Evaluating the experience with program analysis and evaluation: building national capacity for improved public policy and administration

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I. Introduction

Officials from a newly elected government in Latin America recently visited US public administration and policy schools as part of a global outreach effort to discuss the most effective ways to develop training programs to improve government performance. When the conversation turned to the content of the training, I volunteered a number of public administration topics – financial management, personnel systems management, and so forth. The officials said, yes that is important – but what they really want is training in policy analysis and evaluation. Consider this, they said: in our country there is a problem with automobiles. People are poor -- so they obtain the cheapest car they can find, often from across the border, they drive the car until it no longer works, and then they leave it on the street. Our cities are clogged with such cars. The president asked his officials: “what can we do?” They responded with many different solutions. When he asked how do we know which solution will work, it became clear no one had done any analysis of the problem – no one knew how many cars there were, where they came from, how long they were on the street, or what approaches had worked in other places. So, I was told – the nation’s priority was to improve the capacity of it’s officials to use and understand policy analysis and evaluation so that when it approaches problems it will do it in a way that is effective.

This paper is an examination of the use of evaluation research and policy analysis information in governing, and particularly of the capacities that are needed to generate, sustain, and make use of this information. The paper discusses

- Different forms of evaluation research and policy analysis and ways they are valuable for governing,
- The infrastructure needed to sustain a healthy program of evaluation and policy analysis
- The role that universities, public and private, and associations, such as CLAD and the emerging InterAmerican Network of Public Administration Education, can play in developing and sustaining capacity for such research.

Governments unavoidably need many different kinds of information to operate. Some necessarily must come from political channels – to assure the government can respond to the communities that support it. Some comes from polls and surveys of public opinion – to assure that the government is acting with full awareness of popular sentiments. We all recognize and accept these and related forces on public policy making. Obviously it is also important in this mix of information is to have sound policy analysis and evaluation information as well.

What is less well recognized is that planning for effective use of evaluation and policy analysis requires more than designing the studies and incorporating the results into policy debates. Capacity is needed to provide the necessary skills for such work, to assure valid, reliable, and independent results, to sustain a process of professional peer review of research design and findings, and to interpret
evaluation and policy analysis findings in ways that will lead to effective implementation. Building this capacity requires long-term planning and investment throughout government, the knowledge community including higher education, and professional associations.

II. Approaches to evaluation and performance review

Before looking at how program analysis and evaluation is supported nationally, it is useful to review briefly some of the major forms such research can take, since this helps to define how such inquiry can be used in the policy and management process. Indeed, some of the major failures in applications of policy analysis and evaluation come from mismatching the form of research with purpose.

A. Formative v. Summative approaches

Policy analysis and evaluation broadly described follows two different paths – one commonly called “summative” research, and the other “formative.”

1. Summative research designs.

Summative research and evaluation are studies that attempt to determine, as effectively as possible, whether a desired result has been achieved from a program – a kind of summing up of the results. Summative studies follow from classic research designs – medical or agricultural studies can serve as models. A major goal is to assure that the research and evaluation process does not interfere in any way with the program, so that conclusions can be directly attributed to the original assumptions and official implementation of the program, and not to extraneous factors.

One of the more extreme applications of summative program analysis and evaluation is the design of social experiments – in which participants are assigned randomly to receive one policy outcome or another. In the United States this techniques has been used from time to time – for instance in the area of housing to test the impact of low income persons vouchers to help pay for renting housing on the open market rather than placing them in publicly constructed and owned housing (results showed that tenants did improve their housing choices, though it had less impact on their mobility into better neighborhoods than expected.)

Social experiments can give us the best knowledge one can expect about policy. But such studies are of course are often impossible to implement, very expensive to operate, need a long stable policy making period, and can pose unacceptable choices (would anyone tolerate an experiment in, say, criminal justice by randomly giving some juvenile offenders a long prison sentence and others a short one, even though it would be valuable to know whether long or short sentences have an impact on future criminal behavior.) Even when completed, the findings are often quite narrow – if a program is implemented in a certain way, based on certain policy assumptions, and involving participants with certain characteristics, then certain results can be expected. But if any of the assumptions are changed, the results can no longer be counted on.

