



Professionalization of Program Evaluation in Africa: An Imperative for Effectiveness and Accountability for Public Policy

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Abstract

Program evaluation is an applied science which importance for accountability, efficacy and effectiveness of public policies makes consensus among scientific researchers. So, in developed countries, especially North America's ones, it is a professional domain with professional associations, standards of practices and development of tools nurturing and improving continuously practices. The goal of this paper is to show that in French speaking African countries, inexistence or bad functioning of a formal frame of exercise and development of the practice impede the evaluation findings to achieve maximum credibility and acceptance.

In fact, in most African French-speaking countries like Benin, amateurism is standard gold. Program evaluation in this context is practiced by managers and technocratic civil servants for all sectors who, with their specific experience in their domain, think they were able to judge program in implementation. So, in these conditions of inexistence of formal training in evaluation and standards of practices, the evaluation practice is marked by defects like disrespect of evaluators' independence, the glaring conflict of interest, the low rate of evaluation findings utilization, and so on. This result is so evident in Benin because, we know the non-professionalization of a sensitive domain, like education in program evaluation, can lead to disastrous consequences. So, it is urgent that improving evaluation quality and credibility needs a setup of formal framework of practice with qualified trainings, continuous trainings and experiences sharing and to setup standards of practices. The contribution of the most developed program evaluation communities of North America especially those of Canada would be welcome.

Keywords: Evaluation; Professionalization; Public policies; Effectiveness; Accountability

Introduction

The evaluation, according to Champagne et al. [1], is basically to make a value judgment on an intervention by setting up a mechanism capable to provide scientifically valid and socially legitimate information on that intervention or on any of its components, in the aim to ensure that the different actors involved, whose fields of judgment are sometimes different, should be able to take a position on the intervention so that they can build, individually or collectively, a judgment that can be translated into actions. It is therefore a delicate act since it requires systematic collection and interpretation of data on the intervention in order to allow a value judgment that will be translated into actions. From this judgment depends the future of the intervention: continuation, stopping, improvement, etc. This requires a certain competence, rigor, credibility and even certain professionalism from the evaluator.

Program Evaluation, an Evolving Discipline

In Africa, as in the rest of the developing world, results-based management, the need for public management accountability and is equal to social accountability are leading governments to increasingly use evaluations to make decisions on public programs and interventions. Despite the increasing use of evaluations, little effort is made to equip this field with competent specialists who can effectively cope with the task. Thus, the question raised is to understand in what extent professionalization of that field can be an adequate response to such a situation.

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Context and Problems of Health Programs Evaluation in Benin and in Africa

Professions, according to Carr-Saunders (1934) cited by Abbott et al. [2] are organized corporations of experts who apply esoteric knowledge to particular situations. They develop systems of instruction and training, an entrance based on an examination or other formal prerequisites, possess and strengthen a code of ethics and behaviors. In Africa and especially in Benin, there are still no real professionals in program evaluation. Indeed, the evaluation activity is carried out either by external evaluators with little knowledge of the context, or by practitioners with knowledge of the context but belonging to related fields (social scientists, specialists in audit, management or program management, public health or environmental specialists, etc.). In the first case, despite the competence and professionalism of the evaluator, results may not be achieved for several reasons such as insufficient control of the context, the reluctance of stakeholders related to fear of evaluation, the lack of inadequacy of program monitoring databases that can be used for conducting evaluations [3]. Chaplowe et al. [4] based on the research of the UN Office's Special Coordinator for Africa and the least developed countries (UN/OSCAL) and the UN Office's Special Adviser on Africa, explain how donor requirements for monitoring and evaluation can undermine NGO performance by threatening their autonomy, decreasing accountability to beneficiaries in an effort to enhance accountability to the donor, etc. In the second case, the specialists are familiar with the context but have no specific training in evaluation. They are either social scientists or managers or specialists in audit and management control or specialists experienced in a specific domain of social life (often health or education). However, according to Scriven et al. [5], evaluation is not an applied social science but an extraordinarily demanding and practical discipline, even in the sub-field of program evaluation, and requires knowledge of a wide range of subjects as well as certain key skills including quantitative and qualitative research strategies and methods. This means, therefore, that knowledge in the social sciences or in a specific domain of social life (health, education, social affairs) alone is not sufficient for a good competence in program evaluation if they are not combined with sound knowledge precisely in the field of program evaluation. This result is all the more obvious because in Benin, we know that the non-professionalization of such a sensitive field can have disastrous consequences. Indeed, in the 1970s, the Military Revolutionary Government of Benin, faced with the shortage of teachers that could allow it to implement its mass schooling program, used all the executives of the administration to teach in addition to their professional activity as well as the new graduates of the BEPC and the Bac (after respectively 10 and 14 years of total schooling). The results were catastrophic.

