

## “National Evaluation Capacity: Lessons Learned and a Conceptual Scheme”<sup>1</sup>

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This paper is intended to frame the session devoted to discuss Theme 4 of the conference on national evaluation capacity organized by UNDP’s Evaluation Office which is “Towards an enabling environment for evaluation capacity at the national level: what type of support is needed?”. Based on lessons drawn from national evaluation capacity (NEC) experiences, and on discussions in the literature, a conceptual scheme is presented and applied to discuss ways of supporting the development of national evaluation capacity, as well as to generate a set of questions for discussion during the session.

### a. Lessons learned

The lessons learned presented in this section are based on the author’s direct involvement on national evaluation capacity issues during three decades in Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe. Taking these lessons into account helps to consider in a more realistic and constructive way the factors leading to an enabling environment for national evaluation capacity and to identify appropriate ways to support it.

#### 1. *Unbundling evaluation capacity*

There are different evaluation capacities which should be taken into account, which allow for specialization and division of labor. It is important to distinguish between the capacity to manage evaluations from the capacity to conduct them, as the former does not imply the latter and viceversa. This is of particular importance since the 1990s, given that contrary to what happened in the 1980s governments are contracting out and managing evaluations, rather than conducting them. Furthermore, it is also important to acknowledge that conducting evaluations involves both the production of evaluations and their communication/dissemination. Last but not least, it is also worthwhile to consider the capacity to use evaluations as another dimension, and, as it happens in the case of surveys, the capacity to manage and conduct them does not imply the capacity to use them<sup>3</sup>. These are all different capacities that it is not practical to lump together under a single term “capacity”, except to point out to an important development dimension that should be unbundled in order to understand better the different situations at the national level and to design more appropriate ways to support the enhancement of national evaluation capacities.

#### 2. *Individual training to conduct evaluations is neither necessary nor sufficient for the development of NEC*

During a long period, and even nowadays, it is not infrequent that evaluation capacity is reduced to the capacity to carry out evaluations. However, as indicated by the preceding

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<sup>3</sup> On the use of evaluations and the capacity to use them, see Feinstein (2002).

lesson, this is inappropriate because there are several important evaluation capacities. Furthermore, there is an additional important limitation of this approach, which is that it is concerned with the level of the individual rather than organizations or collectives. Experience shows that by enhancing individuals' capacities without strengthening organizations, and the NEC environment, training at the individual level may even result in a paradoxical weakening of organizations, and even of NEC, if there is no concomitant improvement in the environment, which may lead the concerned individual(s) to migrate either to other organizations or even to other countries.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Focus on national rather than only on government's evaluation capacities

Though governments' evaluation capacity is an important component of NEC, civil society's evaluation capacities are also another crucial NEC component: Parliaments and other civil society organizations can (and sometimes already do) use evaluations to be informed about issues in which they are interested and on which they may have to make decisions (or influence decision makers). In order to do this they need to have a capacity to use evaluations, which includes among other things, an awareness of their existence, and knowledge on how to search for them. Furthermore, in some evaluation systems, like the case of Chile, the Parliament is consulted on the evaluation agenda. And in Ghana, specific work has been done in developing evaluation capacities of civil society to assess government performance<sup>5</sup>.

The use of evaluations by civil society can enhance the quality of democracy by providing citizens with information that allows them to assess government performance and to influence the decision making process. A remarkable experience is the approach developed in India by Sam Paul and his colleagues, that developed report cards through which civil society assess public services, an experience that has been replicated in other regions<sup>6</sup>. Finally, on the supply side of evaluation, civil society organizations, such as think tanks, are well placed to conduct evaluations and their capacity to do so may be developed through a learning by doing process, if they are provided with the opportunity to do evaluations.