There has been a great deal of research into ways to obtain similar findings without implementation of actual social experiments, such as through the use of quasi-experimental designs that compensate for the absence of true experimental controls in various statistical ways. This often requires advanced technical research skills, but can lead to valuable insights into programs without the disruption of classical experiments. In the United States, for example, this has been achieved by comparing alternative approaches to policy problem in neighboring, but similar, states (e.g. one state
may have a higher speed limit on their roads than the next, and the research can analyze the effect of this policy difference on accident rates). Another approach is to compare activities over time, before and after a policy change occurs, and so forth.

In any case, expectations about the program analysis and evaluation are often based on assumptions that research has met all of the criteria for summative studies, when in fact this is rarely the case. Planning for effective program analysis and evaluation needs to begin with this insight.

2. Formative research designs

An alternative approach to policy analysis and evaluation is to adopt a “formative” approach. Formative evaluations help programs to achieve their policy goals, rather than to test whether the fundamental assumptions underlying a program or policy are valid. There is, thus, less worry about interference by the evaluator in management and administration of the study. Indeed, formative studies call for research findings to help “shape” administration of the project from the outset.

Formative studies may still include quasi-experimental designs and other similarities to summative work. It is still a research responsibility in formative studies to maintain independence from management decisions and to reach conclusions about program effectiveness. These conclusions will often focus on aspects of the program however, and be used to modify its operations. Under some designs formative research approaches can generate data and information systems that stay an important part of the program operations in the future.

B. External v Internal operations

Another set of issues related to program analysis and evaluation that helps to define what it accomplished and how it is organized is whether the researchers who undertake the work are located within bureaus inside the government itself, or are in external organizations such as research centers, universities, or consulting and contract research firms.

Bureaus inside the government can in turn function in two ways – either to carry out projects themselves or to manage contracts issued to external organizations. In some cases, government organizations exist JUST to sponsor policy analysis and evaluation by external organizations. The Canadian Center for Management Development is one example of this. In the United States, the National Science Foundation (NSF) sometimes plays this role (e.g. through the RANN – Research Applied to National Need program) though NSF tends to favor basic research most of the time.

C. Four types of activity

These two defining characteristics of program analysis and evaluation approaches in government -- summative or formative designs and internal or external administration -- can taken together provide a map of different approaches in such research. None of these approaches is inherently superior to the others -- they simply provide different opportunities and respond to different situations. The following chart illustrates these models.

Examples Of Program Analysis And Evaluation For Different Research Designs And Organizational Relationships.
### III. Uses of policy and program evaluation

#### A. Uses of policy analysis and program evaluation in the policy process

Policy analysis and evaluation research can contribute to the public policy making process in many ways and at many different stages of the policy process. There is a lot of literature on all aspects of these linkages between policy and evaluation research and policy making. Some common questions that policy analysis and evaluation can help to answer in the policy process are the following:

- what are the dimensions of the policy problem
- are assumptions about policy direction valid
- what program design options are preferable
- are expected results being achieved
- are programs cost effective

#### B. Uses of policy analysis and program evaluation in the management process

What is often less appreciated than the policy role of research is the important role that policy analysis and program evaluation play in the management process. Studies both provide specific information valuable in the management process and by supporting planning. Work by Joseph Wholey has identified a number of ways in which information from program analysis and evaluation can be used in program management:

- Hold officials accountable
- Motivate public employees
- Monitor contractors
- Determine and justify budgets
- Encourage government to focus on results

### IV. Infrastructure

It takes more than research design and project administrators to support an overall system of program analysis and evaluation. The potential complexity of design and administration of policy analysis and evaluation is a clue to the kinds of resources and institutions needed to sustain a healthy, independent, and reliable network of supports. Appropriate conditions to sustain capacity for program analysis and evaluation call for adequate resources, comprehensively trained researchers, rich sources of data, networks for peer review and professional training, and open publication of research findings and opportunities for replication. The institutions and the scholarly culture that generate these
conditions take sustained cultivation, and a long time.

