Evaluation in Latin America: Paradigms and Practices

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Abstract

This chapter addresses the development of evaluation, as a practice and as a field of knowledge, throughout Latin America in relation to the sociopolitical context, including characteristics of the state and its relations with civil society. It comes from the perspectives of evaluation as a learning tool, as a means to improve accountability and transparency in public administration, and as a dialogic device. The political context is described in terms of three historical moments: (a) the existence of the welfare state, (b) the withdrawal of the state in the framework of the Washington consensus and the emergence of neoconservative policies, and (c) the return of the state and the rise of civil society and active politics. Finally, there is an analysis of opportunities and challenges facing contemporary policy evaluators and decision makers. ©Wiley Periodicals, Inc., and the American Evaluation Association.

Resumen

En este capítulo se aborda el desarrollo de la evaluación, como práctica y como campo de conocimiento, en toda América Latina en relación con el contexto socio-político, incluidas las características del Estado y sus relaciones con la sociedad civil. Se trata de la perspectiva de la evaluación como una herramienta de aprendizaje, como un medio para mejorar la rendición de cuentas y la transparencia en la administración pública, y como un dispositivo de diálogo.

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contexto político se toma en función de tres momentos históricos: (a) la existencia del Estado de Bienestar; (b) la retirada del Estado en el marco del Consenso de Washington y la aparición de las políticas neoconservadoras; (c) el retorno del Estado y el surgimiento de la sociedad civil y la política activa. Finalmente, se hace un análisis de las oportunidades y desafíos que enfrentan los evaluadores y tomadores de decisiones. ©Wiley Periodicals, Inc., and the American Evaluation Association.

**Evaluation Perspective**

To evaluate implies forming a judgment where the object being evaluated is placed on a continuum: for example, more/less; a lot/a little; near/far; good/bad; adequate/inadequate; achieved/unachieved. In every evaluation there is a referent (a model, a situation, an expected or desired condition of what is being evaluated) and a referred object (the object to be evaluated). The challenge is to calculate the gap between the reality and the horizon aimed at, and to explain the reasons for the gap. What is distinctive about evaluation is that it deals with applied knowledge concerning public policy decisions made in public spheres.

Every public policy is a hypothesis (or a set of hypotheses) of action of the kind “intervention Y will lead to outcome X.” However, the experimental nature of policy, especially in a globalized society, is subject to dynamic processes of change that are both creative and innovative. Evaluation opens up the relationship between the knowledge produced and the practice of intervention, and is a powerful learning tool (Neirotti, 2008).

This learning leads to another function of evaluation, which is to enable dialogue among those involved in the intervention, those we call stakeholders, or those who invest value in the policy and the intervention. Dialogue is focused on different calculations of value and diverse views of the distance between accomplishment and the horizons of aspiration. This is the ‘deliberative’ function of evaluation (House & Howe, 1999).

An evaluation must pursue two additional purposes in order to be useful. On the one hand, it must be an instrument to improve accountability conditions, both internal and external to the program. Being evaluated implies that agents of a policy can account for their productivity not only in the statutory sector to which they belong (internal accountability), but also in the context of broader political and social worlds (external accountability). The result ought to be greater transparency in social planning and innovation feeding public debate about society’s political heritage.

In terms of its methodological purposes, evaluation has a scientific–technical dimension and a political one. The former refers to the rationality of the means with respect to its measurement purposes, whereas the latter is related to the interplay of power among stakeholders.

Technical rationality is not the only factor that drives decision-making processes, nor is there only one scientific solution to any social problem.
Were this the case, we would find ourselves in the grip of technocratic and authoritarian regimes. Neither should the academic and scientific field settle on what counts as public value—this is a matter to be determined by the wider citizenry and democratic politics (Aguilar Villanueva, 1996; Merino & Cejudo, 2010;).

**The Sociopolitical Context for Evaluation in Latin America**

The development of the evaluation function in a nation or in a region has to be seen in relation to its own sociopolitical context. So it is important to identify trends in the development of nations, the forms in which the state works, the conditions of civil society and its relationship with the state as well as the shaping of public policy.

