Evaluation as an instrument for learning government

Summary
Nowadays, evaluation processes are perceived as opportunities for government learning. Hence, the search for different ways of integrating such processes, instruments, techniques, and methods into mainstream development practice has begun. This article presents a matrix, which describe learning results, based on a stakeholders approach. Learning results proposed to define as short-terms results (outputs), such as: new knowledge, new insights and better understanding of the evaluation object; and long-term results (outcomes): decision making, related to the program or policy improvements; changes in attitudes and behavior. While, the evaluation model’s choice should be determined by three criteria, such as: the evaluation purpose, interests of different stakeholders, and available resources.

Keywords: evaluation, organizational learning, input, output, outcomes, evaluation models, learning capacity, government policy and program, economy, efficiency and effectiveness

Streszczenie
Współcześnie, procesy ewaluacji są postrzegane jako szansa na uczenie się rządu. Dlatego też rozpoczęto poszukiwania różnych sposobów na włączenie takich procesów, instrumentów, technik i metod do głównego nurtu. Niniejszy artykuł prezentuje matrycę, opisującą rezultaty uczenia się, bazującą na interesariuszach. Rezultaty uczenia się, zaproponowane do zdefiniowania efektów krótkoterminowych (produkty): nowa wiedza, nowe spojrzenie oraz lepsze zrozumienie ewaluacji; oraz efekty długoterminowe (rezultaty): podejmowanie decyzji w związku ze zmianą i polepszeniem programu i polityki; zmiany w postawie i w zachowaniu. Wybór właściwego modelu ewaluacji powinien zostać dokonany z uwzględnieniem trzech kryteriów: celu ewaluacji, interesów różnych interesariuszy oraz dostępnych zasobów.

Słowa kluczowe: ewaluacja, uczenie się w organizacji, wejście, wyjście, rezultaty, modele ewaluacji, zdolność do uczenia się, polityka i program rządu, gospodarka, wydajność i efektywność
In recent years, administrative reform programs in the public sector have placed a significant emphasis on policy and program evaluation as an important element in the reform process. Evaluation is seen as part of “effective management,” which has become one of the popular ingredients of public sector reform. Substantial effort has been put into building and institutionalizing evaluation capacity in many transition countries, whereas the world of developed states made a significant contribution into the modernization of evaluation function. Evaluation can be used in different ways – as a management tool, as a means for democratic dialogue, as a tool for control and a tool for accountability – depending on who commissions the evaluation, the object of the evaluation and who makes use of the evaluation results. However, the greatest focus nowadays has been made on an evaluation as a learning instrument, and its contribution into the improvement of government performance. The belief is that there are many complexities which need to be taken into account in the decisions it takes to manage the public sector today. These decisions, can be better informed if credible information on the performance of current government activities is available and will be taken into account in a decision making process. Additionally, this approach means that states can learn from their experience, and that they can learn from previous actions through the study of mistakes and achievements.

However, many of the fundamental elements of such learning are unclear and are often vague and build up a field for the research problem. Part of the problem can be traces to different conceptions of “learning” utilized by the different authors work in this area. While, the existing perception of results, especially learning results brings up a query as to how to measure them. The wide variety of alternative approaches in the evaluator’s toolbox raises the important question of what criteria should be used to compare models and methods and take a decision regarding which of them may contribute the most towards learning. Due to the complexity of the learning approach there is an obvious gap between theoretical and empirical investigations. Knowledge as a basis of learning is often difficult to measure and compare. As a result, not a lot of practical studies have been done into the process of government learning through evaluation.

The concept of organizational learning was first implicitly raised as a concept in the early 1950s as a core component of the organizational development approach, relevant for private sector organizations. In the late 1970s and 1980s, a regular stream of books and articles began to appear and since then a proliferation of theoretical and practical research began to be developed and applied to both private, and later, public sector organizations [4].

All organizations, including public sector organizations, exist in and relate to environments that affect their operations. As Turner [22] observes, the organizational environment is a “vital element in influencing the nature of policy, administrative reform or any program of planned change”. Managers at all levels
who have a good appreciation of the environment and use this knowledge in their
decisions and actions in a way of implementation any changes, including toward
developing organizational learning system, have a greater chance of success than
those who underestimate or ignore the significance of the environment. This is
why it is crucial in this stage of investigation to define the conditions for effective
organization learning.

Dividing the environmental conditions into two parts, internal and external,
could be an useful starting point for the analysis. Some authors suggest that for or-
ganizations to remain effective and efficient they must take steps to “fit” their struc-
ture and strategies to the demands of the environment [5]. Others have proposed
the distinction between “influence able” and “appreciated” environments [4].

