Evaluating Social Protection Policies: Lessons from Brazil

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) is considered a valuable mechanism for improving the quality of public policy and has become politically important for policymakers. However, few studies have covered the process of designing and implementing the administrative structures required for effective M&E. Pioneering approaches to evaluating social protection policies by Brazil's Secretariat of Evaluation and Information Management (SAGI) provide key lessons around effective M&E systems. These include the importance of timing evaluations so that they contribute to decision-making processes, ensuring qualified researchers both commission and conduct the evaluations, and developing a reporting system which both handles feedback sensitively and remains transparent about results.

Monitoring and evaluation has been increasingly considered as a valuable mechanism for improving the quality of public policy. It has also contributed to growing transparency and increased efficiency in public policy management, helping Latin American countries prevent corruption.

In the political arena, scientific evidence which supports policy decisions is also a means of political survival, especially when it comes to social protection policies. While such policies help reduce inequalities, develop human capital, and, in some cases, increase internal markets by raising the capacity of poor people to purchase goods and services, they can also be implemented for populist purposes and short-term political gain, without consideration for long-term goals or the unsustainable fiscal debts generated.

Technical and scientific literature provides many references to quantitative and qualitative methods in evaluation studies, and the dissemination of these studies. However, there is very little on the process of designing and implementing the administrative structures for M&E. This is why the work of Brazil's Secretariat of Evaluation and Information makes for an important and ground-breaking case study.

Brazil's case study: the Secretariat of Evaluation and Information Management

In 2004, the Ministry of Social Development and Fight Against Hunger (MSD) was created by merging three areas: (1) social assistance; (2) food security; and (3) a conditional cash transfer programme. It encompassed 21 programmes, which required a consistent M&E framework. This led to the creation of the Secretariat of Evaluation and Information Management (SAGI) – an innovation in Brazilian public management, as it was the first secretariat with exclusively M&E functions, sharing the same hierarchical level as decision-making secretariats. SAGI developed its own evaluation model consisting of two independent subsystems grounded in distinct monitoring and evaluation procedures. The lessons extracted below indicate the procedures which enabled SAGI to successfully deliver comprehensive, timely, and consistent evidence, at low political cost.

Emerging lessons on designing and implementing M&E systems

1 Commissioned studies yielded more diverse, complex and simultaneous datasets

SAGI's role included commissioning evaluation services, a strategy that yielded gains in the scale, diversity and quality of the data. From the outset, SAGI partnered with a wide range of research institutions to conduct nationwide household and institutional surveys, as well as experimenting with different types of evaluation studies, such as panel and anthropological case studies. From 2004 to mid-2012, SAGI commissioned or conducted more than 140 evaluation studies, with most MSD evaluations undertaken by independent research institutions..

2 The best research contractors are qualified researchers

SAGI comprises more than 60 staff with solid academic backgrounds. In 2011 they were responsible for managing a budget of US$ 8 million.

3 It is possible to carry out consistent evaluations without making enemies

Relationships between evaluators and policymakers are generally tense, as evaluation results can damage the credibility of governments, ➡
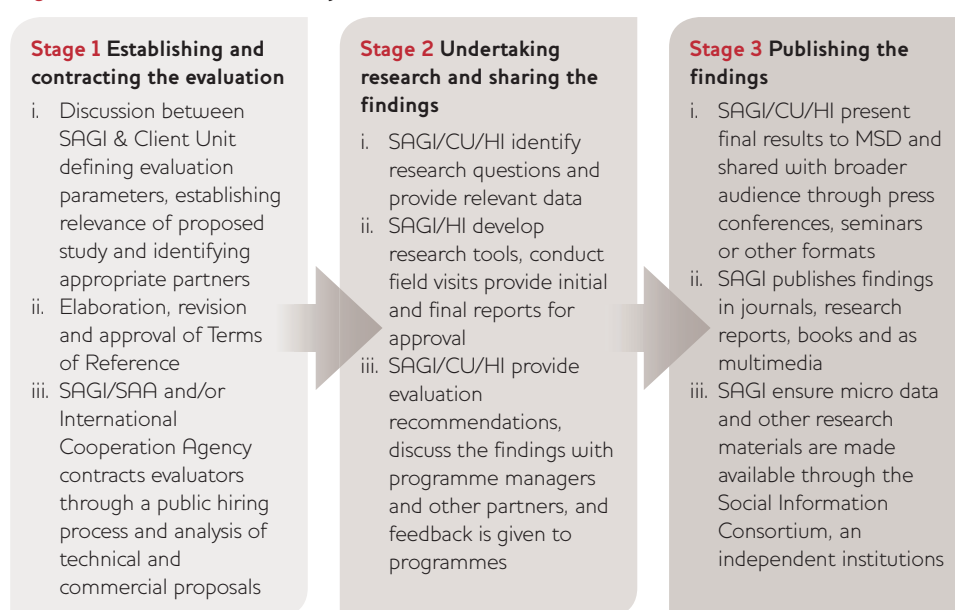
policies, programmes, institutions, teams and individuals. SAGI developed an original way of imparting results to avoid embittering relationships. It divided the process into three stages. Firstly, a preliminary report was addressed to policymakers at the secretariat level, bringing the most important findings to light. This allowed the main programme managers to rethink their design and implementation strategies, producing responses to the problems identified. A second report covered any further problems and allowed for a debate amongst policymakers about responses to the first report. The final report presented the evaluation results to the Minister, together with a synthesis of agreed responses to identified problems.

4 Evaluation transparency increases credibility of programmes and their institutions
Methods of impact assessment, regular programme reports and public access to information have helped to reduce implementation problems and increase positive perceptions of the social protection programmes. Another innovation was storing all anonymised mico-data from the studies into a single public institution and making it available for meta-evaluation and other independent impact studies.

Figure 1 SAGI's evaluation cycle

Stage 1 Establishing and contracting the evaluation

i. Discussion between SAGI & Client Unit defining evaluation parameters, establishing relevance of proposed study and identifying appropriate partners
ii. Elaboration, revision and approval of Terms of Reference
iii. SAGI/SAA and/or International Cooperation Agency contracts evaluators through a public hiring process and analysis of technical and commercial proposals

Stage 2 Undertaking research and sharing the findings

i. SAGI/CU/HI identify research questions and provide relevant data
ii. SAGI/HI develop research tools, conduct field visits provide initial and final reports for approval
iii. SAGI/CU/HI provide evaluation recommendations, discuss the findings with programme managers and other partners, and feedback is given to programmes

Stage 3 Publishing the findings

i. SAGI/CU/HI present final results to MSD and shared with broader audience through press conferences, seminars or other formats
ii. SAGI publishes findings in journals, research reports, books and as multimedia
iii. SAGI ensure micro data and other research materials are made available through the Social Information Consortium, an independent institutions

SAGI = Secretariat of Evaluation and Information Management; SAA = Secretariat of Administrative Affairs; CU = Client Unit; HI = Hired Institution; CIS = Social Information Consortium. *Source:* adapted from Paes-Sousa *et al.* (2006)

Policy implications

- An analysis of key decision-making timeframes must be incorporated into evaluation designs to ensure that technical knowledge and learning from them informs the decision-making process.

- A robust policy evaluation agenda should incorporate diverse types of studies (qualitative and quantitative methods), addressing different areas of knowledge.

- Evaluating social policies can help to produce more professional, enlightened and transparent governance.

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Institute of Development Studies, Brighton BN1 9RE UK
T +44 (0) 1273 606261 **F** + 44 (0) 1273 621202 **E** ids@ids.ac.uk **W** **www.ids.ac.uk**
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Further reading

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