

MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES IN M&E: THOUGHTS FROM SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract: This impressionistic narrative focuses on experiences in setting up South Africa's first government monitoring and evaluation (M&E) unit. The high political expectations for the program required that M&E provide a progress overview and diagnosis of the ambitious land reform program. Key contextual factors that influence success and that may pose challenges are considered in this account, which shows both how strategies had to be changed to address varied demands and the mixed results these produced. Based on the practical experiences, a set of suggestions are provided to emerging evaluators as they sharpen their evaluation acumen.

Résumé : Ce récit impressionniste s'intéresse aux expériences découlant de la mise en place de la première unité gouvernementale de suivi et d'évaluation (S&E) en Afrique du Sud. Les attentes politiques très élevées à l'égard de cette unité ont exigé du S&E de fournir un aperçu des progrès ainsi qu'un diagnostic de l'ambitieux programme de réforme agraire. Les facteurs contextuels clés qui influencent le succès d'une évaluation et posent des défis particuliers ont été pris en compte dans cet article qui montre d'ailleurs comment les stratégies initiales ont dû être modifiées pour répondre aux exigences variées et les résultats mitigés qui ont été produits. S'appuyant sur l'expérience, un ensemble de suggestions est proposé aux nouveaux évaluateurs afin d'aiguiser leurs compétences en évaluation.

INTRODUCTION

█ This article reflects on some of the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) challenges in the South African public sector, and draws on experience at the Department of Land Affairs. Evaluation in South Africa tends to be commonly referred to as M&E, and does

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not follow the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2002) terminology, either in understanding or use. The term is reinforced by, amongst others, the fact that the country's evaluation association is called the South African Monitoring Evaluation Association (SAMEA). I argue that M&E must be undertaken in a manner that is contextually relevant, address multiple M&E objectives, and recognize that it also contributes to broader objectives of supporting transformation and improving governance.

EVALUATION CONTEXT

Transformation Imperatives and the Role of the Department of Land Affairs

The developmental State in South Africa is an interventionist model meant to be activist, to be pro-poor, and to improve public sector administration by making it efficient, participatory, and transparent (Levin, 2004, 2005). M&E in such a context is meant to bring about social change (Greene, 2006), support democracy (Naidoo, 2004), and improve service delivery (Khosa, 2001; Krane, 2006).

In the post-democratic era, South Africa was exposed to the concept of good governance and the concepts of transparency and accountability (Bonaglia, de Macedo, & Bussolo, 2001). Ensuring that the public sector became transparent and accountable would help with its transformation (Naidoo, 2010). The concept of good governance in the country mirrors several international definitions, and in South Africa is constitutionally enshrined as a set of nine values of principles for public administration, the custodian of which is the Public Service Commission (PSC). The PSC is the constitutional body responsible for investigating, monitoring, and evaluating public administration in the country.

The Department of Land Affairs was re-mandated in 1994 to bring about transformation and reverse over three centuries of unequal and racially skewed land ownership patterns. Weiner and Levin (1991) reflected on the challenges that would be faced by the new administration, and noted that the transition would be slow and complex, as subsequent results have shown. Achieving a redistribution target of 30% of land, securing security of tenure, and engaging in large-scale restitution was not going to be easy, given the budgets and operational realities. The establishment of an M&E function within this department was meant to keep this program on track. It was initially supported through technical assistance from a donor

(DANIDA), but was not donor-driven. There is a strong sentiment in the country toward locally developed systems.

The M&E Directorate established itself in the first five years of operation to perform three distinct but interrelated functions. The most challenging was setting up a land reform information management system, given the complexities of accessing historically guarded information. The unit produced periodic Land Reform Barometers, which became a key tool to determine bottlenecks. Projects were monitored and Quality of Life reports produced, which demonstrated socio-economic progress at a national, provincial, and local level. A section also engaged in policy evaluation. Given the apartheid past, there was a strong sentiment that M&E also needed to be empowering; when the unit engaged with communities, it used participatory M&E techniques to foster community-based empowerment (Fetterman, 1998).

A staff of 30, working at the national and provincial level, produced a series of reports for management information and management action. Most of the staff had higher degrees, were trained in-house, and received exposure to evaluation conferences, which at the time were limited.

M&E Challenges in a Transformation Context

Prior to improving governance, there must be sufficient readiness and receptiveness for evaluation (Kusek & Rist, 2004; Rist, 2000). The lack of a receptive context probably explains why evaluation use is such a challenge (Stern, 2006), and the Department of Land Affairs offered no exception. When evaluators do not see results from their work, many of them often attribute this to difficult personalities and/or organizational politics. M&E must work in an existing organizational culture, within which there are always organizational politics (Vestman and Conner, 2006). It is important that this be understood, so that the potential risks and challenges are known and appropriately responded to. To move into an evaluation context without appreciating the political forces at play can pose problems later on.

The M&E Directorate at the Department of Land Affairs had to contend with high expectations that it would indeed help keep the land reform program on track. The M&E function is not easy to institutionalize and requires time and resources (Mackay, 2006). The Department of Land Affairs took time to establish, and changes in

administrative and political priorities meant that the unit had to consistently review its M&E strategies. Similarly, it took time to develop an M&E program.

