

EVALUATOR COMPETENCIES: THE SOUTH AFRICAN GOVERNMENT EXPERIENCE

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Abstract: This article describes the South African government's process in developing evaluator competencies. It first briefly describes the more general historical context in which the need for "competent" program evaluators and evaluation skills emerged in government, and then focuses on the Department of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation in the South African Presidency, its evolution as a new government institution responsible for M&E in government, and its process to develop and institutionalize evaluator competencies.

Résumé : Cet article décrit le processus du gouvernement sud-africain pour développer les compétences d'évaluateur. L'article commence par décrire brièvement le contexte historique plus général où le besoin d'évaluateurs de programme « compétents » et de compétences d'évaluation a émergé au sein du gouvernement. L'article met l'accent sur le « Department of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation » à la présidence sud-africaine, chargé du suivi et de l'évaluation du rendement au sein du gouvernement, son évolution en tant que nouvelle institution gouvernementale, et son processus d'élaboration et d'institutionnalisation des compétences d'évaluateur.

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BRIEF HISTORY OF MONITORING AND EVALUATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

██████████ To better understand why the South African government developed evaluator competencies, it is important to understand how government's role shifted after 1994 in relation to donors, civil society, and its citizens. It is this history that provides the context for explaining the rapid growth of evaluation and the emerging need for competent evaluators in government. Specifically, significant changes took place when South Africa moved from an apartheid state to a democratic one in 1994. This monumental shift to a government that needed to be accountable to its citizens and international donors brought about a change in the need for, and the role of, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) in government.

Prior to 1994

Significant donor funding was provided to South African nonprofit organizations (NPOs) before 1994. Most international donors viewed the apartheid regime as illegitimate and undemocratic, regarding NPOs as legitimate vehicles for channelling funds to apartheid victims. These NPOs provided much-needed services, which at times were underpinned by political activities, to the majority of South Africa's marginalized population. Being explicit about the nature of their activities (or achievements) was not always in the NPOs' best interest, as this could potentially result in severe consequences (e.g., dismantling the NPO or even prison). Therefore donors' reporting requirements were often quite relaxed. Most donor organizations accepted an auditor report and a general annual report as sufficient proof of financial accountability (Podems, 2004). This period is often regarded as having been a "healthy" period for civil society, as staff had relatively easy access to donor funding with few strings attached (Kabane, 2011).

1994 to present

The development and need for M&E in government resulted from several events that took place from 1994 to the present. One initial external impetus for strong M&E happened post-1994 when the donor funding scene changed dramatically. Most donors wanted to support the new legitimate government. With this shift came an

increased demand by donors for transparency and accountability (Mouton, 2010; Podems, 2004).

The incentive for M&E in government was also driven internally. The South African government penned a new constitution that institutionalized the protection of the fledgling democracy by providing for watchdogs over government (i.e., Parliament and Chapter 9 institutions) and a new role for the Public Service Commission (PSC). Chapter 9 institutions refer to a group of organizations established under Chapter 9 of the South African Constitution to safeguard democracy (South African Constitution, 1996). These institutions were required to report to the legislature and provide evidence for the legislature to hold the executive accountable. Moreover, in an effort to improve performance and value for money in government, the Department of the Treasury developed processes of performance management and performance budgeting. Thus there was an internal drive to improve performance and government accountability through the institutional oversight provided for in the Constitution, and the need for government to demonstrate to its citizens the benefits of its policies and their implementation (Goldman et al., 2012).

This ultimately led to the adoption of M&E by several government institutions. M&E units were more often “M” (monitoring) units and tasked to produce regular (usually quarterly) performance reports. M&E was basically seen as monitoring for compliance rather than as a means to improve programmes or determine impact and value for money. While the government created hundreds of M&E positions and various forms of M&E continued to be conducted in government, it was not until the mid-2000s that government began to take a more active role in shaping M&E in South Africa (Engela & Ajam, 2010).

During this time, the Office of the Presidency initiated an M&E effort that evolved from a Government-Wide M&E System (GWMES) into the Department of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation, also known as the DPME (Goldman et al., 2012). In November 2007 the Presidency produced “The Policy Framework for the Government Wide M&E System” (Presidency, 2007, p. 5) that “aimed to provide an integrated, encompassing framework of M&E principles, practices and standards to be used throughout government, and function as an apex-level information system which draws from the component systems in the framework to deliver useful M&E products for its users.” Three domains were identified: (a) program performance information, (b) data quality, and (c) evaluation. The aim of the GWMES

was to promote standardization and homogeneity in M&E practices across various departments within the South African government. In 2009, the advent of a new administration brought an increased commitment to use M&E as a tool to improve government performance, initially with a focus on priority outcomes (Engela & Ajam, 2010).

