

Better Policies as a Result of Policy Evaluation

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Abstract: This article will explore the role of the evaluation in the modern policy-making process and the ways in which evaluation activities can contribute to the improvement of the public policies and programs. Therefore, the theoretical part of the article I will, firstly, explore the role of evaluation on various stages of policy-making process. Secondly, the advantages and disadvantages of using qualitative and quantitative approaches in policy evaluation will be outlines as well as one of the possible solutions for overcoming the limitations of both these approaches will be proposed. Thirdly, this article will concentrate on the explanation of the necessity of ex-ante and ex-post policy evaluations. In the empirical part the article will concentrate of the concrete methods of policy evaluation and their practical use in order to demonstrate their critical role in the improvement of public policies and programs.

1 INTRODUCTION

Public policies and programs are aimed at solving particular social problems and bringing benefits for certain strata of population. However, the formulation and implementation of a certain policy or program does not guarantee that the intended outcome will be achieved. Policy evaluation in its turn is conducted for the purpose of making judgements over the effectiveness of particular policy intervention and is, therefore, not only a keystone for the improvement of the public policies and programs but also an important tool that enables policy-makers to understand whether these policies and programs generate intended effects and need to be implemented or extended. Moreover, policy evaluation promotes accountability in resource allocation across various public programs and helps to understand whether the measured changes in public well-being can be attributed to certain policy intervention (Khandker et al, 2010: 3). Thus, policy evaluation is inevitable part of the policy-making process as it provides systematic, objective and empirical examination of the effects of the public policies and programs (Parsons, 1995: 545).

Nevertheless, evaluation cannot directly affect the decision-making as new policies and programs are seldom based solely on the results of evaluation as a number of other factors such as, for instance, competing pressures of ideologies, institutional constrains and interests tend to play significant role in

the design policy intervention. Moreover, evaluation is not often directly utilised by governments due to the lack of institutionalised procedures and channels connecting evaluation results with the arenas in which decisions are being made (Weiss, 1999: 477-479). However, by finding out and analysing the outcomes of government interventions evaluation provides the directions for the improvement of policies and programs. Furthermore, policy-makers tend to pay a significant attention to evaluation not only with the intention to create the wisest and best policies but also searching for justification for their actions. In addition, some types of policy evaluation include cost-effectiveness and cost-benefit analysis that enable the policy-makers to make decisions based on the finical constraints and choose the programs according to the level of expenditure (Weiss, 1999: 473-474). Thus, although policy evaluation does not directly affect the decision-making, it is still very important in the policy-making process providing politicians with the knowledge important for the creation of the beneficial programs and policies as well as with the justification for their actions.

2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

Three major groups of approaches to the evaluation analysis can be identified: techniques measuring the relations of utility and benefits to costs, techniques measuring performance and techniques using

experiments in evaluating programs and policies (Parsons, 1995: 545). Each of these techniques plays a significant role in different phases of the policy-making cycle. To begin with, in the agenda setting and problem definition phases of policy cycle policy evaluation diagnoses social conditions with intention to provide information over the necessity of new program and, therefore, is used to compare, identify and prioritise the needs inside as well as outside program areas. Moreover, evaluation research is involved in defining the targets such as geographic areas, groups and individuals and physical units. Good specification of targets appropriately establishes boundaries allowing the intervention to correctly address the target population (Rossi et al, 2004: 130-131). Moreover, techniques of decision analysis play major role in policy design phase by identifying and assessing various alternatives of achieving program outcomes with the aim of achieving cost-effective alternative (Parsons, 1995: 546). Thus, in the in the initial phases of the policy cycle evaluation assists in adequate identification of social problems and specification of target groups for intervention that are essential for the effective operation of a policy or a program. In addition, the techniques aimed at measuring the relationship of costs to utility allow policy-makers to choose the best alternative with the restricted budget.

Formative evaluation occurs in the intermediate stages of the policy cycle. Its major aim is to ensure that a program or a policy is feasible before it is fully implemented. This mode of evaluation typically addresses such questions as whether the program is reaching the targeted population, the amount of the resources being spent in the conduct of the policy or whether the services are delivered according to program or policy design specification (Parsons, 1995: 547). Thus, formative evaluation plays an important role in the policy implementation stage as through monitoring the way in which the program is managed and administrated, evaluators provide policy-makers, managers and stakeholders with feedback enabling them to control and correct the process of delivery of particular policy or program more effectively.

