Engaging citizens in evaluation

Citizens' participation is, to some extent, realised through evaluations. With increasing frequency, politicians and decision makers call upon citizens to take part in evaluations – either to evaluate *ex post* what has happened, or to evaluate *ex ante* a proposed course of action. They are called upon either as stakeholders, taxpayers, concerned citizens or victims/beneficiaries of some action that has been taken or is proposed. They are called upon with different aims in mind: letting the steam out, listening, learning, influencing, creating new options. Evaluations therefore form an increasingly important forum for citizen participation in policy and decision making within representative democracy.

In order for citizens to have a real say in this connection, there are many things to remember: the citizens chosen should be those really concerned; both representative and able persons should be urged to participate; the time and remuneration allocated must be sufficient; enough time should be set aside for informing and listening; participants should be given the opportunity to formulate criteria for evaluation; and so on. However, there are two major points that, more often than not, are forgotten:

1. Evaluations of past or proposed actions should be based on comparisons with alternative actions that may be considered serious competitors to the action evaluated.
2. Citizens should be given the opportunity to formulate these alternatives.

The role of alternatives in evaluations

Any evaluation that purports to tell something about the effects and impacts of a given action must compare that action in relation to some other state. An effect is the difference between two states, one with the action undertaken or proposed, the other without that action. The specification of that other state is thus decisive for whatever effects are measured or calculated. The evaluation as a whole hinges on it.

That other state could be "no action", but this is usually of less interest than comparison with a "second best" action, an action thought to be the best conceivable alternative. Suppose that a proposed highway is evaluated by comparing it with no action. Since there is a demand for travelling, the

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outcome of the evaluation is certain. Compare the highway with public transportation, and the outcome is less certain.

Most evaluations pay no attention to the problem of formulating alternatives and compare (at best) with no action, sometimes referred to as the "counter-factual" development.

Controlling alternatives

Since the specification of the alternative determines the outcome of the evaluation, controlling the formulation of the alternative is essential for anyone wanting to have a say in the process. This is as true for politicians as for citizens. Unless either group formulates the alternatives, evaluators, administrators and bureaucrats will do it and thereby decide the outcome.

Citizens who take part in an evaluation should therefore be given the opportunity to formulate what to their minds constitutes a preferred course of action. If there are different citizens' groups taking part, they may have different proposals for the alternative action. These should all be used as measuring rods to provide comparisons with the action undertaken or proposed.

Formulating an alternative may or may not be an easy thing. Sometimes both feasibility and costs are difficult to judge. Citizens should therefore have access to professional assistance to help them create viable alternatives.

A different role for politicians

Are citizens there to help politicians realise their pet projects? Or should politicians look upon themselves as mere midwives who are there to help citizens realise *their* projects?

Citizens' participation, if it is to be taken seriously, should aim at giving power to the people. Elected politicians may well say they represent the will of the people – but they will find it more difficult day by day to uphold that image in the face of well-educated citizens who have long since ceased to see themselves as the subjects of some sovereign. At least, that will be the case when it comes to matters of local importance: town planning, public transportation, maintenance of parks, schools, public safety, etc. On a national and international level active political leadership is still very much needed, although there is also room for active citizens' groups to take part in policy formulation. If politics is viewed as the process by which collective projects to improve living conditions for groups of people are carried out, it becomes self-evident that those groups should be in control of the process. They need help, however, and it is the role of the politician to provide that help: supplying resources – time, money, expertise – for the process, creating a forum for resolving differences, steering the groups in question through the jungle of bureaucracy, implementing the conclusions, etc. In that process, evaluations

Introduction

Recent years have seen a growing interest in the values and ethics of evaluation in the EU, especially in relation to quality management. That should not be surprising, since many values relate directly to the utility of the evaluation process. Utility, in turn, hinges mainly on resources and sound techniques of gathering information. Thus, in discussing evaluation, both technical and ethical issues need to be addressed.