### 4. Identification of different types of evaluation capacity gaps

The practice and the literature on evaluation capacity makes frequent reference to supply and demand<sup>7</sup>. This is useful but it is convenient to consider not only actual supply and demand, and the resulting gap between them, but also "potential" evaluation supply (for example, professionals in the country that could conduct evaluations but have not yet had opportunities to get engaged in them), "potential" evaluation demand (demand for evaluations that exist but does not become actual for lack of funding) and "latent" evaluation demand (demand of information that has not been articulated as a demand for evaluation because there is no clear awareness or understanding of evaluation). By introducing these three additional concepts, the following evaluation capacity gaps can be

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<sup>4</sup> At a recent national roundtable of the UNDP Assessment of Development Results for Chile it was forcefully stressed that a set of evaluation capacity building activities aimed at the individual level did not resulted in a strengthening of the concerned organization, because after the activity was completed the trained individuals left the organization. Incidentally, it should be mentioned that the "capabilities" approach, pioneered by Amartya Sen, is also focused at the individual level (though it can be eventually extended to take into account "social capabilities").

<sup>5</sup> See Mackay and Gariba (2000)

<sup>6</sup> See Paul (2002)

<sup>7</sup> For example, cfr. Boyle & Lemaire (1999)

identified during a NEC diagnosis (which is important for the design of appropriate support): an evaluation capacity gap between potential and actual supply of national evaluation capacities (that may lead to provide opportunities for those potential evaluators to become actual evaluators, “reinventing” themselves as evaluators); a gap between potential and actual demand, which may require a funding mechanism (for example, an evaluation fund) that can be tapped to commission evaluations (or a consultation mechanism such that the Parliament can participate in defining the evaluation agenda). A third type of gap is between actual and latent demand for evaluations, which may require the development of the capacity to use evaluations.

A complementary set of evaluation capacity gaps is related to the different types of evaluations. Some years ago an influential paper was circulated in development evaluation circles about the so-called “evaluation gap”<sup>8</sup>. It was focused on impact evaluation, and it pointed out towards an important evaluation gap, which had implications for evaluation capacity. But there are other types of evaluations that are also missing (or whose quality leaves ample scope for improvement), thus leading to additional evaluation gaps (for example, self-evaluations, process and outcome evaluations), and the corresponding capacities to undertake them.

#### *5. Some countries may develop their NEC with support from other countries*

Among the different ways in which NEC have been developed, and are being developed, one that is worthwhile to highlight in the context of this conference is the sharing of experiences among developing countries. For example, an interesting case is the support provided by Chile to Mexico to develop their national evaluation performance system, and the capacities to operate it (it is also worthwhile to mention that Mexico could also contribute to develop Chile’s evaluation capacities in the social sectors).<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, in most countries the development of national capacities has not been country-wide and, therefore, an important challenge is to develop evaluation capacities within the country at the subnational level. This has already started to take place in some countries, such as India (in Andhra Pradesh), Mexico (in Queretaro) and Brazil (in Belo Horizonte).

#### *6. National and regional evaluation networks can contribute to NEC*

During the last years several evaluation networks have been created at the regional and national level<sup>10</sup>. As shown by the case of Sri Lanka and other countries, these networks can play a role in expanding NEC, reducing gaps between potential and actual supply as well as between latent and actual demand.

### **b. A conceptual scheme**

Efforts to develop evaluation capacity at the national level have been going on in all regions for even more than 30 years, even though some of them are neither well known nor appropriately documented. The lessons presented in the previous section are an attempt to draw on some of this rich experience. Building on them, the following conceptual scheme, anchored in a national evaluation capacity (NEC) matrix, may be useful both for a

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<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.cgdev.org/section/initiatives/active/evalgap/about/>

<sup>9</sup> The innovative Mexican evaluation system, and its evolution, is described in Feinstein & Hernandez Licona (2008).

<sup>10</sup> See Feinstein & Beck (2006) and Morra-Imas & Rist (2009)

diagnosis of NEC and also for considering ways of supporting the enhancement of NEC, thus being a tool for strategic thinking about NEC.

The matrix combines the different types of evaluation capacities mentioned in lesson 1 with the different “principals” and “agents” mentioned in lessons 3 and 4 (civil society combines the second and third columns).

### National Evaluation Capacities (NEC) Matrix

National Evaluation Capacities	GOVERNMENT	UNIVERSITIES THINK TANKS CONSULTANTS	PARLIAMENT
MANAGING evaluations	I	II	III
CONDUCTING evaluations	IV	V	VI
USING evaluations	VII	VIII	IX

The Roman numbers within the cell are used to facilitate reference to the matrix’s cells. Thus, I is Government’s capacity to manage evaluations; IV is government’s capacity to conduct evaluations, and so on.