Establishment of the Department of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation

In January 2010, the DPME was established within the Office of the Presidency. According to the Presidency website,

... [T]he establishment of the Department of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation ... was a clear demonstration of Government's commitment to ensure that our performance makes meaningful impact in the lives of our people. The Department, in close cooperation with the National Planning Commission, will play an important role in setting expectations of improved outcomes across government. The Department will drive a results-oriented approach across the three spheres and other organs of state. The Department will review the data architecture of government so that the required performance information is generated and it will ensure that this information is actually used in intergovernmental planning and resource allocation. (Presidency, n.d.)

Prior to 2011 there was no standardization of evaluation in government; when people spoke of M&E in government departments, they were almost always referring to monitoring. Initially, DPME also focused primarily on monitoring. However, in 2011 this was extended to evaluation, and staff members from the DPME and other government departments took a study tour to Mexico and Colombia to learn from their experiences with evaluation in government. In that same year, the DPME led the development of a National Evaluation Policy Framework (NEPF), which was approved by Cabinet in November 2011 (Goldman et al., 2012). The NEPF then led to the National Evaluation Plan and the National Evaluation Framework (Jacob, 2013).

To encourage evaluation use, the NEPF is guided by a utilization-focused approach to evaluation, with a recognition of systems and an emphasis on learning. It aims to provide a common language for evaluation in South Africa, defines a range of types of evaluation

studies, and states that priorities for evaluation would be defined as part of a rolling 3-year National Evaluation Plan (NEP) that focuses on the 12 priority outcomes of government. The NEPF promotes transparency by stating that evaluation findings will be made public. Within the DPME, a specific unit is responsible for the implementation of the NEPF and the resulting evaluation system (DPME, 2011).

The DPME promotes 6 types of evaluations that will take place in the government system:

- Diagnostic – identifying the root cause of problems and the options that could be considered for addressing them;
- Design – a short evaluation of the design of programs by M&E units within departments to ensure that designs are robust, ideally before implementation starts;
- Implementation – reflecting on progress in an intervention and how it can be strengthened;
- Impact – identifying the impact and attribution of interventions and how they can be strengthened;
- Economic – the cost-effectiveness or cost-benefit of interventions; and
- Evaluation synthesis – drawing out lessons across several evaluations (DPME, 2011).

The NEPF has attempted to shift government from a compliance culture to one that has a greater emphasis on improvement, learning, and efficiency. This shift has had its challenges in terms of human capacity. First, the speed at which M&E units and directorates were established during the first decade of the century resulted in large numbers (estimated to be in the hundreds) of new M&E officers appointed over a relatively short period. Most of these officers have no formal training in monitoring or evaluation. Second, this rapid institutionalization of evaluation in the government sector and the creation of demand for a minimum of 15 medium-scale national government evaluations a year has had major implications for the need for evaluation expertise, both within (e.g., such as M&E officers) and outside (e.g., service providers) of government.

MONITORING AND EVALUATION SKILLS IN GOVERNMENT

Various data suggest the lack of monitoring *and* evaluation skills in government. For example, in January 2009 the Presidency attempted to reform the Cabinet reporting system, asking departments to de-

velop appropriate indicators to allow accurate monitoring of their services. One reason that was identified as to why departments struggled to fulfill these requests was a lack of technical knowledge around monitoring or evaluation (Engela & Ajam, 2010).

The DPME conducted a survey in 2012 that also provides an indication of the capacity limitation. This survey, conducted with all national and provincial departments (with a 62% response rate), found that 32% of departments indicated that capacity for M&E is too weak and managers do not have the skills and understanding necessary to carry out their M&E functions. Further, 40% said there is not a strong culture of M&E in their department and that only in 36% of cases are there significant measurement of impacts (DPME, 2012b). In 2013, DPME conducted an additional study on human resource capacity around M&E. This study found that 78% of provincial departments felt confident in monitoring and reporting, whereas only 42% were confident in managing evaluations. For national departments, the figures were 94% and 52% respectively, reflecting the perceived lack of expertise in evaluation. Approximately 72% of respondents said they needed training in evaluation policy and practice (DPME, 2013).

