Evaluation Networks and Governance: The case of the ReLAC (Latin American Network of Evaluation, Systematization and Monitoring)

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1   Introduction

Although evaluation has been integrated more and more in the processes of design and analysis of public policies, there are key differences between countries about the use and dissemination of evaluation activities in the public sector. Many factors affect the development, integration, and the use of evaluation in each country, so it is possible to find almost so many styles of and approaches to evaluation like countries. In some regions, like the European Union, these differences among styles seem to be less problematic due to a clear common framework which could help to the building of a common evaluation culture.[2] This is not the case, for instance, of Latin America, where a common framework is missing and the role of national and regional evaluation associations is different.

This paper will explore this issue, paying attention to the role of evaluation networks in supporting the governance of the region. The next section discuss the notion of governance and evaluation culture, in order to give the conceptual grounds for the introduction in the third section of the evaluation networks at the global and regional level. The fourth section introduces with more detail the ReLAC, the Latin American Evaluation Network, discussing its strengths and weakness in order to be a relevant tool for the region governance. The final section concludes the paper.

2   The Governance Perspective and the Culture of Evaluation

The concept of governance has gained great popularity across most of the social sciences during the last decade, although it has been used differently in a variety of contexts. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify some shared characteristics that provide the basis of the governance perspectives (Rhodes, 1996:660; Shaffer, 2001:18; Bonfiglioli, 2003:18-20): a strong interest in self-organising, inter-organisational networks; shifting boundaries between public, private and voluntary organizations and an indirect and imperfect ´steering´ by the state. For Jessop (1995:310-311) the concept of governance signals a shift to 'a broad concern with a wide range of governance mechanisms with no presumption that these are anchored primarily in the sovereign state'. The concept of governance is broader than government (this is concerned with the formal institutions and structures of the state), paying attention to the multiple ways in which governmental and non-governmental organisations interact, and to the ways in which political power and authority are distributed, both internally and externally, into the state (Goodwin, 2003:2).

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[2] Although there is some discussion about the existence of an 'European' evaluation, due to the presence of different evaluation traditions from various countries, arising from the way evaluation was introduced in successive waves in different contexts (Stame, 2006).

The literature on governance has shown how the top-down and centralized approaches to policy and interventions gave place to policy being infiltrated by two interrelated concepts: 'local context' and 'participation' (Ray, 2003:2). Development thinking has been strongly influenced by the importance of adopting a people-centred approach to development (Cleary, 2003). This implies that development is no longer seen as uni-dimensional where progress is measured primarily in terms of economic growth and an accumulation of wealth. There is growing consensus that development is about enhancing individual freedoms, expanding human capabilities, widening choices, and assuring citizens their basic human rights. In order to go beyond an 'audit culture' (Roberts, 2001) and to search for in depth knowledge of the processes involved in development projects, this paper introduces later the establishment and development of the ReLAC – the Latin American Evaluation Network- as a starting point for the analysis of participation and associated work in the evaluation of development interventions.

Evaluation culture can be defined in the simplest terms as the way of how evaluation is considered by key stakeholders in a particular context. It is also a process of reality construction that allows these stakeholders to see and understand particular events, actions, objects or situations linked with evaluation in distinctive ways. To pay attention to issues of culture helps to avoid a view of it as a mechanic or engineered structure, but as a product of the social interaction of several key actors.

In the field of sustainable evaluation, many evaluations that attempted to uncover the human causes of environmental degradation failed in simplistic and deterministic analysis, giving insufficient attention to the way in which people act as conscious agents to intervene in the world around them (Jones, 1999). In order to overcome these shortcomings, different people-centred approaches emerged (Cleary, 2003).

There are several factors that influence the development of an evaluation culture (Levine, 1981; Toulemonde, 2000; Haarich, 2005): the political consensus about the general objectives of the government, the concentration of services as well as the public and scientific life in main cities; the level of descentralization or federalism, the legal requirements in order to do evaluations; the role of different government offices more or less interested in the development of evaluations; the existence of internationally funded projects (by the World Bank, for instance) that require the integration of evaluation in different policies; the civil societyy; mass media; and the role of international professional networks.

For Toulemonde (2000), in the late 1970s evaluation culture spread within policy networks that were open to international trends, especially those of research and development aid. But this broad diffusion of evaluation on a European scale has not been a strong driving force in the development of evaluation practice beyond the circle of the policies concerned. For Boyle, Lemaire and Rist (1999:3) there are six dimensions in order to describe a friendly or favourable environment for a positive development of evaluation: (1) The development and institutionalization of the social sciences; (2) the existence and maintenance of a trustworthy statistical apparatus; (3) the existing capacity to staff a national evaluation system; (4) the constitutional relationship between the executive and the legislative branches of the government; (5) the population and geographic size; and (6) the administrative distance from the centre to the periphery of the governmental system

In this way, the different existence of these factors in dissimilar national contexts makes difficult to find a pure "culture of evaluation". This means that the diversity of regions and countries cultures is a permanent source of enrichment and social

innovation, and that evaluation practice, while getting mature, may escape from uniformity.