This matrix allows us to consider different actual and possible scenarios. Thus, during the 1970’s and 1980’ the emphasis was placed on conducting evaluations, and these evaluations were carried out by governments, sometimes with the support of international organizations (so IV was the dominant cell of the matrix). In the 1990’s, some developing countries such as Colombia, Chile, Mexico and Costa Rica, started to develop government based evaluation systems, with governments contracting out most of the evaluations, playing thus much more a management role (in terms of the NEC matrix, shifting from cell IV to I)<sup>11</sup>. There was, and still is, very little involvement of parliaments/ civil society in evaluations(weak second and third columns, except V), though in the 2000’s there is a growing involvement of think tanks/universities in conducting evaluations (in terms of the NEC matrix, cells III, VI and IX are almost empty in most countries, whereas V has become significant.

The NEC matrix can be used to think about appropriate national evaluation systems, taking into account national realities, and the required capacities to run those systems. For example, in some countries a desirable and feasible national evaluation system may be one in which government manages the evaluation processes, whereas evaluations are conducted by think tanks and/or universities, with parliament/civil society using those

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<sup>11</sup> See Cunill Grau & Ospina (2008). As part of the process of creating and legitimizing M&E systems, some countries like Colombia have a series of laws and decrees mandating evaluation, which could contribute to an enabling environment for NEC. However, as stated in Mackay (2007) “a law or decree on its own does not ensure that the considerable efforts required to build an M&E system will be undertaken”, whereas Cunill Grau & Ospina (2008) refer to the Brazilian and Chilean cases as two examples where systems were consolidated without a legal foundation. Taken together, these cases indicate that a legal framework is neither necessary nor sufficient for the development of a M&E system, though it may be help to create an enabling environment for it, and for the enhancement of NEC.

evaluations (i.e., it would correspond to cells I, V and IX, i.e., the diagonal, of the NEC matrix, which would be the critical national evaluation capacities needed to ensure that the system would function).

### **c. Supporting the development of national evaluation capacity**

Rather than proceeding with ready made recommendations on how to support NEC, it is important to carry out a NEC diagnosis, for which the conceptual framework presented in the preceding section may be helpful<sup>12</sup>. It is likely that the following lines action may be appropriate to support the development of national evaluation capacity, though their suitability should be assessed on a case by case basis:

*i) Information* Support in the search of relevant experiences in developing and enhancing NEC, taking into account different contexts, as well as on reference materials that can be useful as tools for enhancing evaluation capacities, such as diagnosis guidelines (some of these materials are included among the references at the end of this paper).

*ii) Networking* Support in linking up with, and/or eventually setting-up, networks of evaluation practitioners

*iii) Funding* Support for training and training of trainers, through scholarships, and/or also for contracting national evaluation teams to conduct evaluations, as well as for enabling study tours and knowledge sharing among developing countries.

These three lines of support could be facilitated by international cooperation, thus contributing to an enabling environment for national evaluation capacity, in line with what is stated in the Paris Declaration, and ratified in the Accra Declaration, concerning the reliance on country based systems<sup>13</sup>.

This conference may help in moving forward along the lines of the first two types of support, and also in identifying sources of funding to enhance national evaluation capacities (the third line of support). In turn, the enhancement of national evaluation capacities could play a key role in promoting good governance.

### **d. Questions for the session:**

On the basis of the conceptual framework and the lessons learned presented in this paper, the following set of questions are proposed for discussion during the conference session corresponding to theme 4:

1. Are there any *successful experiences in your country* concerning the development of national evaluation capacities?
2. Would you like to share *lessons* on national evaluation capacity?

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<sup>12</sup> In addition, Mackay (2007) provides examples of M&E country diagnosis. See also Morra-Imas & Rist (2009) and Feinstein (2009)

<sup>13</sup> See Picciotto (2007)

3. Which are some of the crucial *national evaluation capacity gaps* in your country? For example, i) lack of sufficient demand for evaluations? ii) lack of capacity to contract out evaluations or to conduct them or to use them? iii) other gaps, if any?
4. Has your country *benefitted from support by other developing country* in enhancing national evaluation capacity?
5. Can your country *provide, or has provided, support* to other countries in developing their national evaluation capacities? If so, please indicate which type(s) of support

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