

**Rosalind Eyben, Irene Guijt, Chris Roche, and Cathy Shutt. (2015). *The Politics of Evidence and Results in International Development: Playing the Game to Change the Rules?* Bourton on Dunsmore, England: Practical Action Publishing Ltd. Kindle Edition. (ISBN: 978-1-78044-886-2)**

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This publication arose from the Big Push Forward Network ([Institute of Development Studies, 2018](#)) and its 2013 conference of the same name, where international development practitioners critiqued the requirements for measuring development projects. The book targets the international development sector but is useful for all evaluators, particularly those working in social services, because it questions predominant evidence and accountability frameworks within monitoring and evaluation (M&E) structures. The book highlights the fact that evaluation is not unbiased, and it offers critical reflections on the influence of reported evidence, the voices heard, and the hierarchy of accountability embedded within M&E processes. Although critiques like this are not new, what makes this publication particularly insightful is its use of case studies to emphasize recommendations for academics, practitioners, and policy analysts to avoid bias in their work.

The book offers a critique of the results-focused development agenda, which has emphasized quantitative indicators, stemming from new public management theory. It argues that because the evidence required is so structured, emphasis is placed on implementing projects that are easily measured rather than allowing creative and reflective approaches, which have proven critical to evaluative thinking. The four key aspects of evaluative thinking identified by [Vo, Schreiber, and Martin \(2018\)](#)—values, cognition, application, and valuing—can be analyzed to include both systemic process and reflective judgement. As a development practitioner at a major donor organization explained, “by using indicators that are easily measurable, attention is given to activities that will contribute to ‘achieving the indicator’ instead of activities that really matter but that are more difficult to measure” (Loc. 1329, ch. 3). In chapter 2, Eyben contends that in the current system, the logic model is a “rigid tool that constrains responsive planning” (Loc. 715, ch. 2); evidence is deemed valid if it “categorizes, counts and measures people as individual entities” rather than recognizes the larger community dynamics that might be responsible for a project’s success/failure (Loc. 832, ch. 2). As the various contributors make clear, measuring the success of a project becomes an exercise in presenting the type of evidence that fits into the strict quantitative requirements of this approach, rather than enabling qualitative or mixed methods where they

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would be useful. The physical and cerebral space between donors and beneficiaries is problematic; often reporting requirements are created by those far removed geographically (e.g., on separate continents) from a project's beneficiaries. This contrives a situation where donors do not understand the community's needs and opportunities for measurements; conversely, staff working on the project at the community level might not fully understand donor needs. Ultimately, the resulting evaluations do not use appropriate measurements.

Contributing chapters provide case studies that demonstrate the challenges associated with these evidence requirements. For instance, Ola Abu Alghaib describes how her organization diverted required resources from local projects, focusing instead on reports and measurements serving donor needs. Cathy Shutt's chapter highlights perhaps one of the most graphic examples of problems arising from donor needs—a donor's request for a quantitative indicator for a female body part in an FGM (female genital mutilation) project. First-hand examples illustrating development practitioners' experiences in the field demonstrate the rigidity of the measurement agenda.

One of the book's greatest contributions is its thought-provoking analysis of power dynamics at various levels. The hierarchy between project funders and implementers can create issues in accessing resources. For example, implementers may not wish to confront donors with challenges they perceive related to project M&E requirements, even when situated knowledge has identified that some measurements would be more useful than others recommended by the funder. Power dynamics are also reflected in project competition; donors are careful to hold onto resources as they compete with an ever-increasing number of emerging non-traditional donors, including south-south cooperation partnerships. This increase has given donors further incentive to require proof of a project's efficiency and effectiveness. The book is very clear not to place blame, instead illustrating current challenges and suggesting ways forward, beginning with understanding both the implicit and explicit power structures that exist between donors and their recipients.

In the final chapter of the book, Irene Guijt highlights seven strategies that development organizations can use to overcome these challenges: develop political astuteness and personal agency; understand dynamic political context and use organizational values; identify and work with what is positive about the results and evidence agenda; facilitate front-line staff to speak for themselves; create spaces for learning and influence; advocate for collective action; and take advantage of emerging opportunities (Loc. 4636, ch. 11). Advocating for collective action, the sixth strategy suggested, responds to the critique that these solutions ignore the very power relations so strongly criticized. The notion that individuals are more powerful and able to enact change together is a foundational means for ensuring that even the most powerless players may have a voice assembled with group support.

The biggest challenge to strategy implementation, and one that I argue is not adequately discussed in the book, is resources. Many organizations are

understaffed and overworked, such that these strategies, while worthwhile, may be arguably unrealistic. For example, enabling front-line staff to speak for themselves and taking advantage of emerging opportunities require that resources be placed into capacity building and reflecting—practices that take time. However, perhaps that is the authors' aim—to show that these solutions will take time and effort but are worthwhile in the long run. As the conclusion admonishes, “Development practitioners have two options: they can learn how to reconcile their understanding of messy, unpredictable, and risky pathways of societal transformation with bureaucracy-driven protocols, or they can persist in the pursuit of space and time for more appropriate portals and methods” (Loc. 4994, ch. 11). This challenge is one with which all evaluators can grapple—how do we ensure that our measurements are meeting funder requirements, while at the same demonstrating the reality of the project's beneficiaries?

## REFERENCES

- Institute of Development Studies. (2018). *The Big Push Forward*. Retrieved from <https://www.ids.ac.uk/project/the-big-push-forward/>
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