SOUTH AFRICAN MONITORING AND EVALUATION ASSOCIATION (SAMEA)

Role in Competency Development

Over the past few decades there has been a remarkable growth in the evaluation field around the world. According to Rugh and Segone (2013), the number of national and regional voluntary organizations for professional evaluators (VOPEs) has risen from 15 in the 1990s to more than 155 by early 2013. Growth in South Africa appears to follow that trend, with documented examples of individuals gathering informally to discuss evaluation in the late 1970s (Basson, 2013). Events to promote M&E (e.g., courses by Michael Quinn Patton and Donna Mertens) further encouraged a small group of interested South Africans to convene a meeting during the 2004 African Evaluation Association (AfrEA) conference held in Cape Town to discuss a way forward. This meeting eventually resulted in the launch of SAMEA, the South African Monitoring and Evaluation Association, in November 2005 (Goldman et al., 2012; samea.org.za).

SAMEA recognized the growing need to engage civil society and government in a discussion on evaluator competencies as early as 2007. In 2009, SAMEA initiated a process to support a discussion around the development of evaluator competencies in South Africa. Part of this process included holding an Evaluator Competency Open Forum in Cape Town in 2010. Although the South African government did not show an interest at this time (e.g., the Public Service Commission, a partner of SAMEA at that time, declined in-kind and financial assistance), the Evaluator Competency Open Forum was attended by over 150 civil society and private sector representatives with a smattering of government officials who attended on their own behalf. The full-day open forum included presentations from international experts in academia, civil society, and government, as well as from South African civil society and academia. These presentations informed a heated debate; not all in attendance supported having defined evaluator competencies, while others were passionate about their development. Despite the engaging discussions and interest generated by the forum, SAMEA's efforts did not gain momentum or result in any concrete decisions or next steps. While the reason for this is not clear, the turnover of the SAMEA board may have contributed to it, as the board members who had championed the development of evaluator competencies completed their terms in office. This article continues by focusing on the South African government's process to develop evaluator competencies.

DPME INITIATES THE DEVELOPMENT OF EVALUATOR COMPETENCIES

As noted previously, government tasked the DPME to establish tools and guidance for the national evaluation system. This included development of guidelines and templates, a set of standards for evaluations, and a set of evaluation competencies that would underlie the development of training courses on monitoring and evaluation.

In 2012 the DPME commissioned the Centre for Learning on Evaluation and Results Anglophone Africa (CLEAR AA) to support DPME in developing evaluation competencies and evaluation standards, with the first author of this article playing a leading role. The evaluation standards and evaluator competencies are still in first versions (DPME, 2012a). While both are being used by government, they are also currently being tested and revised by DPME based on their initial experience.

Process to develop evaluator competencies

CLEAR AA's first step included an intensive literature review and interviews with key informants within and outside of South Africa. One group included people who had been involved with, or had experience of, developing competencies in different countries and organizations around the world. This included critics, supporters, and "fence sitters." The second group of individuals comprised South African academics who taught evaluation, private sector individuals who implemented evaluation training or evaluations, active members of SAMEA, and select government officials who conducted or commissioned evaluations. The literature review included reviewing existing competencies that were written or translated into English and journal articles that supported and critiqued evaluator competencies.

This led to a paper that informed government of the kinds of competencies that had been developed and the advantages and pitfalls of having (and not having) such lists. CLEAR AA used this document to engage the DPME in lengthy discussions that then heavily informed the development of the competencies (Podems, 2012). Although the DPME provided their reflections and perspectives on the skills and knowledge that they thought were important for those who conduct evaluations, the majority of their feedback focused on program managers who manage evaluations.

The next section describes key discussion and decision points between CLEAR AA and the DPME in the development of the competencies.

Conversations with DPME

The DPME stated that evaluators need sufficient awareness and knowledge of social science research methods and evaluation approaches to be able to make informed decisions around appropriate methods and evaluation designs. They also stated that evaluators need the ability to work collaboratively with a range of people, communicate effectively, think critically, and at times negotiate, facilitate, and educate. Evaluators also need to possess a certain level of knowledge about the government and its policies, systems, and context. DPME believed that these were some of the critical skills and knowledge areas that would lead to evaluators who could work effectively with stakeholders to promote learning through an evaluation process.

