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EVALUATION CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT: A SYSTEMIC PROJECT APPROACH BY DEVAL IN LATIN AMERICA

Summary

In democratic countries, governments are trying to enhance the effectiveness of government action using new management concepts and policy strategies. At the same time, evidence-based decision-making on the basis of evaluations and the development of the national evaluation capacity thus required are increasingly being called for in international agendas. However, these evaluations are often only used to a limited extent for policy decisions: Other political agendas and interests often take priority. Moreover, approaches to strengthen development capacity are usually limited to fragmented individual measures that do not take account of all the key evaluation actors or of the various levels of capacity development.

Against this backdrop, DEval has developed a systemic approach to evaluation capacity development geared towards individual and institutional capacity and to a conducive environment for evaluations and their use. As part of the FOCEVAL project (Fomento de Capacidades en Evaluación), the systemic approach has been fully implemented in Costa Rica, and partly implemented in other countries. The project has supported strategically relevant evaluations, provided advisory services to governments and parliaments, established training and continuing education courses on evaluation, involved civil society organisations in evaluation processes and promoted junior evaluation experts. In Costa Rica, the evaluation actors have joined forces in a national platform and have collaborated to draw up a national evaluation policy. The approach has thus contributed to important points: to collaboration between the stakeholders, to more ownership in evaluation processes, to more evidence-based decisions, to enhanced transparency in government action and to sustainability of the evaluation system.

In Costa Rica, however, the structural independence of the evaluation function is questionable, as the responsible government bodies still largely determine the choice of evaluation topics. Obtaining finance for training in the evaluation sector is a further challenge.

Experience to date has also highlighted fundamental limitations of this approach: It can scarcely be applied in authoritarian systems and fragile contexts, and even in stable and democratic countries, processes and structures need to be set up to publicise evaluation results systematically and to feed them into political decision-making. Overall, a large number of tasks still need to be carried out in Latin America before evaluation systems can achieve their full potential.

In addition to policy strategies geared towards effectiveness, the systemic ECD approach requires the actors to be willing to develop evaluation systems together and to request and use evaluations. These conditions are not yet met in many regions and countries. Even under difficult conditions, however, awareness-raising among stakeholders about evaluation and encouraging discourse on evaluation can lead to the creation of a conducive environment. This is not easy in many contexts, but in the medium term DEval's ECD experience can provide a valuable instrument for more evidence-based policy and hence for sustainable development outside Latin America too.

Evidence-based policy: a challenge for national evaluation capacity

In many democratic countries, governments and their administrations are currently using new management concepts and policy strategies to enhance the effectiveness of their work. Moreover, pressure from civil society has increased on governments in these countries to publicise the results of their work and make

Figure 1: Strengthened evaluation functions through ECD



Source: own diagram

them more transparent. Political decisions on the basis of evidence from scientifically robust evaluations could therefore be one of the key pillars of good governance, but they require a high level of skills and well-functioning state structures.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations at the end of 2015, the Bangkok Principles on National Evaluation Capacity for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) based on this agenda and the Global Evaluation Agenda 2016–2020 developed by EvalPartners also all focus on evidence-based policy and national evaluation capacity.

In the Latin American context, a study (Pérez, Gabriela and Maldonado, Claudia [eds.] 2015) presented by CIDE/CLEAR in 2015 on the evaluation systems of ten Latin American countries showed that the results of the national M&E systems were generally still barely used for decision-making.¹ One possible reason for this is that political agendas (e.g. serving the interests of particular groups) influence decisions more heavily than evidence drawn from evaluations. In addition, the evaluation results presented are often not easy enough to understand or are not sufficiently tailored to meet decision-making requirements. In other cases, due to qualitative shortcomings, they are not sufficiently credible or do not attract enough attention to be included in political decision-making processes. Evaluation capacity development is a response to these challenges, as Figure 1 shows.