While formative evaluations aim to assist the program developers in improving the program in the early stages, summative evaluation is conducted after the curriculum is finished and is designated to help with decisions about whether the program should be continued or extended to other locations (Weiss, 1998:31). Summative evaluation reviews such categories as goals, methods, results and implementation in order to draw conclusion whether

the operation of program or policy was consistent with the initial goals. Summative evaluation is initially a comparative mode of inquiry as in order to measure the actual impact of the intervention analysts usually compare the situation before and after the policy or program implementation in terms of relevant outcomes. Thus, for instance, the impact of intervention on one group can be defined by comparing the group subjected to intervention with a control group (Parsons, 1995: 550). Summative evaluation in addition to evaluating the achievement of aims also takes into consideration unintended consequences. Therefore, a policy or a program may be considered to be justified even if it has not achieved the effects that it was set to achieve but has had other beneficial effects on society (Spicker, 2006: 167-168).

Thus, evaluation research undoubtedly plays an important role in every phase of the policy cycle. Therefore, the difference between various phases of policy cycle provides one of the explanations of the choice of techniques used in evaluation. Thus, for instance, there is no point in commencing expensive experimental approach the results of which may not be available for considerable period of time, if it is necessary to obtain a quick evaluation of the short-term impact of the program or policy in its early stages to modify it or justify its extension. At the same time when evaluation is conducted with the intention to provide a guidance over the expansion of initially limited policy or program, it is necessary to choose an appropriate technique allowing to ensure that the expanded policy or program would bring expected outcomes (Hogwood and Gunn, 1984:228).

Similarly, the purpose of the evaluation determines the appropriateness of the choice between qualitative and quantitative research designs. Whereas qualitative evaluators tend to use observational techniques relying on detailed knowledge of the processes by which the program or policy is shaped and how program or policy stakeholders are affected by these processes, quantitative approaches use the statistical methods of analysis as the data collected by quantitative evaluators can be transformed into numerical value. The quantitative results are found to be more authoritative as qualitative evaluation allows to reach conclusions with known degree of confidence. However, qualitative investigation can provide more dynamic information and a richness of detail. Therefore, when the central focus of inquiry is related to the program process qualitative approach is generally more preferable. Moreover, in case of introducing a new complex and innovative policy or

program qualitative investigation can answer the questions concerning possible problems that can arise or how such new entry takes shape. However, when addressing the outcomes of the policy intervention quantitative methods are more preferable as they can provide accurate data of a number of people benefited from a particular policy or program (Weiss, 1998:85-86). Thus, both qualitative and quantitative methods have inherited strengths and drawbacks and the choice between these methods should be determined by the initial goal of evaluation.

Furthermore, the weaknesses of the policy evaluation research design can be minimised when qualitative and quantitative methods are mixed. The insights of the policy or program evaluation can be yielded by integration of qualitative and quantitative approaches that neither method would produce on its own. While quantitative approaches provide a tool kit that is very useful in evaluating the impact of the policy or program, it still has significant limitations in social science that can be overcome by incorporating qualitative methods (Rao and Woolcock, 2003:165). The combination of qualitative research with quantitative tools results in greater coverage and generalisability making the most of comparative advantages of both approaches. Thus, for instance, Community Score Card that combines both qualitative and quantitative data and analysis is successfully used as an interactive monitoring instrument increasing accountability of service providers. While quantitative methods are used in scoring the particular qualities of service provision, qualitative approaches then utilise the generated scores for defining and diagnosing the problems and identifying solutions (Garbarino and Holland, 2009:16).

