

Commentary on Latin American Experiences on Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

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Abstract On the basis of Latin American experiences in monitoring and evaluation (M&E), this note addresses learning issues with particular emphasis on the role of trust, the relations between M&E, and barriers to the use of M&E as a source of learning and suggestions to overcome them.

Oswald and Taylor's article 'A Learning Approach to Monitoring and Evaluation' provides an interesting set of insights drawn from part of the literature on evaluation and learning. This note will address some of the key issues considered in that article, taking into account Latin American experiences.

1 On trust, learning and evaluation

The importance of an enabling environment for learning from evaluations, where monitoring and evaluation (M&E) will not be perceived as a threat but as an opportunity to learn, enhances the contribution that evaluation can make in transforming society. And trust plays an important role in creating such an enabling environment, a learning culture. But an important challenge is to consider ways in which trust can be developed. For this purpose it is worthwhile to relate 'trust' with 'credibility', which is a key factor in the use of evaluations,¹ that depends on the capacities of the evaluators, their independence, the use of a participatory approach in conducting evaluations and transparency in the evaluation process. It is worthwhile to point out that during the last 15 years there has been a significant development in evaluation capacities in Latin America, corresponding both to an increase in demand for evaluation, partly related to the emphasis on results-based management, and to several initiatives to develop evaluation capacities that were launched with support from international organisations such as the International Fund for

Agricultural Development (IFAD), the multilateral development banks and NGOs, as well as from governments (particularly in the case of Mexico, Chile and Colombia).²

2 The relationship between monitoring and evaluation

Oswald and Taylor argue that 'writers make a clear distinction between *monitoring* and *evaluation*, but it is useful to see them not as two distinct functions' (this *IDS Bulletin*). During the 1970s and 1980s it was standard practice in the design of rural development projects to set up 'monitoring and evaluation units'. These units generally failed, and a review of them showed that although in principle it makes sense to strongly link monitoring and evaluation, in practice this is an arrangement doomed to fail: monitoring should serve project or programme management, whereas evaluation needs to be independent from project management. The pattern that was observed was that those M&E units that performed well in evaluation, failed in monitoring and vice versa. This was the typical pattern in Latin America, and led to the recommendation to separate the monitoring from the evaluation function.³

3 Barriers to the use of M&E as a learning tool and suggestions to overcome them

This section will address some of the main difficulties preventing evaluation from being used as a learning tool, and suggests ways forward with regards to each difficulty:

- a *Insufficient funding*: This issue is frequently mentioned as a major difficulty for conducting evaluations and for using evaluation as a learning source. While this is generally true, it has also been found on several occasions that funds earmarked for evaluation (allocating for example, between 1 and 2 per cent of intervention funds for evaluation) are either not used or reallocated for other purposes, for the reasons mentioned below.
- b *Limited capacity*: There is generally a significant gap between the demand for evaluation specialists and the existing supply, particularly as a result of a strong increase in demand due to pressures for showing results, as well as funding restrictions and the search for improved use of funding. It is useful to make a distinction between the actual supply of evaluators, including organisations, and the potential supply, including universities and research centres, as well as professionals who may lack experience in evaluation but who could be persuaded and geared to develop capacities in this field through hands-on learning opportunities as a complement of training through courses and seminars. A scholarship programme for doctoral and master's degree dissertations, funded, for example, by foundations linked to banking institutions or other public or private organisations, could create an enabling environment for building capacities in evaluation.
- c *Methodological approach*: Virtually all methods have limitations, which is why it is important to develop a more pragmatic approach, using a number of different methods and triangulating both information sources and methods used.⁴ It is also worth highlighting that, insofar as evaluations challenge the basic assumptions of interventions, they will also facilitate a 'double-loop' or macro-level learning process that allows learning lessons to go beyond the specific scope of the intervention being assessed.
- d *Lack of incentives*: It is often argued that there is a trade-off between these two roles of evaluation.⁵ An alternative approach is that the 'accountability' role of evaluation complements its learning role, as 'accountability' can also be used as an incentive for learning. What is essential is to create an evaluation culture in which mistakes are seen as opportunities for learning, and learning as an important source for growth and development. Awards for best-quality evaluations could be used as an incentive for improving quality.⁶ But in the end, the main incentives for evaluations to be conducted and to be of good quality will depend on the demand for evaluation by policymakers and the population.

Notes

- 1 As explained in Feinstein (2002).
- 2 See Acevedo *et al.* (2010), Feinstein and Beck (2006).
- 3 Feinstein (1997) refers to these issues in the framework of a first generation of M&E experiences in Latin America and the Caribbean.
- 4 See Feinstein and Beck (2006), Feinstein (2007), and Pitman *et al.* (2005).
- 5 See O'Donnell (2007) and Feinstein and Beck (2006).
- 6 In this respect, it is worthwhile to establish links between the community of practice in M&E with the community of practice in quality, that are frequently 'like parallel worlds'. See Feinstein (2010).

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