DPME also provided feedback on what they expected from program managers. Program managers need to be able to clearly identify when an evaluation is needed and clearly articulate their needs for an effective and useful evaluation. CLEAR AA cautioned that program managers cannot (and should not) be expected to be program evaluators, to which the DPME agreed, as this would be akin to expecting program managers to also be auditors. It was also recognized that design and management of evaluation is different from doing evaluation, and that this should be addressed in the competencies for program managers who manage evaluations.

DPME asked that program managers have the ability to think critically and possess analytical thinking skills that they can apply to their own programs and to evaluations conducted of their programs. Additional skills and knowledge areas for this group include the willingness to self-examine and then understand how evaluation can be useful to them—they need to know when to request an evaluation and how to use the results.

DPME also wanted program managers to understand how to budget for an evaluation and how that budget influences the evaluation approach. For example, they need to understand why certain methods cost more and be aware of the expected benefits and challenges of different approaches and methods. This could enable them, for example, to choose a cheaper method and compromise on the depth of the evaluation and yet still answer their evaluation question. This type of knowledge can only be achieved with a certain amount of knowledge of the need for evaluation, evaluation approaches and methodology, budgeting, and practical experience.

Finally, DPME emphasized that program managers would need to understand how to commission an evaluation and how to be compliant with the South African government's rules, while retaining a certain amount of flexibility to allow for a feasible evaluation. A key point made by the DPME was that anyone who commissions an evaluation would need to understand how to select the "right" evaluator or evaluation team.

Drafting the competencies

Several key factors informed the development of the draft competency framework. This included the CLEAR AA report and subsequent DPME and CLEAR AA conversations, the competencies of the

Canadian Evaluation Society and ANZEA in Aotearoa New Zealand, the Development Assistance Committee's work on competencies, and South Africa's unique cultural and political history. It took approximately five months to develop the initial competencies, which were created for three role players:

1. *Program manager*. This person manages the program and is usually the key intended user for the evaluation results. This person is often responsible for identifying the need for an evaluation.
2. *M&E advisor*. This person is internal to the government department, often provides advice on the evaluation process, and is influential in both the evaluation and management decisions. This person's work may also overlap with the evaluator role.
3. *Evaluator*. This person may be internal or external to the government and is involved in designing and conducting the evaluation. The evaluator may conduct an evaluation on his or her own or with team members who bring complementary knowledge, skills, and abilities.

The process of developing and defining the competencies had its challenges. First, the operational model for government evaluations was still emerging, and the roles and responsibilities for each of the three roles were not well defined. For example, some people interviewed during the development of the competencies stated that the program manager should be doing the evaluation, while others felt that this management position should never be tasked with actually doing an evaluation. A lack of clarity about the role of each person complicated a discussion on what competencies each role needed to possess.

Second, although multiple examples of skills and knowledge existed for competencies for evaluation specialists and evaluators (those who conduct evaluations), identifying competencies for managers of evaluations proved more difficult. Third, and equally challenging, was determining how to describe each competency (e.g., what does "cultural competence" mean when practically applied? How do people know if they, or others, are culturally competent?). Fourth was the challenge of how to determine what level of a certain skill or what knowledge was needed for each competency in each of the three roles. In addition, there was a discussion about whether to simply name competency levels (e.g., basic, intermediate, advanced) or to write exactly what was expected. In the end, the latter approach was adopted,

and the consultant and DPME drafted competency statements for each role and for each competence.

Eventually, a product was created with the DPME and labelled the Evaluation Competency Framework (ECF). This framework describes the competencies (knowledge, skills, and abilities) in relation to four dimensions: (a) overarching considerations, (b) leadership, (c) evaluation craft, and (d) the implementation of evaluations. Each dimension is then divided into descriptive areas. For example, overarching considerations are divided into three areas that focus