What's the problem when an evaluation culture doesn't exist? a) institutional and political constraints are more difficult to overcome; b) the struggle for adequate budgets demands extra energy; c) the evaluator is closer to the images of a detective or spy than a critical friend; d) the evaluation will find greater difficulties to reflect local and regional priorities.

In the case of Latin America, one common element is the growing importance of the demand of evaluation of public policies. Managers and policy makers are using the evaluation as a way of making more efficient the public expenditure, as well as fulfilling issues of accountability. At the same time, there are problems with the design and implementation of evaluations, as well as the limited use of its results. Evaluations are many times used more as a way of financial and administrative control, and not as giving services for planners and managers. In many cases, it has to do more with the generations of descriptions and less with the valuation of these activities and its uses for improving planning and decision making.

3   Evaluation Networks and governance

The main purpose of many evaluation networks and organizations is to contribute to the development of an evaluation culture in their particular contexts as a way of situating evaluation as a key tool in order to improve the efficacy and efficiency of the design and implementation of social interventions. In our days, the term network has become a hallmark of the development industry. Some of their characteristics are that they have the potential to provide a more flexible and non-hierarchical means of exchange and interaction that is also more innovative, responsive and dynamic, while overcoming spatial separation and providing scale economies. It is clear that the label 'networks' currently pervades discourses about the relationships between organizations in development, although there has been little research or theorization of such networks (Henry, Mohan, and Yanacopulos, 2004).

For some authors, networks are regarded as a counter-hegemonic force. Most important is not to consider them as static entities but must be seen as an ongoing and emergent process. The networks offer a variety of advantages in terms synergistic, such as an option to work together, availability of resources, access to information, opportunities to share experiences, generating new policy interventions and the development of a collective vision. The networks are flexible and that favours the building of consensus. More than anything, the networks hope to have an impact on the real world- to change reality. Since then, the networks may also have some disadvantages. If they are closed, they can inhibit the introduction of new ideas, and the network can become a static structure. In addition, external influences can divert to the networks of their original purpose.

One of the most open spaces where evaluators meet regularly through groups at local, national and international levels are the evaluation associations and networks, where its members are involved in many aspects of evaluation and performance measurement. Members include interested individuals, evaluation practitioners,

managers, consultants, teachers and students, officials from all levels of government, educational institutions, research agencies, civil society organizations and businesses. It is an important issue how in different countries of the world evaluators have come together to form professional associations and societies. While in the 1980s there were only three national and regional evaluation societies, by the late 1990s there were nine and by the beginning of the 21st century the number had grown to fifty (Segone and Ocampo, 2006). Nowadayas, according to the records of the IOCE[3] there are eighty seven groups and networks of evaluation worldwide.

In general, these evaluation organizations aspire to improve methods and practice, enhance the standards and quality of evaluation work, develop skills, promote ethical behaviour and standards, strengthen professional independence and provide a forum for exchange, debate and learning. Most of these associations understand evaluation as a profession and practice that can contribute to improve societal, policy and institutional problem solving and development.

Recognition of the potential benefits of evaluation has also led to efforts to establish international organizations of evaluators. At the global level there are two associations: the International Organization for Cooperation in Evaluation (IOCE) and the International Development Evaluation Association (IDEAS).

IOCE is an organization for evaluation networks and societies that is committed to building a worldwide evaluation community. The IOCE, as an organization for evaluation networks and societies, is committed to building a worldwide evaluation community by becoming a platform for worldwide cooperation and partnership in evaluation, fostering the cross fertilisation of ideas, high professional standards and an open and global perspective among evaluators. The mission of the IOCE as stated in their constitution is to help legitimate evaluation and support evaluation societies, associations and networks so that they can better contribute to good governance, effective decision making and strengthen the role of civil society. As an international organization, the IOCE is committed to cultural diversity, inclusiveness and bringing together different evaluation traditions in ways that respect this diversity.

The other global organization is IDEAS - International Development Evaluation Association -, a voluntary association of professional evaluators, development institutions and civil society organizations committed to promoting the theory, methods and practice of development evaluation globally. The mission of IDEAS is to improve and extend the practice of development evaluation by refining methods, strengthening capacity and expanding ownership, particularly in developing and transitional countries (Gariba, 2006). IDEAS' strategy is to serve as a catalyst for enabling and convening a global development evaluation constituency, while observing the principle of subsidiarity, especially with respect to the emerging community of evaluation practice among Country Evaluation Associations. The activities of IDEAS are designed to expand both the supply of and demand for evaluation.