Similarly, a combination of these skills can be useful if it includes sufficient experience in program evaluation. Otherwise, there may be a shift from evaluation work to approaches other than program evaluation. Thus, as Chelimsky et al. [6] pointed out, the evaluation units included in state structures are, among other things, under the influence of the prevailing professional culture in the agency housing the evaluation unit (law, audit, science, etc.), a culture that tends to precipitate political clashes with the evaluation culture, sometimes due to differences in theory or practice, but most often a sense of rivalry or resentment. For example, a team of specialists in law or management audit/control will tend to focus more on legal aspects, "human rights" or monitoring and performance measures than on evaluation as such. Another common practice is the use of specialists

in or who have recently left public office to evaluate or participate in the evaluation of public programs. This practice, which is intolerable because of the obvious conflict of interest, is still very common for many reasons, including the lack of competent practitioners in the field of evaluation. There are many other harmful practices in Africa that have been denounced by other authors in North America: Excessive expectations from the clients, underfunding of the evaluation, pressures from the political environment and hidden agendas, attempts to co-opt the evaluator, subversion of evaluation questions, sabotage of estimates or research methods, limitation of access to data sources necessary for the evaluation, misuse or non-use of the results, and the perceived limited effect of evaluation on public policy decisions, etc. [6-8]. All these practices threaten three fundamental requirements of program evaluation according to Chelimsky et al. [6] namely independence, credibility and morality. Independence means protecting evaluators from partisan influences that can threaten the evaluation process, especially at the design stages (imposition of an inappropriate quote or interference with a solid quote if the evaluators themselves have developed one) and dissemination stages (influence of results or report formulation, prohibition of dissemination). The credibility of the evaluator is based on the high quality of the results. But various practices can compromise this quality of results, including bureaucratic or professional resentment, misunderstanding of the evaluation company, restriction of the evaluation theme or budget, or deliberate attempts to discredit evaluation reports. From a moral point of view, evaluators according to Chelimsky et al. [6] need freedom of initiative, tolerance for intellectual curiosity, as well as good retribution for the quality of their work. These three requirements are recognized and guaranteed in the standards and practice guides that are the hallmark of mature professions. Indeed, in Africa, given the politically sensitive context in some countries, the 2002 practice guide inspired by the United States program evaluations standards, had to seek to make, at the level of political viability and dissemination of results, a compromise between the proposals of the various African countries with relatively open regimes, with proven press freedom and a participatory political process and those of other relatively autocratic regimes or military dictatorships [9]. In USA [7], the maturation of the evaluation profession has resulted in the development of collective wisdom through practice guides, an increase in local affiliations and a development of the means of mentoring novices in the profession. In addition, the guiding principles of the American Evaluation Association (AEA) are well received when shared with clients as they give them a minimal sense of expectations and likely outcomes but also allow them to realize that a given individual evaluator is not acting for himself, but under the guise of a code or standards of practice shared by a community of practitioners. This means that the absence or weak functioning of such a formal framework or a referent in the practice of this art which is program evaluation seriously harms the credibility of practitioners and the trust of clients. Efforts to professionalize the field and develop monitoring and evaluation systems as well as the establishment and animation of communities of practice exist in Africa [8,10,11]. But the question is whether they are sufficient in the face of the stakes. This is all the more important since in Africa there are practically no academic institutions offering diploma training or even evaluation services. The practice is almost exclusively done on the mode of consultancy. In this regard, as Bernstein (1978) cited by Rossi (1980, page 901) himself cited by Beyer and Trice (1982, page 611) pointed out [12]: « ...research done by academic institutions-although far from perfection - is significantly more in line with scientific