Both ex-ante and ex-post policy evaluations play a critical role in the improvement of policies and programs. While ex-ante evaluation by involving simulations seeks to measure the anticipated impact of future policy intervention, ex-post evaluation measures the actual impact of the policy or program on targeted area or population (Khandker et al, 2010: 20-21). Therefore, ex-ante evaluation makes it possible to design a policy or a program that would maximise the benefits at a given cost. Moreover, it may help to avoid some initially inefficient policies and programs providing some evidence on the impacts that should be expected after the program implementation. In addition, ex-ante evaluation provides the information on how the modification of some parameters of the policy or program would influence the general impacts. Thus, for instance, Job Training Partnership Act in the US was replaced

largely because the experimental evaluation demonstrated that in addition to be very costly the program was not beneficial for a number of stakeholders (Todd and Wolpin, 2008: 265). Ex-post evaluation in its turn plays a major role not only in assessment of achievement of intended objectives but also by identifying weak and strong points of intervention this mode of evaluation allows to indicate the directions for improvement of future policies programs. Thus, ex-ante and ex-post evaluations allow the policy-makers to improve both existing and future policies and programs.

There is a wide variety of methods used in modern policy evaluation, however, given the initial complexity of the subject this article will demonstrate the practical use only of two of them. To begin with, one of the methods frequently used in assessing social programs is participatory evaluation. This evaluation model is best suited to formative evaluation and, therefore, most frequently occurs in the intermediate phases of policy cycle. Participatory evaluation is conducted in order to provide opportunity for policy or program primary users to participate in the research process (Cousins and Earl, 1992:400). Evaluation is viewed by participatory model as a collaborative effort involving individuals both internal and external to organisation such as professionally trained evaluation personnel, program developers, practice-based decision makers and program or policy stakeholders in co-learning relationship and power sharing (Harris, 2010: 7). Participation occurs in all stages of evaluation process from identification of relevant questions to dissemination of outcomes and preparation of the plan for the program or policy improvement. Thus, the focus of policy evaluation, its design and outcomes are determined by participants within their own cultural, political and socioeconomic environments. Overall, participatory evaluation is intended to understand the preferences, voices, perspectives and decisions of program beneficiaries and most affected stakeholders (Zukosi and Luluqisen, 2002:2-3).

Consequently, such guiding principles of participatory evaluation as participant focus and ownership, negotiation, learning and flexibility can be identified. These core principals explain far-reaching benefits of this model of evaluation. To begin with, by allowing local participants to identify the most relevant questions participatory approach ensures that the evaluation meets the needs of policy or program developers and beneficiaries. Secondly, participatory evaluation provides an opportunity for policy or program stakeholders to reflect on its

process and apply generated knowledge to make mid-course improvements to program or policy performance. Thus, this model of evaluation can be characterised as action-oriented and reflective. Thirdly, participatory approach empowers policy or program beneficiaries to control the process of evaluation giving them a sense of ownership over the evaluation results. The recognition of expertise of local talents brings pride and confidence among participants and in the community. Moreover, participatory approaches enables participant learning by providing an opportunity to introduce and develop evaluation skills that can result in better understanding of their environment and may lead to active involvement of local people in advocacy for policy change. Finally, participatory evaluation promotes organisational learning and growth through creating knowledge base among local organisations and people that can be further applied on other projects and programs (Zukosi and Luluquisen, 2002:3).

However, the benefits of participatory model of evolution are neither guaranteed nor automatic (Guijt, 2014: 18). The major challenges to participatory approaches may be summarised as time and commitment, resources and conflict. Thus, participatory evaluation requires significant time and commitment from a number of players as it involves coordination and training of various stakeholders with diverse backgrounds. Differences in participants' backgrounds can in their turn provoke conflicts among as well as within groups. Therefore, foreseeing possible ways of conflict resolution among the participants involved is required in the initial stages of the evaluation planning. In addition, the involvement of a number of people is required by evaluation process available resources and funds should be allocated realistically (Zukosi and Luluquisen, 2002:4). Nevertheless, an appropriate use and design of participatory evaluation enables to overcome the challenges of this evaluation model and benefit from its strengths.