The practice of policy and program evaluation in Latin America can be characterized within three historical moments: (1) regulatory planning for development (called *desarrollista*, in Spanish), (2) reforms of the state demanded by the Washington consensus, and (3) the return of the state, the emergence of the civil society and contested politics. These three historical moments in the region correspond to (a) welfare statism—the period of the development of welfare states, prevailing until the 1970s and which was brought to an end by military–authoritarian governments; (b) authoritarian governments and the neoconservatives and the period of neoconservatism typical of the 1980s and the 1990s; (c) the contemporary progressive shift period entailing the rejuvenation of the state and open politics. To understand the development of evaluation policy and practice in Latin America it is helpful to elaborate what each of these three historical periods emphasized.

Welfare statism involved a determined intervention of an omnipresent state in social and economic policies and development planning across society. In general, it was supported by extensive political organization with nationalist overtones and the popular support of civil society organizations, especially trade unions, business organizations, and the third sector (Garretón, 2000).

Mostly through military intervention, authoritarian governments and the neoconservatives were designed to bring to an end advances in social rights represented by the welfare state and involved the minimization of the state. Once these welfare state governments ceased to exist, the scenario was open for the advance of neoconservative policies, both in economics (free market) as well as in state intervention (minimum presence, withdrawal, privatization, and outsourcing). The neoconservative turn produced a civil society, already beaten down by authoritarian governments, that was fractured and weak, even though citizen participation was encouraged as a form of competition with the state. State planning was withdrawn in favor of private initiatives following values promoted by the *Washington consensus*, a term that captures the economic policy prescriptions for Latin American countries perceived by the United States as being in crisis.
The progressive shift in the new century reintroduced progressive government in the Latin American region and a new configuration of political actors with significant levels of social mobilization. The state has recovered its role as a promoter of economic and social development and there was a return to social planning, though still with delegation of state functions to the private sector. There has been a remarkable increase in levels of organization and participation of civil society, but contrary to what occurred during the period of neoconservatism with a politicization of civil society. There has been a shift from competition between the state and the civil society to a relationship of collaboration and complementarity.

How did the evaluation function develop in these three stages? In the period of the welfare state, in relation to regulatory planning, important information sources were developed essential to the planning function (for example, for economic statistics, social census, and vital and educational statistics), though systematic program and policy evaluation was not carried out. Once big development-oriented plans were designed (a task driven by politics but considered technical), audits, follow-ups, and inspections were performed, and the emphasis was on the process only and the fulfillment of rules and procedures with little room for formative replanning (Matus, 1987). At most, evaluation was used as an activity prior to the implementation of projects and mainly centered on feasibility studies. The results, effects, and impacts of the policies and programs received little or no evaluation at all.

With the reforms of the Washington consensus there was a move toward formal evaluation of public policies. Together with denationalization, privatization, deregulation, and decentralization processes, and along with the creation of public administration agents, it was considered necessary to have evaluation agencies to monitor and assess the results of the application of the policies. The period saw the formation of structures for the systematic evaluation of state services, such as the National System for Results Evaluation of the Public Administration (Sistema Nacional de Evaluación de Resultados de la Gestión Pública—SINERGIA) in Colombia, the National System of Evaluation (Sistema Nacional de Evaluación—SINE) in Costa Rica, and the evaluation built into the Brazilian Pluriannual Action Plans at federal, state, and municipal levels.

During this period, the focus was on evaluation oriented to so-called second-generation reforms, with emphasis on the study of results and impact within the framework of the modernization of the state and the paradigm of the performative-based new public management (Norris & Kushner, 2007). The first-generation reforms refer to structural adjustments carried out by governments with the support of international organizations, mainly the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank, oriented to cut fiscal deficits and open up economies. Second-generation reforms were oriented to the transformation of the state and its health, education, labor,
and social security sectors. Within this framework a deregulatory and coordinating approach was encouraged. More than abiding by rules, evaluation shifted its attention to the results, the scope of its aims and the quality of performance of the public administration (Cunill Grau & Ospina Bozzi, 2003; Saltzman, 2003). Under this new regime, the citizen is recast as client or consumer. Evaluation is focused on measuring user satisfaction with services through surveys and instruments such as citizen charters, but also focuses on monitoring the outsourcing of state functions.

The new public management was oriented toward the private sector and civil society organizations. These increased in number and level of expertise, though their participation was not significant enough to allow for the development of strategies, methodologies, and a culture of participatory evaluation. The bases for this kind of evaluation have emerged subsequently, but it will be necessary to wait until the new millennium in order to see the development of this evaluation style, in conjunction with the high levels of mobilization of social movements arising in the region (peasant, racial identity, gender, local movements, among others).