With regard to internal conditions, which are supposed to support the process
of organizational learning, Easterby-Smith [4] argues that organizations have to
develop a learning culture and a learning structure. As a result, the author identi-
fies six dimensions of an organization’s learning capacity:

1. individual learning capacities;
2. collective learning capacities;
3. structural learning capacities;
4. cultural learning capacities;
5. capacities resulting from the organization of work;
6. the capacity of the leadership to learn and to promote learning” [4].

Human factor play the most important role in a process of learning, and the
potential of public servants from different administrative levels to learn determi-
nes the learning organization’s potential as a whole. At the same time, the orga-
nizational structure must be receptive to change and senior managers should be
supportive and capable of learning themselves. Cultural learning capacity is the
summative outcome of individual learning cultures. Hence as Easterby-Smith [4]
notes, “it is the combination of these six learning capacities which make up for an
organization’s capacity to learn in a continuous way” and focusing on only one of
these aspects will be insufficient.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors of Internal Public Organizational Capacity</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
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<tr>
<td>Individual learning capacities</td>
<td>Indivdual’s ability and competence to learn</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The ability to think systemically</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The ability to think critically</td>
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<td>The openness of mind etc.</td>
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<td>Collective learning capacities</td>
<td>Successful interaction among individuals</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The capacity to dialogue</td>
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<td>The capacity to solve the conflict</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Group spirit etc.</td>
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<td>Structural learning capacities</td>
<td>Decentralized structure</td>
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<td>Participation possibilities</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Flattened hierarchies</td>
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<td>Small units interacting etc.</td>
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<td>Cultural learning capacities</td>
<td>Culture of dialogue</td>
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<td>Effective communication</td>
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<td>Openness</td>
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<td>Transparency</td>
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<td>Trust</td>
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<td>Risk taking etc.</td>
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<td>Capacities resulting from the organization of work</td>
<td>Project groups work</td>
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<td>Developed IT and there usefulness</td>
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<td>Goal or result oriented approach</td>
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<td>Experimentation</td>
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<td>Decentralized control</td>
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<td>Job rotation etc.</td>
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<td>Capacity of the leadership to learn and to promote learning</td>
<td>Management style toward leadership</td>
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<td>Ability to motivate people</td>
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<td>Ability to accept critique and alternatives</td>
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<td>Other leadership characteristics</td>
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Along the process of organizational transformation, public managers undertake different efforts or interventions in order to develop learning capacity, and at times use different organizational initiatives and tools. Going further into the organizational environment, Popper and Lipshitz [12] propose to promote learning through organizational structure and procedure which is defined by them as “learning mechanisms”. Cohen [2] offers to use and develop for further learning development organizational procedures, norms, rules and forms, where public organizations tend to accumulate their knowledge and power over time. However, learning organizations tend to become less regulated, that is why different bureaucratic constraints as was mention above tend to create obstacles, especially in public sector.

That government should improve their performance, particularly with respect to the management of public resources, the quality of public services and policy making, appears to be a generally accepted principle of “good governance”. Historical analysis of the development of the evaluation function shows a strong link between this process and the process of change in a public administration system. The authors (Patton, 1981, Henkel, 1991) emphasize the shift from professional to
managerial authority and values which are accompanied with more institutional and managerial modes of evaluation, based on “knowledge exploited” [10]. Wollmann distinguishes three phases in the development of public-sector reforms and evaluation over the past 30 years [17]. The first wave of evaluation in the 1960s and 1970s conducted social science-based evaluation research; whereas the cost-efficiency-related evaluation of the second wave was in the mid-1970s and 1980s; and the evaluative activities and tools of the third phase, started from the 1990s with New Public Management reforms characterized by revolving performance efficiency and effectiveness evaluation and self-evaluative procedures. There is a natural compatibility between “business” approaches to government administration and performance management, reflected in the use of performance indicators, performance-related pay, benchmarking, and quality service standards. As a result, Davies points to the growing influence of the accounting and audit community, and emphasized their attention to non-financial areas of public administration [3].

In Easterby-Smith’s book the author proposes, “to reconceptualize” traditional forms of evaluation practice within organizations as “an evaluative enquire” for organizational learning [4]. He defines “evaluation enquire” as an approach to “understanding, improving and changing organizational life…” [4]. Evaluation is described as a “process of systematic enquiry to provide information about some object – a program, project, process, organization, or product” [4]. The author believes that evaluation can assist organizations in developing the culture of information and knowledge which aims to support and improve a decision-making process.