Thus, for instance, participatory impact evaluation approach was utilised to track progress and change as a result of the Northern Region Rural Integrated Programme in Ghana. Village Development Capacity Index evaluation framework developed by trained evaluation team in partnership with various program stakeholders including local rural representatives was used to assess the impact of local capacity building to improved sanitation services and water supply. Village representatives provided feedback on data collected through focus group discussions, interviews with key informants

and households, and observations in the field. The scores on each of these indicators were allocated to the villages under investigation by the program major stakeholders. Consensus building and dialogue among different stakeholders were facilitated by the scoring process. The scores were further used to track the program impacts and changes over time in order to evaluate the progress by monitoring team (Estrella and Gaventa, 1998:8). Another example of practical use of participatory evaluation approaches comes from Latin America. Colombia's Association of Indigenous Councils of Northern Cauca (ACIN) consistently participates in monitoring and evaluation of the regional development plan. ACIN is involved in systematic comparison of the actual results with intended outcomes and in assessment of links between productivity and environmental and cultural factors. These activities have helped in recognition of communities strengths as well in the improvement of their management capabilities. The links between a number of communities provide the concerted necessary in negotiations with provincial and national governments as well as with private sector (Guijt and Gaventa, 1998:4).

Realistic evaluation is another approach widely used in assessing public policies and programs. This evaluation model developed by Pawson and Tilley in 1997 is focused not only on the question whether the policy intervention produced required outcomes but also under which conditions and how these outcomes were produced (Gill and Turbin, 1999:181). Realistic evaluation seeks to explain why policy or program works through understanding mechanisms actions. Therefore, evaluators need to concentrate on how causal mechanisms generating behavioural and social problems are countered or removed by the mechanisms introduced by particular policy or program. Moreover, this model of evaluation seeks to understand in what circumstances and for whom the intervention provides intended outcomes using the context-mechanism-outcome configurations enabling evaluators to develop cumulative and transferable lessons from research (Pawson and Tilley, 1997:215-218).

3 CONCLUSIONS

There are both advantages and disadvantages of this method deserving consideration. The major strength of realistic evaluation is its attempt to link particular concepts to mechanisms through generative causation. Thus, it enables evaluator to deepen the research that is not possible with the use of orthodox

evaluation methods (Crabbé and Leroy, 2012: 121). Moreover, realistic evaluation provides a consistent and coherent framework for evaluation in various stages of policy cycle. In addition, it promotes maximisation of learning across practice, policy and organisational boundaries. Overall, realistic evaluation 'provides a principle steer from failed one-size-fits-all ways of responding to problems' (Pawson and Tilley, 2004:22). However, this evaluation model has some distinct limitations. To begin with, there is no a general formula that can provide step-by-step instructions for delivering findings. Therefore, realistic evaluation requires sustained theoretical understanding, abilities to design techniques and research to analyse data (Pawson and Tilley, 2004:22). Finally, this evaluation model does not allow generalisation of findings as the context is regarded to be one of the most important explanatory factors (Crabbé and Leroy, 2012: 121). Nevertheless, realistic evaluation method can be argued to be promising for future policy evaluations.

Pawson and Tilley (1997:78-82) demonstrate the practical use of realistic evaluation for assessing the installation of closed-circuit television (CCTV) as a measure against the crime in car parks. The authors providing lists of mechanisms and contexts assess not only the final outcomes of using CCTV for crime reduction, but also explain how and under which conditions the introduction of this particular measure promotes the decrease of crimes in the car parks. Thus, for instance, one of the mechanisms outlined is what the authors refer to 'memory jogging'. This mechanism emphasises the role of CCTV as an indicator for reminding the drivers about the vulnerability of their cars. Thereby, drivers may be prompted to take greater care to lock their vehicles, to remove items that can be easily stolen from view or to purchase additional security devices.

Evaluation of Aboriginal Parental Engagement Program (APEP) is another empirical example demonstrating the beneficial use of realistic approach to policy evaluation. APEP program was funded by federal government Department of Education and Employment Relations of Australia with the purpose to enhance readiness of 0-5 year old Aboriginal children for school by increasing the level of parental engagement in education. Ex-post realistic approach was conducted both to assess the program outcomes and to specify the underlying mechanisms and contexts determining the program impact. The results of the evaluation demonstrate that multiple mechanisms and contexts contributes to parental engagement. Thus, for instance, the analysis of the surveys enabled evaluators to draw the conclusions

on how the program outcomes varied according the families' initial circumstances. The results of this evaluation can be used by policy-makers and program developers to improve future policies taking into consideration defined mechanisms and contexts (Cargo and Warner, 2013).

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