A. Resources
Not surprisingly, a basic condition for success of program analysis and evaluation is the availability of adequate resources to support studies over the necessary time period. These resources are often difficult to find, especially when the programs themselves always seem under funded. One valuable approach is systematically to designate a small percentage of all programs for analysis and evaluation, and to establish this as policy independent of the design and operation of individual programs. Another of course is to seek funding independently of program administration, such as from private foundations.

B. Data
Data resources are needed for any study. Often much of the research task is devoted to locating or gathering relevant data. There are many creative solutions to issues of data gathering – one is to adapt existing information in management systems for purposes of analysis – especially in formative studies. Designing management systems to yield usable research data is an imaginative step.

But data questions are not limited to individual studies. Capacity for evaluation and program analysis can be greatly enhanced by systems for maintaining archives of data relevant to policy analysis and evaluation studies including the capacity to archive data sets to support replication and secondary analysis of findings. The emergence of the internet of course greatly facilitates this, since there is less need for a central repository, such as the ICPSR in the US. The imperative remains however that program analysis and evaluation studies do not end when the project is completed – researchers have an obligation to make data sets available for reanalysis by other scholars and sponsors, such as government agencies, should be prepared to accept this as a part of research costs.

C. Institutional Capacity
Capacities extend beyond funding and data. An institutional capacity to train and support research scholars and to assemble the necessary research teams is also required. This is also often linked to doctoral education, where new generations of research scholars are developed and socialized.

1. Universities
Universities are the primary, and most complete, institution for nurturing capacity for policy analysis and evaluation – given their multi-dimensional role in training new scholars and sustaining existing ones. Universities often have to be nudged, however, to support the role of scholarship in applied research programs such as policy analysis and evaluation. In the United States this service role of scholarship is strong in some settings, such as the so-called Land Grant universities that were established to act on the following principles:

- Provide broad access to higher education, irrespective of wealth or social status,
- Educate and train the professional cadres of an industrial, increasingly urban society, and to
- Strengthen and defend American democracy by improving and assuring the welfare and social status of the largest, most disadvantaged groups in society -- which in the 19th century were farmers and industrial workers (then called mechanics).

While this mission has encountered much updating over the years it has helped set a tone for university missions in the US that have made them strong partners in both undertaking policy analysis
and evaluation studies and in building institutional capacity for this work through graduate training and scholarship.

2. Contract firms
   Another key resource for sustaining policy analysis and evaluation is the growth of specialized firms conducting such studies under contract, sometimes for profit and sometimes as non-profit firms. These firms can take many forms – survey research enterprises, think tanks, consulting firms, and specialized research organizations. Examples in the United States include Abt Associates, Westat, Mathematica, and so forth. These firms provide single-minded capacity to undertake projects. They are not distracted by the multiple agendas of universities (such as graduate training.) At the same time, they may not contribute as much to enrich the overall research capacity of a country or region, because they are not engaged in this peripheral activities such as graduate training. There are some interesting hybrid arrangements as well, with contract research centers allied with graduate education, such as the RAND Corporation and RAND Graduate School working side by side.

3. In-house capacity
   Finally, as noted above, the capacity within government agencies to conduct such research is also a very important factor in the design, conduct, management, and application of policy analysis and evaluation findings.

4. Activities to build capacity
   Latin America is not noted for having extensive academic or external agency research capacity in social science generally or policy analysis and evaluation specifically. There are at least three hemisphere wide programs now underway to seek to expand the capacity of key institutions, particularly universities, for conducting policy analysis and evaluation. These include the InterAmerican Network for Public Administration Education, supported by NASPAA, USAID, and the Hewlett Foundation, a policy schools project supported by the Woodrow Wilson Center and funded by the Ford Foundation, and a project supported by the Kellogg Foundation to build nonprofit education capabilities.

   INPAE. The InterAmerican Network for Public Administration Education is working to build graduate level management education for the public sector in Latin America. INPAE is a partnership among NASPAA, several North American universities, and several South American partners to build teaching materials in policy and administration. A textbook is underway as are a number of technical assistance projects related to institution building for evaluation research and other studies.

   Woodrow Wilson Center Project. An similar, independent project funded by the Ford Foundation and administered by the Woodrow Wilson Center, is looking at the development of public policy schools in three or four sites in Latin America, including preparing faculty.