Through a short survey of different definitions of “evaluation” it is clear that scientists stress different aims, which evaluation should play within a governing process:

a) The purpose of evaluation research is to measure the effects of a program against the goals it set out to accomplish as a means of contributing to subsequent decision making about the program and to improve future programming [16].

b) Evaluation is a “careful retrospective assessment of the merit, worth, and value of administration, output, and outcome of government interventions [15].

c) Policy evaluation is the systematic and objective assessment of an on-going or completed project, programme or policy, its design, implementation and outcomes” [6].

d) Evaluations are concerned with whether or not programs or policies are achieving their goals and purposes [1].

e) Evaluation is synonymous with learning; it is the process which generates insight and knowledge [11].

Thus, while the purpose of evaluation can be different, in general evaluation plays two main functions in the policy or organizational development processes.
Firstly, it supports and facilitates accountability and transparency by measuring policy output and outcomes, and compares these with policy goals. Secondly, evaluation improves government performance and policy-making and/or implementation through new knowledge and better understanding. To emphasize the crucial role of evaluation purpose, it is important to admit its particular influence into the evaluation design and selection of evaluation models.

There are different evaluation forms and models, and each of them contributes in their own way into the learning process. Summative forms of evaluation should provide information about the program’s or performance effectiveness, and attempts to answer questions such as, “Should the program be continued?”, “Should more resources be allocated to a product development?”. Formative evaluations, on the other hand, are used to make instrumental, usually immediate, improvements to the ongoing program or administrative process and Rose distinguishes this from prospective evaluation, which is “concerned with what happens after a program is implemented” [13]. The author stresses the importance of identification of shortcomings in advance that makes it possible to correct faults before they occur rather than face embarrassment after a program is put into effect [13]. Thus, all types of evaluation can assist public organizations in developing useful information and knowledge, which are the main resources for better policy and decision-making processes.

Evaluations involve several types of interest groups, including: politicians (councils, boards), beneficiaries (clients, users, and consumers), management and staff, evaluators (external and internal) [9]. The contribution to, and the demands on evaluation from each of these four main groups vary (Table 2). Political assemblies or their majority have the political and financial responsibility. Typically, they want confirmation that programs work efficiently and effectively (or not), and that money is used in the best manner. This enhanced knowledge, which could improve the further policy making process, budget allocation and increased chances of re-election. Even if an evaluation is commissioned at the managerial and not the political level, it is wise for evaluators to try to identify and consider the political interests.

The beneficiaries, in other words the clients, users and consumers of public goods and services are those, whose interests in an evaluation are very important, but are often the most neglected. The direct participation of clients (or a sample of clients) may create different evaluation benefits: to get better knowledge and understanding of their needs, values and their satisfaction from the one side, and to change their attitudes and behavior toward sharing understanding and support for the future program or policy development. Clients are experts on their own values and how these are considered and respected by program staff. If evaluation is carried out as a means to improving a program, it would seem reasonable to involve beneficiaries actively in the evaluation process.
Managers and staff normally have the knowledge of the operations and the object of evaluation. Their interests, usually, relate to the performance or program improving and better decision making process. And as results of evaluation they may expect better understanding of existing errors and problems, new knowledge and information how to improve the program, project or performance. They are also those who should implement the decisions that will be taken, based on the evaluation results. Every evaluation can be also seen as a potential threat to the interests of management and staff.

The final interest group consists of evaluators, both internal and external to the organization. If the evaluation is commissioned by a public manager (at some level), we may talk about an internal evaluation, made for internal use. An external evaluation is usually commissioned by someone outside the organization or activity, for example by a founder or politician. The two types of evaluations offer different conditions to the evaluator. For example, difference role of the evaluator: in the first case his role is as consultant; in the second case, the evaluator’s role may be that of an auditor or an external analyst. Evaluators are interested in new professional knowledge and experience. However, the main evaluator’s interest should be in providing an effective evaluation. The question of effective evaluation from author’s point of view consists of two parts: first, if the evaluation has achieved its stated objectives, and secondly, are the evaluation results been effectively utilized.

As a consequence of theoretical investigations it is important to define a list of evaluation learning outcomes, which include:

- Short-term results (outputs), such as: new knowledge, new insights and better understanding of the evaluation object (project, program, policy or performance);
- Long-term results (outcomes): decisions taking, related to the program or policy improvements; changes attitudes and behavior.

As has been mentioned above, these results have various dimensions, which depend on the perspective of different stakeholders (Table 2).