Notwithstanding the aforementioned, there was a growing demand for the professionalization of evaluation. Foundations of the institutionalization of evaluation were laid, the first concerns for the training of evaluators were raised, and support for evaluation research, training, updating, and professionalization of the activity was encouraged by government and international organizations.

Much of this evaluation development came not from national governments, but from international organizations. Evaluation activities were created in order to secure the effective development of proposals for harmonized action across the region. It is also worth noting that evaluation faced a dual purpose: on the one hand, to determine how public policies operated in general terms and in the institutions relevant to each sector (for example, provincial/state education and health systems, schools, hospitals, health centers, provincial/state and municipal social development offices) based on their results, but on the other hand, to encourage competition among different sectors in order to support quasimarkets and the exercise of consumer choice.

As a result of the increase in political mobilization, the consolidation of social movements, the development of civil society organizations, and the processes of state modernization, the region is currently facing the challenge of creating new evaluation approaches in the context of other public policy priorities. The presence of various actors participating in policy design and implementation is giving rise to a multilevel form of governance, where national government converges with provincial/state and municipal governments, as well as governance through partnership management, involving associations between governmental and nongovernmental agencies (Bañón & Carrillo, 1997; Bozeman, 1998).
These emphasize the political aspects of evaluation, where it is asked to strengthen policy determinations, to construct consensus, and to negotiate differences in values, interests, and discourses. Attention to the political aspects of evaluation has resulted in a greater incidence of mapping of actors; analysis of their proposals; and concerns for institutional, cultural, and identity aspects of the social groups involved in the evaluation. This has sometimes bent evaluation toward an illumination approach (Parlett & Hamilton, 1972) and an empowerment evaluation approach (Fetterman, 2007). Freire’s (2008) strategy of considering knowledge a power resource has been rediscovered in the context of the “knowledge society.”

One of the difficulties arising from earlier stages in the development of evaluation practice was that appropriate use of evaluation was deemed guaranteed by simply paying attention to technical aspects of evaluation. Focusing on the values and interests of the different actors at the inception of an evaluation, as we do now, calls for validation of the evaluation among stakeholders in order to secure consensus over the object to be evaluated and the way to conduct the process. According to Majone (1996), the academics (dominant among those working in evaluation) frequently forget that using data (or factual arguments) is not enough, and that it is also necessary to know how to argue and to persuade (House & Howe, 1999).

The contemporary use of evaluation is no longer considered the exclusive responsibility of decision makers, though it is assumed that the evaluator finishes his work when he submits the results of his research and the good use of such information will then be the politician’s responsibility. But this raises the question as to whether evaluation systems should make their insights more widely available to stakeholders at all levels.

**Results and Process**

Movement through these three phases has produced a shift of evaluation focus from social planning processes to results—the former seeking to control methods of policy implementation through social planning and the latter assuming greater freedom in implementation strategy so long as desired outcomes are generated.

In a results framework little attention was placed on program process, avoiding causal explanations linking implementation strategy (and context) to results (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Program implementation itself was a black box, and program managers were forced to use their intuition to match program management with desired outcomes. This represents a challenge for the current stage, where it is evident that there are no uniform guidelines for policy implementation.

Methodologies are emerging that respond to this challenge. Early evaluation provision under the welfare-state period saw the emergence of several organizations for the production of statistical information, and during the second stage strategies to survey results and impacts were devised.
A neopositivist evaluation approach was mostly pursued, and sometimes alternative, nonquantitative approaches were dismissed as nonscientific. Meanwhile, quantitative methodologies, mostly based on quasiexperimentation, generated little reliable understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of program achievements. In addition, information frequently arrived too late for decision making.

More responsive (and less costly) methods were developed, such as rapid appraisal, the use of purposeful sampling, before–after models without comparison groups, but also naturalistic approaches, which are characterized by their holistic reach and for including the perspectives of diverse actors. Evaluation became a forum for dialogue (Greene, 2001) and mediation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Shadish, Cook, & Leviton, 1991).

Table 1.1 summarizes the different parameters used for comparing the three sociopolitical moments and their relationship to the evaluation practice.

**Opportunities and Challenges**

As a resource for the improvement of public management and as an instrument for strengthening democracy (MacDonald & Kushner, 2004) evaluation offers opportunities and challenges to government and academic organizations as well as to civil society. First, there is a wide range of institutional evaluation systems in many countries, although these systems are largely sectoral and poorly articulated. Evaluation structures themselves cannot solve such deficiencies, though evaluation can highlight the dilemmas and shortcomings in infrastructure.