   Finally, the Kellogg Foundation is supporting formation of a network of graduate schools for nonprofit sector administration. This street level view of policy decisions that may come from that discussion will surely be valuable for many aspects of policy analysis and evaluation.

D. Professional Associations
   Policy analysis and evaluation research cannot be carried out in a vacuum. It requires ample opportunity for scholars to interact with each other in numerous levels – to comment on each other’s work, to monitor work for ethical and procedural abuses, to share data, results, and procedures, to plan for replication of studies, and to discuss relevance of findings with research managers and producers.
Just as Virginia Woolf called for a “room of one’s own” for writing, so also do policy and evaluation scholars need a place of their own to report on findings, share research tips, and learn from each other. Associations can provide this role, and fill a number of other, critical, ones as well, such as the following roles:

- Serving as sites for peer review
- Integrating multiple institutions – such as bringing together different levels of subnational governments or assembling both scholars and practitioners.
- Maintaining the capacity of professional groups to act as independent authority to judge quality of research and resolve disputes
- Articulating evaluation standards and ethics
- Offering Professional training

E. Culture of behavioral research

Institutional supports for a community of applied policy research and evaluation are not enough. There are also several important elements in what we might call the “culture” of attitudes, expectations, and behaviors in the research and policy making community that are essential.

1. Performance orientation

For one thing scholars need a mental orientation toward questions of how the research will be used – not just on basic research questions about what variables cause others to change, but practical focus and commitment to seeing government programs because we thought I out.

2. Peer review

The quality of policy analysis and evaluation is judged in multiple ways. Certainly usefulness for the sponsor is important. But central to this research is a concept of peer review, which says that potential errors of fact and of procedure should be judged not by the sponsors or by influential superiors, but by a panel of scholars who are peers.

3. Government – academic partnerships

Policy analysis and evaluation also often requires government and academic centers, such as those at universities, to work together. This cooperation is uncommon in Latin America. The INPAE project mentioned above includes a component to stimulate, and subsidize these partnerships – specifically with the goals of building this collaborative culture in Latin America.

4. Culture of policy stability

As well, it is valuable to have a civil service with continuity in government positions, which can invest in long-term policy analysis and evaluation studies, follow the conduct of studies, and plan follow-up work.

5. Replication

Also at the heart of any scientific study is replication – the ability for another scholar to take the same data and the same scholarly approaches and reach the same results. Associations and their journals can provide the forum for such replication studies.

6. Transparency

Finally, with rare exceptions, it is important the policy analysis and evaluation be conducting in settings that are as open as possible, to avoid the appearance that program leaders may appear to tamper with results. Professional associations can help afford this transparency.

V. Impacts and results

The impacts of policy analysis and evaluation are not as simple as those of basic research, and planning for its reception by government agencies and the public is also wise. Often professional associations can be valuable in helping to prepare for these circumstances.
A. Techniques to increase applicability

For one thing, scholars often do not think about how findings can be presented that maximize their useful impact on policy making. Scholars should consider ways to increase the impact and use of evaluation, such as to:

- Develop realistic recommendations;
- Find multiple uses for the data;
- Recommend decision makers of findings and recommendations;
- Share findings and recommendations with a broad audience;
- Assign evaluation staff to assist in implementing recommendations.

B. Risk of political usage

One risk is that results from policy analysis and evaluation may be distorted to produce a very different appearance to the public about a program’s performance – disguising failures or claiming successes that are greater than warranted.

C. Relationship to public administration

Over the long run, a public administration ethic that relies on performance values is essential to underpin a commitment to policy analysis and evaluation. When public administration is viewed solely as a matter of rule of law, then performance and outcomes data may not be perceived as important. In this sense, a commitment to policy analysis and evaluation, and the construction of supporting conditions within universities, through contract research support and so forth, is a commitment to a broadened view of public administration is reaching beyond rule of law to encompass values of performance and outcomes measurement as well.

D. System Responsibilities

It should be clear from this overview of the systemic requirements for program analysis and evaluation that no single institution can develop and sustain this system alone. There are in particular very important roles for academic institutions and for academic and development associations, such as CLAD and INPAE, to advance and sustain this capacity.

PERSONAL DESCRIPTION

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