methodological standards than that done by entrepreneurs such as "peripheral bandits», an epithet commonly applied to consulting firms around Washington, D.C. C." Finally, since, according to stake [13], standards and practice guides do not always respond effectively to the main concerns of an evaluation (identifying and reporting the qualities but also the shortcomings of a program), it is necessary to use all possible procedures to enrich the work of the personal experience of the evaluator without a violation of the ethics of evaluation. Among other means, it offers data validation, triangulation and meta-evaluation. But in Africa, to say the least, meta-evaluation is almost non-existent in practice. Schwartz and Mayne et al. [14] propose, apart from the structural approach (based on standards and practice guides) of quality assurance of evaluative information, the formative, summative and systemic approaches. The formative approach involves individually estimating the quality of the evaluative reports by submitting draft or draft reports for review. The summative approach involves an individual assessment of the quality of an evaluation that has already been completed to learn lessons for future work. Finally, the systems approach assesses the quality of the functioning of the systems that produce the assessments and are very useful in the accreditation processes. The absence in Africa, first of all, of comprehensive training in program evaluation, of a sufficient pool of evaluators in the context and of well-qualified public administration officials in the field, prevents the use of either method of assessing the quality of information evaluation, which is detrimental to the credibility and quality of these evaluations.

Reorganization Efforts

The issue of the quality of evaluations has been at the heart of several concerns [3]. Addressing this issue, the debates of the inaugural assembly of the International Organization for Evaluation Cooperation (OICE) in Lima, Peru proposed two approaches [15]. The first approach calls for the establishment of external mechanisms to regulate evaluation so that people can be aware that there are principles and lessons that shape expectations and by which hopes are communicated. The other approach proposes the promotion of local evaluation standards to be internalized through professional development. This approach combines this professional development with efforts to promote ethics in evaluation practice, consumer's education through helping funders and governments apply standards to evaluation results they receive from consultants to ensure they are of high quality. The American Evaluation Association (AEA) to help ensure this credibility offers a range of services to new members: Reliability assurance to members, curriculum vitae bearing the association's logo, election of the best local evaluation office, etc. [7].

According to Leviton et al. [7], three skills are essential for evaluation: consubstantial knowledge of the field, methodological knowledge and skills, expertise in organizational theories and finally communication and negotiation skills. A good foundation for the integration of these different skills and knowledge can only be achieved with good basic training. This means that the development and implementation of a core curriculum for evaluation training would be the first and most important step towards the professionalization of evaluation in Africa. Indeed, as Leviton [7] pointed out, it is training in which evaluators are always exposed to a variety of methods and concerns that generally make them more competent. This will allow for a sufficient pool of skills in the evaluation of programs that are well imbued with the context and that through forums for exchanges and studies of their common

concerns and the most fundamental professional challenges can strengthen their capacity and internalize standards or set up external mechanisms for regulating their practices. Adams and Dickinson et al. [16] provide training workshops and specific support mechanisms for organizations to increase the evaluation capacity of community workers in the public health sector. Such exchanges are all the more necessary because it is difficult for a single evaluator to have all the necessary skills. Indeed, each evaluator has good skills in some domains more than others, and life experiences would confer greater expertise on some aspects of the work more than others [7].

However, professionalization can be accompanied by other problems. Deshamais et al. [17] believes that the search for market closure is a possible explanation of the considerations underlying an occupational group's interest in professionalization. The author also points out that this consideration does not necessarily compromise the mission of public protection that must guide professional orders in the exercise of their supervisory power, because, he says, the legitimization process promotes on the contrary respect for this mission. The occupational group through this process maintains not only the social recognition of its competence and usefulness but also the exercise of the powers of control granted to it; the necessary credibility for the survival of the group is at stake. But transparency in the process can allow governments and the general public to have a say in protecting the public interest more effectively.

Conclusion

Program evaluation is an applied science whose importance to the accountability, effectiveness and efficiency of public policy is becoming increasingly common in the scientific community. In Africa and mainly in Benin, the inexistence of effective basic training programs in evaluation in social field in general, and health domain in particular, while the use of evaluation by decision-makers in public policy decision-making is increasing, has undermined its quality and credibility. It then becomes important that the reflections are directed towards the establishment of a formal framework of practice including a diploma training module, continuous training and exchanges of experiences as well as the establishment of standards rules of practice. The contribution of fairly advanced program evaluation companies such as North America and primarily Canada would be greatly appreciated.

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