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[3] http://ioce.net/members/national_organizations.shtml

4 The Latin American Evaluation Network (ReLAC)

Internationally, evaluation is at the heart of modern developments in governance and democracy. This has to do with the demands of continuous improvement in the performance of administrations, greater accountability and transparency – in the interests of citizens as well as policy makers-, and effective delivery of results in the in public and private sectors and civil society. The ways evaluation can address these demands is by providing feedback on what has worked; deepening the understanding of the processes of policy implementation; designing knowledge systems that allow institutions and systems to learn; and developing capacities to manage effectively and to innovate.

The Latin American Evaluation Network (ReLAC) is a network of networks designed to contribute to the strengthening of capacity in monitoring and evaluation and professionalize the evaluation function in Latin America. It seeks to strengthen the culture and practice of monitoring, evaluation and systematization as a social and political process essential for the improvement of policies, programmes and projects, seeking for greater transparency and citizen participation.

ReLAC originates in the context of the inaugural assembly of the International Organization for Cooperation in Evaluation (IOCE), held in Lima, Peru, in March 2003. In that context, the networks of Brazil, Colombia and Peru agreed to promote the formation of ReLAC. In October 2004, the ReLAC was launched in Peru, where it had it first conference: "Evaluation, Democracy and Governance: Challenges for Latin America", where issues of democratic evaluation, methodologies for evaluating human rights programmes, capacity building in evaluation of social initiatives, monitoring and evaluation as a political and social process to strengthen Democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean, etc. were discussed and reflected the intense focus or ReLAC to promote a social agenda for the region, having the evaluation as a key tool for it.

The objectives of the ReLAC are:

- Generate and support opportunities for exchange and reflection among professionals and entities involved in monitoring, evaluation and systematization.

- Promote the development of capabilities in monitoring, evaluation and systematization.

- Develop general principles, procedures, ethical standards and conduct for the good practice of monitoring, evaluation and systematization.

- Promote the development and dissemination of concepts, methodologies and tools for monitoring, evaluation and systematization adapted to the cultural diversity of the region.

- Encourage national and international agencies to practice and use transparent, participatory and equitable system of monitoring, evaluation and systematization.

- Contribute to the development of the international community of monitoring, evaluation and systematization, from the specific cultural and local experience of the region.

- Supporting the development of organizations and national networks and sub regional of monitoring, evaluation and systematization.

The second conference of the ReLAC was held in mid July 2007 in Bogotá, Colombia, under the heading: "Contributions of Monitoring and Evaluation to Governance and Democracy". The conference was attended by 170 delegates of 22 countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, Spain and North America. The key speakers lectured about the strategic role of the evaluation in development; the evaluation as a political process; the professionalization of evaluation; the evaluation of humanitarian aid; evaluation, accountability and learning.

The ReLAC has elaborated a master programme in Evaluation, which had its pilot test in January 2008 in Santiago de Chile, in the framework of a Diploma programme offered by FLACSO (Latin-American Faculty of Social Sciences). The Diploma programme was taught again in January and November 2009.4 This master programme is oriented to evaluators who want to update and deepen their knowledge in evaluation with a broad perspective on Latin America and the Caribbean. The program recognises the need and demand of professionals evaluators in the region, which along with the prospect of effectiveness for development, has shown that development programmes and projects implemented over the past decades in the region have not produced the expected results. Hence, for the academic training centres and the evaluators themselves appears the requirement to upgrade methodologies, interchange experiences and establish parameters and standards of evaluation to account for the new challenges of the present.

Among the key skills required for evaluators to respond to the reality of Latin America, the programme has identified the following ones:

- Knowledge of the reality and socio-economic, cultural and political contexts of the region,

- Ability to understand and address the cultural and social diversity,

- Capacity for an approach to social change in the context of exclusion, strong asymmetries of power and the dominance of a legalistic and economic approach of the evaluation

- Ability to exercise professional autonomy in institutional settings characterized by the absence or low transparency,

- Consideration of the approach of rights, both in the design, implementation, and evaluation of development projects,

- Knowledge of the strategic role of monitoring and evaluation for the achievement of the development goals.

The master programme is organized in four thematic modules, with some courses in each of them, and the idea of having a deep articulation between modules and courses.

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[4] FLACSO is an academic international organization created in 1957 by the goverments of LAC with the mission of promoting the teaching, research and scientific cooperation in the field of social sciences.