The issue of reporting protocols creates another tension for M&E units, which seek to disseminate information broadly. Often this is not possible, as departments' internal protocols prevent such units from engaging more publicly with their results and actions thereof. The M&E units thus need to negotiate a delicate balance between serving an internal client (management) and addressing the broader M&E imperatives of ensuring performance transparency by presenting results publicly. If the M&E function is improperly located and internally funded, tensions can be created within the organization and for the M&E unit. Organizational diagnosis, itself a politically loaded and sensitive matter, is seldom done, and many evaluators go into their work oblivious of the context in which they work.

The main tensions were as follows:

- To whom or what must M&E be loyal? Can an internally funded M&E unit be expected to do evaluations without compromise, and does it have control over the report once it is delivered?
- How does the location of M&E within a department impact upon its effectiveness? In this case it was located within a Branch, and then moved to another,¹ but in both instances there was a feeling that its location was not sufficiently independent.
- The donors provided some technical support to the M&E Directorate. However, there was an uneasy tension in that the donors expected outputs from the Directorate, which were not the priority of the Directorate at the time. There was an expectation that the program would produce impact, yet it took approximately five years after inception for the program to get off the ground. In many cases donors fail to appreciate the implementation context, and want to see results based on their investment.

THE "THEM VERSUS US" SYNDROME

It is very easy for evaluators to assume an intellectual superiority and believe that they have the answers to complex problems. It may be that evaluators, due to their work in a field that makes judge-

ments and the fact that many see independence as implying detachment, may not appreciate how difficult actual policy implementation is. Furthermore, they may become so concerned about following specific methodologies that they could miss very real phenomena and questions that such methodologies fail to capture.

When such a stance is taken, often unconsciously, evaluators tend to engage in combative listening and use the issue of independence to reject any legitimate concerns raised. People who raise issues are often seen as being unreceptive to evaluation and as choosing to be unaccountable. Some evaluators deflect criticism by saying that their independence is being compromised, and in such instances may lose the opportunity to receive and process very genuine concerns raised. The approach of being aloof, and thus more important than implementers, can be more pronounced when there are sharp distinctions between a core and periphery, or a head office and regional office. It is not surprising that in such contexts M&E assumes an accountability function and may be seen as an extension of top management and leadership. A consequence of an accountability form of M&E is that performance may become directed toward a target, which in itself may not be meaningful to the overall goal of an organization. In such a context where the M&E unit is perceived as a prefect and seen as an extension of top management, even reports that seek to advance learning may not be used.

A possible solution to the problem is to state up front, to all concerned, what M&E proposes to do and where the reports will go. This will not solve all of the problems, but it will add an element of predictability. When M&E operates on an ad hoc basis, it fuels unnecessary tensions and is not seen as programmatic. I found that developing a differentiated M&E program and communicating that fact—repeatedly stating and showing what the products were, and who they were for—helped to reduce some of the tensions.

NEGOTIATING M&E

At the time, the belief within the unit was that sound technical reports will on their own show relevance and thus be adopted. The reality was different. Where there is a high expectation for success, an evaluation report that is often critical of the lack of progress aggravates an already tense situation. The potential users of these reports are more likely to shoot the messenger than focus on the inherent value of an evaluation report.

It was found that although the unit produced solid research on all policy areas and made recommendations, it was difficult to identify the uptake of these. Staff felt that the M&E work went into a management vacuum, and in the absence of feedback they assumed that the work was not considered. The problem was probably with the M&E function, which failed to properly negotiate around the organizational dynamics, and thus was not able to generate sufficient levels of organizational learning (Leeuw & Sonnichsen, 2000). Had this been done, many of the implementation and policy problems may have been addressed sooner (Carlsson & Engel, 2002).

It was found that tensions between the M&E unit and managers whose sections were evaluated were quite strong, and at times debilitating. Furthermore, the location of the M&E unit was contested, with implementers wanting ownership of it. Some compromise and negotiation occurred through the development of regional M&E officers, who were meant to share M&E expertise at the provincial level and thus build capacity at that level. Despite these officers being under the managerial control of regional heads, in most cases the strategy failed to build the collaboration expected. In the end, the model of having regional officers who were supposed to merge seamlessly with the national office did not work. This is despite strong communication efforts being made up front to clarify roles and responsibilities. The point being made is that context must be understood, but as it changes, ongoing negotiation to keep the strategy relevant is required.

APPOINTING INEXPERIENCED M&E PEOPLE

Another aspect that rendered the regional M&E capacity rather ineffective was that these M&E officers often did not have adequate experience or understanding of M&E. Despite efforts to offer a training program and networking, the M&E officers in the main lacked the skills to convey to their principals that they were competent. In such instances managers were quick to point out that M&E was a failure, and poorly performing officers justified the managers' preconceived notions about M&E. Building effective evaluation capacity is a long and frustrating, but necessary, process (Boyle & Lemaire, 1999). It is not an easy process, and needs sustained effort (Khan, 1998).