Table 1
Snapshot of a Section of One of the Competency Dimensions

Domains/descriptors	Manager	M&E Advisor	Evaluator
<i>4.3 Report writing and communication</i>			
<p>RW1 – Writing: Ability to write clear, concise, and focused reports that are credible, useful, and actionable and address the key evaluation questions</p>	Can critique and provide constructive feedback on reports to ensure that they are credible, useful, and actionable and address the key evaluation questions	Can critique and provide constructive feedback on reports to ensure that they are credible, useful, and actionable and address the key evaluation questions	Can write clear, concise, and focused reports that are credible, useful, and actionable and address the key evaluation questions
<p>RW2 – Clear evidence in report: Evidence for evaluation choices, findings, and recommendations in evaluation report is clear and understood</p>	Can read evaluation reports and identify key issues, credibility of findings, and logic of argument	Can critique and provide constructive feedback ensuring that reports are transparent about methodological choices and show the evidence, analysis, synthesis, recommendations, and evaluative interpretation and how these build from each other	Can be clear and transparent about methodological choices and show the evidence, analysis, synthesis, recommendations, and evaluative interpretation and how these build from each other
<p>RW2 – Communication: Ability to clearly articulate, communicate, and disseminate key messages that are appropriately written for different key stakeholders</p>	Can advise on key messages for different key stakeholders and manage the dissemination of information in a targeted and timely manner	Can advise on key messages for different key stakeholders	Can clearly articulate and communicate key messages that are appropriately written for different key stakeholders
<p>RW5 – Use: Ability to identify, articulate, and support strategic use of data in the report for the evaluation's intended use and users</p>	Can select and present findings to different stakeholders	Can select and present findings to different stakeholders	Can select and present findings to different stakeholders

on contextual understanding and knowledge, ethical conduct, and interpersonal skills. These are then further broken down into more explicit detail. Ethical conduct, for instance, looks at government standards and ethics and personal ethics. The competency areas are also specifically described for each role, explaining the relevant level of competence. Table 1 provides a snapshot of a section of one of the competency dimensions.

Vetting and use of the competencies

In early 2013, the DPME shared the competencies with the SAMEA Board of Directors, and presented them at three workshops with SAMEA members across the country. In August 2013, DPME led a process to consolidate the comments and make revisions. Presently, these competencies are being applied by government, while at the same time being tested by different constituencies, such as the SAMEA membership. Two different government evaluation course curriculums have been developed based on these competencies, with the first course (Managing Evaluations) tested with various government departments at the national and provincial levels, and a second cycle started in August 2013.

Although the process to develop evaluation standards is not reviewed in this article (this was the second part of the CLEAR AA task, which produced suggested evaluation standards), the application of the standards has yielded information that is relevant to the competencies. DPME undertook an audit of 83 evaluations (not including meta-evaluations) conducted between 2006 and 2011 and applied the evaluation standards suggested by CLEAR AA. Of these, 12 fell below the minimum quality score of 3 (DPME, 2013). This can be seen as a quite positive result, as 71 out of 83 “passed,” but it was not a representative sample. Many departments (87%) are not doing evaluations, and the reports that were reviewed came from departments that (a) could find the reports and (b) were prepared to submit them as part of the audit process (DPME, 2013).

Although a critical interpretation may be that departments only submitted their strongest evaluations because they knew that the evaluations would be audited, the same logic would also demonstrate that most departments could identify a “good” evaluation. A key overall finding in this research, which provides useful data on evaluator competencies, is that most evaluations were poor on capacity build-

ing of government and junior evaluators and reflected a challenge in working with evaluation consultants.

DPME used the ECF to screen and identify evaluators and evaluation organizations that could provide evaluation services to government. Evaluation organizations were asked to apply the competencies by providing examples of that competency in another evaluation context. In addition, evaluators or evaluation organizations also had to demonstrate that they had undertaken five evaluations of over ZAR500,000 (approximately US\$50,000) in the last five years. In practice, DPME staff are finding that the pool of strong evaluators within the 42 organizations and individuals identified (who actually bid for evaluations; many are latent) is not of significant size and relatively few strong organizations have emerged.

DPME has started engaging with the Department of Public Service and Administration to have these competencies embedded in all relevant job descriptions and in criteria relevant to evaluation-specific functions within the public service. They also plan to engage with universities concerning how their courses prepare evaluators who implement evaluations in and for the government, and for government staff who manage evaluations.

CONCLUSION

South Africa's unique history and political context has influenced the development of monitoring and evaluation in government. Significant changes took place post-1994 leading to the GWMES, the establishment of the DPME, the national evaluation policy framework, the national evaluation plan, and the national evaluation system. These changes are bringing about the standardization of M&E in the government sector. As part of that, government has developed evaluation standards and evaluator competencies to guide program managers in commissioning and managing evaluations, to guide evaluation advisors and evaluators in government on strengthening their evaluation knowledge and skills, and to provide transparency in how government selects evaluators who consult for them. How the establishment of these competencies will influence evaluation in South Africa, how and if these competencies will improve the quality and usefulness of evaluation, and if this will result in government being more responsive and transparent to its citizens, remains to be seen.

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