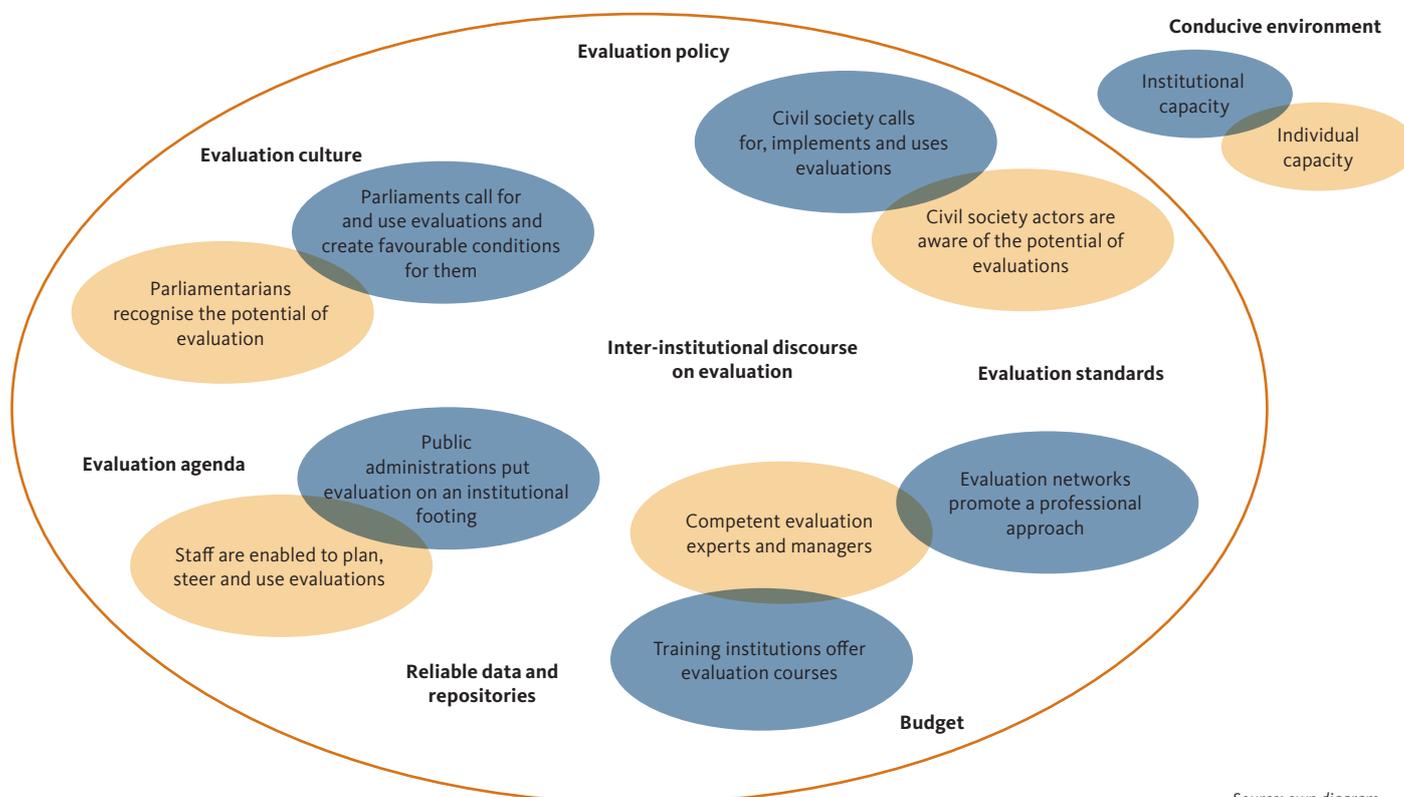
Even if the will is there to use evaluations as explained above, many countries still lack the structures and qualifications required for implementation. In this case, ECD can enable partners in developing countries and more advanced economies to develop the functions shown in Fig. 1. In the past, this comprehensive understanding was rare, however; ECD was usually limited to fragmented individual measures, often in the field of training and continuing education. These single measures geared towards individual stakeholders were not systematically dovetailed under one roof, and the evaluation system was not viewed in its entirety.