It is probably better not to appoint an M&E officer at all than appoint an unskilled one. The time taken to rectify the damage of a poorly performing M&E officer is too great, without even taking

into account the damage to the discipline caused by incompetent M&E officers.

Currently there is a situation in the country where there are many M&E officers in government at relatively high levels, but many of them lack the knowledge or experience to be effective. The question of competencies and training remains pivotal. The Public Administration Leadership and Management Academy (PALAMA) is responsible for the roll-out of training, and the South African Monitoring and Evaluation Association (SAMEA), in partnership with the PSC, has contributed toward building capacity, but this is a long-term investment. A training program for M&E officers has been put into place, and there are some pockets of excellence. The country evaluation association has played a role, but more needs to be done.

THE IMPACT OF M&E

New evaluators often have to negotiate difficult institutional politics and deal with a variety of cultures and subcultures. These activities can be very time-consuming and demotivating, which probably explains the high turnover of M&E staff in many newly established functions. The attack on the M&E function relates to a very basic issue within an organization: Who holds the intellectual authority of what constitutes knowledge about success? M&E comes in with evidence-based reports and expects rational decision making. However, if one were to recognize that M&E is but one of many streams of performance information considered, and M&E is only as good as the organization within which it is located, it is easier to understand why it is difficult to attribute decisions to particular M&E reports.

The question of improving dissemination is receiving greater attention, and there has been more thought given to developing recommendations in a participatory manner, producing management letters, and tracking recommendations, to name but a few. All these endeavours point to a recognition that M&E needs to be able to justify its existence, and it is not easy to confidently state whether an M&E report has produced transparency and learning. It may be that the measure sought by evaluators is to see whether M&E can produce utility, hence the practice of attempting to track the journey of recommendations. This is a self-justifying act, born of pragmatism; M&E must demonstrate its utility in a climate of competing issues.

To state that M&E produces higher levels of transparency is true, but one needs to recognize that many other management functions also produce these levels of transparency. In terms of learning, the question is how does one measure this? Even if users of M&E reports found them useful, they are hardly ever likely to acknowledge it. In fact, just stating that M&E produces learning can be construed as arrogant in some contexts, as it assumes that M&E work represents the ultimate answers, and the enlightened M&E persons need to help the less enlightened to see the way, as noted by Schwandt (2008).

...AND PERHAPS YOU WANT TO RECONSIDER THIS REPORT, OR REFORMULATE THAT FINDING...

Evaluators at some stage in their career will be asked to reconsider a finding or recommendation. This is often the most important section of a report, appears usually at the end, and is often not thought through properly. The findings or recommendations should be linked to the body of research or investigation, but may not be, and tend to be contested. Unfortunately, apart from the politics that surrounds the nature of recommendations, many recommendations tend to be weak and fail to reflect the actual evaluation. It is important that evaluations are credible from all points of view, as this will make them easier to defend. Critics of the content often cite poor methodology as the reason for a particular result, and a report found to be methodologically poor can seriously undermine the legitimacy of the evaluation institution that produced it.

Uncomfortable recommendations may not appear as blatant as an evaluator being called and instructed to change a report. More often, accurate findings can be diluted by a report not being acted upon in a timely manner or by the right decision makers. It must be remembered that in most organizations, a few individuals hold the real power, and it would be naive to assume that a report going to the top will inevitably get the results envisaged. There are always alliances and allegiances, and while there may be commitments to wanting to know exactly what is happening, the mood often changes when an evaluation surfaces in cold print. One should heed what Patton (2004) points out: that evaluation cases ripple in an organization, and to adopt a managerial approach, which assumes that causality will emerge between report and action, is unwise. One of the main tactics used by those who do not agree with a finding is to deflect, among other methods by constituting a group of people who may not agree with the results and who undermine a study by attacking the

methodology, or putting the report through a convoluted process that is time-consuming and tires out the evaluators.

The writer experienced all of these in his career. In the case of a policy evaluation, it was shown that a particular approach was not reaching the intended beneficiaries, and when a report emerged, it was contested. An evaluation close to an election can be interesting, and used to cast out the old and bring in the new.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have reflected on some of the challenges faced in an M&E unit, in a program where there were high expectations, when M&E was in its infancy, and the departments themselves were being established. It is important for evaluators in these contexts to know what is possible, and recognize that feeding findings into management systems takes time. It is important that evaluators be well prepared, be capable, and recognize that M&E is a highly complex and challenging but worthwhile activity.

NOTE

- 1 The management structure of government departments in South Africa include coherent practice areas (policy, implementation, programmes, etc.) termed Branches. These are headed by Deputy Directors-General (deputies to the Director-General, and second in charge within a department) of a practice area. By being managerially accountable to such a Head, in this case Deputy Director-General, a unit is by association assumed to belong to such a Branch. In the case of M&E this affects its independence, as it needs to be perceived as structurally independent and not located in specific practice areas. If, as was the case, it was located in either the policy or implementation branch, it gave the impression of being partial toward a particular practice area.

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