Module I: INPUT and CONTEXTS	Module II: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS
• Evaluation and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean♣ • Evaluation and Public Policy♣ • Ethical Dilemmas in evaluation♣	▪ Evaluation theory ▪ Evaluation thinking ▪ Evaluation typology ▪ Results-Based Management and logical models ▪ Rights-based models and evaluation ▪ Principles, rules and standards of evaluation
Module III: METHODOLOGIES AND TOOLS	Module IV: SINTHESIS AND APPLICATION
▪ Introducction to the evaluation methdos ▪ Quantitaive methods ▪ Qualitative methods ▪ Indicators construction ▪ Socioeconomic, financial and technological components ▪ Institutional and political components ▪ Process and result evaluation ▪ Impact evaluation	▪ Evaluation design ▪ Evaluation management ▪ Evaluation project

There has been an increasing number of job postings being advertised in the ReLAC discussion lists. Government agencies and non-profit organizations (NGOs, foundations, and institutes) are the two main clients offering such opportunities, covering a broad range of areas by such announcements, including education, environment, child labour, agriculture, and socioeconomic development (Chianca, 2005).

During its brief history, the ReLAC has achieved some interesting achievements, including increased awareness of the relevance of evaluation, the dissemination of current trends in evaluation, the increased workload networking among its members, and the creation of a community of evaluators.

The ReLAC has fostered the creation of new national networks. It has developed a website in order to link the new evaluation networks, and an electronic discussion list is the main tool in order to allow interaction and collaboration among the network members. Some of the challenges are, among others, to achieve a sustainable membership, not to overburden its voluntary leadership and to maintain its current level of activities.

Some of the lessons learned in the context of a national network could be easily applied for the ReLAC. Silva *et al.* (2006:69), writing about the Brazilian network evaluation stated that:

> ...democratic contexts create a favourable environment for the development of evaluation networks; given their support for the independence and autonomy of their

members, networks are a better strategy for organizing evaluators than establishing a full organization with a hierarchal structure; and a major component of a successful network is people with fresh ideas who are motivated to work. Money is important, but not as important as the people.

5   Conclusions

RELAC has been playing an important role in the establishment of national evaluation associations in Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as evaluation capacity building, which can be delivered in many different ways, formally and informally, through extensive university or training institution programmes or very rapidly (Bamberger, 2006). Following Quesnel (2006:28), the experience of the evaluation community in general shows that the success or failure of evaluation capacity development depends greatly on three conditions:

- the awareness and appreciation at the governmental decision making levels of the importance and necessity of evaluation —in other words, the existence of a demand for evaluation;

- the institutionalization and meaningful integration of the various evaluation functions in the government machinery at national, sectoral, programme/project and sub-state levels; and

- the development of human and financial resources to support a professional, dedicated, and effective cadre of evaluators and evaluation managers.

Monitoring and Evaluating capacity is increasingly being acknowledged as a key to improved public sector management. It is possible to identify several trends in governance to which evaluation is contributing (Russon and de Silva, 2001), including:

- democratization by promoting citizen participation in government through inclusion, dialogue and deliberation; and

- de-bureaucratization by promoting public accountability, responsiveness, transparency and efficiency.

A deeply rooted culture of democratic evaluation at all administrative levels can help evaluation practice to fully produce its benefits. This would imply that public managers could be prepared to accept and to publish reports that contain negative or disturbing conclusions (Toulemonde, 2000). But this requires the media and politicians to use evaluation works without distorting the conclusions. Another factor that could contribute to achieving this goal is the creation and consolidation of national evaluation societies or associations, which help to make evaluation recognized as an integral part of democratic functioning.

Another form of maturity is probably at play. In the public sector this involves the progressive shift from evaluation as a constraint to a managerial use of the exercise – something which has largely been achieved – and then to a democratic evaluation culture. The latter stage is still very far from being attained in Europe. My view is that all countries in the European Union are in the process of reaching relative maturity in their evaluation culture. It

> seems that in the short term some universal lessons are going to be learnt and that specific national characteristics will consequently disappear. (Toulemonde, 2000)

The networks of evaluators also can have a role towards the professionalization of the evaluation by the generation of spaces of discussion and interchange of concepts, approaches, and methods of evaluation. They could have a key role in the generation and dissemination of knowledge, as well as putting the professionalization of the evaluation in the public agenda. In the context of developing countries, they could help to deepen the strategic role of the evaluation in the development framework. Mature networks could also make proposals in order of making evaluation more professional by stating norms, behaviour and ethics codes, etc. At last, but not least, evaluation networks are a means to ensure the independence and authority of evaluators.

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