For several years, political agencies have been creating their own evaluation resources, and they have created a demand for professionalized evaluation skills in the region. These agencies have contributed to the mobilization of human resources from different disciplines (sociology, anthropology, economy, education, psychology, health, etc.) that are currently converging on the field of evaluation. This mobilization has given rise to a variety of opportunities in the academic world, such as master’s degrees and other graduate programs or evaluation subjects in specialization careers. In addition, there are numerous networks, associations, seminars, and conferences focusing on salient areas (public policies, management, research methodologies, planning, among others) that include evaluation issues in their agendas for discussion and dissemination. There is a promising future ahead for the professionalization of the practice that combines the endeavors of government organizations, academic institutions, and evaluation societies or networks. In most countries, the past decade has seen national evaluation associations created at the initiative of organized civil society groups, and various regional networks of evaluators and evaluation associations have emerged. These include the Monitoring, Evaluation and Systematization Network in Latin America and the Caribbean (Red de Seguimiento, Evaluación y Sistematización de América Latina y el Caribe—ReLAC);
### Table 1.1. Characteristics of Evaluation Within Different Sociopolitical Contexts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>State-centric</th>
<th>Neoconservative</th>
<th>State/Society Articulation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>State presence</strong></td>
<td>Welfare state</td>
<td>Withdrawal of the state</td>
<td>Return of the state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social and political</strong></td>
<td>National popular movement</td>
<td>Empowerment of civil society (indifferent to political issues)</td>
<td>Repoliticized civil society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>participation</strong></td>
<td>Politicized civil society</td>
<td>Opposition state/civil society</td>
<td>Political projects and reconfiguration of mobilized political subjects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Types of planning</strong></td>
<td>Traditional and normative</td>
<td>Strategic with minimum state participation</td>
<td>Strategic with greater state participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rationale behind decision</strong></td>
<td>Preeminence of the technical and administrative rationale (planning and process control)</td>
<td>Preeminence of the technical rationale</td>
<td>Recovery of the political rationale articulated with the technical rationale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>making</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evaluation system orientation</strong></td>
<td>Production of statistical data to support planning</td>
<td>Systematic research focused on its validity (information production)</td>
<td>Focus placed not only on valid knowledge production, but also on the communication and use of that knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evaluation focus</strong></td>
<td>Ex ante evaluation Audits and process control</td>
<td>Ex post evaluation Results</td>
<td>Results in relation to processes (management)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Methodologies</strong></td>
<td>Procedure analysis Statistics Prospective (feasibility/viability)</td>
<td>Quantitative (impact analysis)</td>
<td>Quantitative/qualitative combination</td>
</tr>
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the Evaluators Network of the United Nations for Latin America and the Caribbean (Red de Evaluadores de Naciones Unidas para América Latina y el Caribe—EVALUN LAC), the Latin American and Caribbean Monitoring and Evaluation Network (Red Latinoamericana y del Caribe de Monitoreo y Evaluación—REDLACME) and the Network of the Regional Platform for Evaluation Capacity Building in Latin America and the Caribbean (Plataforma Regional de Desarrollo de Capacidades en Evaluación y Sistematización de América Latina y el Caribe—PREVAL).

The relationship of evaluation to decision making is complex and depends on whether we think of evaluation of planning processes or of social budgets, the latter being more restricted (Cunill Grau & Ospina Bozzi, 2003; Zaltsman, 2004). Bringing decision making within the ambit of evaluation will go hand in hand with the growth of professional evaluation cultures. Creating the conditions for the proper use of knowledge produced by evaluation should be the work of the decision makers (to the extent that there is consensus regarding the benefit of evaluation findings), but also of evaluators themselves (by fostering dialogue, interpreting the demands for knowledge, arguing, and persuading) and of those in charge of policy implementation (those working in the production and distribution of services, who need to take possession of evaluation results).

Above all, it is necessary to convert the monster into an ally (Mokate, 2000), that is, to stop considering evaluation a threat (an instrument of control and coercion) and to perceive it as a democratic opportunity. In the short term, Latin American countries need to consider evaluation as a possibility to learn together by reflecting on practice, to use dialogue, to get to know each other, to recognize others as peers, to improve the quality of existing policies, to be accountable, and to make management more transparent and valued (CLAD, 2000). In the long term, we need to perceive evaluation as an instrument for deepening democracy, for creating enhanced conditions for equity, and for helping people to improve their quality of life.

References


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