Reviewing the historical development of the field of evaluation, it is noticeable that an increasing number of evaluation models are developed over time. From methodological perspective and technical implementation, all models have their strength and weaknesses. However, the choice of a model should be made on the basis of certain criteria.

Criterion 1.

As a first criterion, the purpose of evaluation should determine the evaluation design and evaluation model. The literature on program evaluation \([4, 7]\) recommends formative evaluation if the evaluation is intended to support learning and thereby improve the program implementation. But, if the purpose of evaluation is unclear and not properly defined, then the second criterion could be used.
Criterion 2.
The interests of all the different stakeholders should determine the design of the evaluation model. As an example, if evaluation is commissioned by a political entity that is particularly interested in information about programs results and their utilization, the goal-attainment or result-oriented models might be applied. Therefore, author believes that if evaluation responds to the needs and interests of different stakeholders, the learning process would be more fruitful and evaluation results better utilized.

Criterion 3.
The characteristics of the evaluation object should determine the design and choice (combination of) of the evaluation model. The explanation here is that these characteristics inform the evaluation process and create a better background for learning. For example, such characteristic can include:

- program objectives (are they clearly defined?);
- knowledge about clients needs and their satisfaction; and,
- the legitimacy and justice framework [7] etc.

To illustrate the legitimacy and justice limits, it is well known that public sectors are heterogeneous, and problem-solving is organized differently in different national contexts and in different policy fields. Based on Hansen’s suggestion: the sovereign state is matched by the goal-attainment models, whereas the negotiated state is matched by the stakeholder evaluation model. Thus, only the evaluation design which matches the key characteristics and values of the evaluated area “will be considered as legitimate”, more viable and capable of bringing better outcomes [7].
Table 2. Learning outcomes from the perspective of different stakeholders. Source: [Preapered by author]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interest Groups</th>
<th>Evaluation Impact</th>
<th>Learning Outcomes</th>
<th>Useful Evaluation Models</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Politicians</td>
<td>Political power through political pressure and the control of financial resources</td>
<td>Knowledge about the efficiency and effectiveness of policies (programme) improving the policy making process better allocation of financial resources</td>
<td>Goal-attainment models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beneficiaries</td>
<td>Clients and consumers are the best experts about the programme process, results and outcomes</td>
<td>Knowledge (better understanding of policy (programme) goal and objectives) Change behavior attitudes and values Better communication process</td>
<td>Client-oriented models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management and Staff</td>
<td>Have the knowledge about the operational delivery issues and the object of evaluation</td>
<td>New knowledge and experience about policy (programme) Implementation of evaluation recommendations in practice Better decision making process Developing professional networks</td>
<td>Goal-attainment models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluators</td>
<td>Have professional knowledge, competence and time to conduct the evaluation</td>
<td>Increasing professional knowledge and experience Developing useful recommendations</td>
<td>Usefulness of evaluation models determined by evaluation aims</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Consequently, there is no one best evaluation model which is appropriate for the learning process; they can all contribute to these processes in different ways. The choice of evaluation model should be based on certain criteria: the purpose of the evaluation, stakeholders’ interests, and the characteristics of the evaluation object. The evaluation process should be organized in the most efficient way that will assist the learning process and bring useful outcomes.

The institutionalization of the evaluation function is a primary condition for the utilization of evaluation results. On the basis of both theoretical investigation and practical experience there is no doubting the value which evaluation plays in governmental learning processes and that evaluation knowledge can contribute to administrative reform efforts. Indeed the complex decisions required today to manage the public sector can be better informed if credible information on the performance of current government activities is available and forms a routine and expert part of the decision-making process. As Arvidsson observes, “if politicians and program managers will be better informed, and in systematic way, we would all (clients, patients, customers, students, tax-payer…) be better off”. If the evaluation function is developed as a part of the government “machine” and as part
of the government process, evaluation could meet public demands for economy, efficiency and effectiveness. This is why the institutionalization of the evaluation function is a primary condition for the implementation of evaluation results.

In the context of exploring what conditions lead to a government institutionalizing evaluation, Mayne points to the important role of three main groups of preconditions: technical, organizational and political [9]. Technical preconditions include the capacity (hardware, software, and skills) for handling the new procedures and systems of evaluation. Organizational conditions comprise the need for evaluation to be systemically integrated with the functions and regulations in decision-making and control, for example, the budgetary process. And, political preconditions are whose which give evaluation its authority by recognizing the need for the support of necessary political and related authorities.

Bibliography


