms of tracking resource use, avoiding duplication of efforts, mainstreaming accountability and enhancing evaluation demand.

EVALUATION EXPERIENCES

The attitude towards evaluation in Ethiopia is generally negative. People emphasize the accountability part of the task, downplaying the learning side. The bureaucracy is less efficient in learning from evaluation results, whether it be policy, programme or project evaluation. Despite the fact that evaluation is an effective instrument to mainstream good

governance, the inadequate attention it receives has impaired its role. Another common attitude is viewing evaluation as an imposition from development partners and international financial institutions. This has hampered the learning environment. Without a strong national evaluation association and professional networking, standardized evaluation has remained in the shadows. Accordingly, everyone is counting himself/herself as an evaluator. This has created ambiguity in the development circle as to the worthiness of doing evaluations.

Nevertheless, even with all its problems, the country's evaluation system has borne some fruit. This is expressed in the rising demand for on-time release of annual progress reports and the increased use of evaluation results in project and programme design and academic research. Had this been supplemented with awareness creation schemes, strengthening the toddling Ethiopian Evaluation Association, tailored courses and training on evaluation and comprehensive capacity building programme, the result would have been praiseworthy.

CHALLENGES

The evaluation system of Ethiopia is facing many challenges. These include:

- Inadequate attention to evaluation, both at strategic and grass-roots level, which can be partly attributed to mismanagement of previous experiences;
- Unclear roles and responsibilities among evaluating units at different levels;
- Lack of commitment, emerging from the tendency to look at evaluation as an imposition from development partners and international financial institutions;
- Poor quality and irrelevant information, in terms of ignoring outreach, effect and impact of policies, programmes and projects in designing information collection platforms;
- Poor accountability for failures;
- Lack of integration among actors in the evaluation systems at different levels;
- Problems of mainstreaming lessons drawn from evaluation results;
- Limiting the scope of evaluation to financial and physical dimensions, partly to avoid the very important yet sensitive dimension of evaluating the politics;
- Excessive dependence on reports rather than first-hand information-gathering and cross-referencing mechanisms;
- Poor evaluation capacity at both individual and systemic levels, partly a result of the little attention given to evaluation at the strategic level;
- Poor integration among components of the system, partly a result of 'mandate overlap' between government agencies and conflicting interests between stakeholders;
- Poor culture of evaluation as a society and as a nation.

PROSPECTS

Despite the long list of problems in the country's evaluation system, there are some prospects. Among them are:

- Recent formation of the Ethiopian Evaluation Association and professional efforts to advance the agenda of standardized evaluation by creating awareness and establishing customized professional standards;
- Recent embrace of a more stringent and full-fledged programme evaluation by development partners;
- Publication and dissemination of evaluation guidelines by MoFED;
- Growing attention to the role of evaluation as an instrument of good governance;
- Expansion of higher education institutions, which might at some point provide more tailored evaluation courses;
- Growing demand for evaluation results from diverse development actors.

CONCLUSIONS

Though Ethiopia has constitutionalized and institutionalized evaluation, it has not optimized its benefits. The nation's institutional structure has a four-tiered evaluation system, whose tiers are meant to feed each other and create a complete system. Yet different problems at different levels have impeded the systemic integration. In addition, the little attention given to evaluation and the tendency to shy away from accountability have hindered evaluation from playing its role in creating a positive learning environment and a flexible institutional setting. However, the growing demand for evaluation results could be taken as an opportunity to strengthen the practice, standardization and utilization of evaluation in the nation. For this to hold true, all actors in the development circle have to work jointly. Not least, evaluators, as professionals, have to stand for their valuable profession and the invaluable benefit it could offer for the well-being of the society through networking.

DOCUMENT CONSULTED

MoFED, 'Ethiopia; Building on Progress a Plan for Accelerated and Sustained Development to End Poverty (PASDEP)', vol. I. Main Text, Addis Ababa, 2006.