In contrast, ECD using a systemic approach is more comprehensive: It includes everything required to make progress in creating the necessary conditions to institutionalise evaluation structures and processes in state and society. ECD must therefore be implemented at different levels using instruments that are appropriate for the particular level, as Figure 2 shows:

The systemic approach includes evaluation capacity development on three levels: individual capacity (yellow), institutional capacity (blue) and a conducive environment (black text on a white background). The three levels should collaborate. The diagram shows how the systemic approach can be implemented in full. Where this is not possible, the approach can also be partially implemented without losing its significance as a concept.

¹ Assessment: three countries 'medium', seven countries 'low', no countries 'high'.

Figure 2: Systemic approach to evaluation capacity development



Implementing the systemic ECD approach in Latin America: the FOCEVAL project

In order to achieve the overarching results shown in Fig. 1, DEval has been implementing the systemic approach in full in Costa Rica in the FOCEVAL project (Fomento de Capacidades en Evaluación). Parts of the approach have begun to be introduced successively in other countries (Ecuador, Guatemala). The project cooperates with government institutions, universities, evaluation societies, civil society and parliaments.

Various measures specific to the particular actors are used here. Key stakeholders have been involved as active participants in a **national (Costa Rica) and a regional (Latin America) platform**. These platforms were initially used by a number of stakeholders to serve the interests of particular groups and only gradually became the basis for cooperation and collaboration between stakeholders.

In 2014 and 2018, FOCEVAL assisted the Costa Rican Ministry of Planning in designing the **national evaluation agenda**. A new four-year evaluation agenda will be set up in 2018. In addition to selection criteria concerning relevance to the SDGs and to civil

society, the government institutions responsible must be interested in the evaluation. If these institutions do not want to have their programmes evaluated, evaluations are not carried out and the evaluation functions transparency and accountability are not sufficiently fulfilled.

In order to ensure that evaluation is put on a sustainable institutional footing in Costa Rica, FOCEVAL supported and provided advice on developing a **national evaluation policy**. This was based on close cooperation and trust between the actors in the national platform.

One of the key criteria for high-quality evaluations is capacity development among evaluation experts. FOCEVAL thus introduced **training measures** that are increasingly being offered by local training providers on their own responsibility. Permanently establishing these measures requires their financing to be guaranteed, however, for example by earmarking government funds for training.

FOCEVAL provided support on methodology, personnel and financing for various types of evaluation in Costa Rica: A **participatory evaluation** tested mechanisms to involve

representatives of a civil society organisation in the evaluation. Those responsible for the programme evaluated initially had reservations and only gradually took note of the results. The **evaluation of the poverty reduction strategy**, 'Puente al Desarrollo' analysed the multiple dimensions of poverty; an **evaluation of municipal services** is being conducted by **junior staff**. In all these evaluations, acceptance and use of the evaluation results is a major challenge. This means that the responsible institutions or actors need to be involved in the evaluation process at an early stage.

Conclusions and outlook

The strengths of the systemic ECD approach were demonstrated from various points of view: evidence-based decisions are promoted; relevant actors collaborate and increase their ownership in evaluation processes. As different actors are involved in evaluation systems, the sustainability of the system is guaranteed, even if there is a change of government.

The limitations of this approach also became apparent, however: In authoritarian systems and fragile contexts, it is almost

impossible to implement the approach. In such countries, calling for transparency and accountability may jeopardise personal safety and the existence of critical organisations. In more stable countries in Latin America, however, which do not yet have adequate evaluation structures as defined in the CIDE/CLEAR study, there are good starting points to use evaluations in political decision-making processes.

In addition to policies geared towards effectiveness and society's needs, the willingness of stakeholders plays a considerable role in the success of the systemic approach. Even under difficult conditions, stakeholders' awareness of evaluation can be raised, and the discourse on evaluation can be encouraged. If government policy allows this to occur, a conducive environment can arise in which the systemic approach can be used to guide their action.

In the current situation dominated by conflicts and 'alternative facts', this use poses a major challenge. In the medium term, however, DEval's experience with the systemic ECD approach may provide a valuable instrument for more evidence-based policy and hence for sustainable development in other regions too.

References

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The German Institute for Development Evaluation (DEval) is mandated by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) to independently analyse and assess German development interventions. Evaluation reports contribute to the transparency of development results and provide policy-makers with evidence and lessons learned, based on which they can shape and improve their development policies.