Until now, evaluation ethics and values have most often been described using a given set of parameters, such as accountability or even "common sense". But these are more "valuation" than values. Today, as national and trans-national evaluation communities and associations draw up their standards, the issue of ethics figures prominently. The question is, what is assumed to be gained by setting up these standards? To whom they are addressed? There are demands for cross-cultural transferability, but ethics standards cannot cover every possible situation and context without becoming trivial. What good, then, can be achieved? Is it not better that the evaluator act as a morally responsible agent rather than an obedient actor no matter what the situation?

Ethical standards for evaluation

In some evaluation societies, the goals constituting the society are stated. Some focus on defining the contexts of, and means to achieving professional goals.

The Canadian Evaluation Society has a set of three standards that serve as its guiding ethical principles: competence, integrity and accountability. Thus, for example, "Evaluators are to act with integrity in their relationships with all stakeholders" (*www.evaluationcanada.ca*).

In the American Evaluation Association's Guiding Principles for Evaluators, utility, feasibility, propriety and accuracy are recommended as criteria for judging the quality of programme evaluation efforts. These are standards approved by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) and endorsed by the American Evaluation Association and fourteen other professional organisations (*www.eval.org*) (see Forss, this volume).

Ethical standards may be seen as sufficient guarantee for proper evaluation. The objective being to ensure that similar decisions will be

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reached by all the other evaluators. That may be the two-edged sword of ethical evaluation. Building a model that will accurately guide even one evaluator is not a problem-free task. For some evaluators, standards probably will offer some degree of guidance.

The presumption is that rationalism provides the generalising means to accomplish goals – *i.e.* sensible and wise actions are essential. At the same time, this approach lessens the scope for acting for the good of society. Can the evaluator's *role* ethically bypass the *person* of the evaluator, the person who is part of society and social good?

Evaluation standards always operate at two main, firmly integrated levels, that of the individual evaluator and of society. This means that a body of doctrines – a group of principles – cannot bypass the evaluator's human role even as they guide his/her professional role. That human factor, and its linked morality, is more than just obedient role-playing. "Standards" thus cover such a wide range of situations, contexts, individual evaluators and their motives that they can hardly be the ultimate miracle solution to ethical evaluation.

Take, for example, fairness as a general standard applied to each individual situation. If fairness is lacking – for example, because the evaluator has not had all the information needed – has a mistake been made in applying the standard? That is to say, is the evaluator wrong? If so, should that result in some kind of a value sanctioning of the evaluator? If the evaluator did their best but the procedure failed, can we say the fairness standard had been applied nonetheless? Or, if the evaluation proved fair without any conscious application of a fairness standard, do we then conclude that the general standard of fairness is not a general standard after all?

An individual as a moral agent is in his/her role one and the same (*i.e.* he/she cannot separate their humanity from their professional role). The communal rights and demands related to the human factor are present in all situations; the role cannot bypass them. Thus "standards" cannot bypass the contextual base set by the individual's membership of a community. It is right to expect, on the part of both the evaluator and the public, a communal morality that regards individuals as human beings rather than as roles. Respect for human beings helps underpin the community's morals, as well as those of individuals.

Morals cannot be decreed as laws; therefore, morals cannot be sanctioned in the same manner as laws. Moral attitude is thus, in principle, voluntary.

Unspecific ethical principles – on which the majority of the evaluation community would agree – would lead to trivial ethics. But standards raise problems precisely because, as the norms of evaluation, they need to be concrete. Can standards ever really be universalised? Can they cover every possible unique situation and unique case? It must be remembered that there

is never just the act of choice – there is also the choice of *something*. So there is a risk that evaluation ethics will become merely ethics of the act of choice, not of goals and ends.

On the other hand, an evaluation environment without standards would ultimately lead to a market-place of values, where individual evaluators are left to choose their values – and their choices could become superficial and arbitrary. In such cases evaluators may not be functioning as autonomous moral agents. If evaluators follow standards within a values market, they are jeopardising their moral agency; they may be leaving the final moral choice to others. This would limit the evaluator's own moral identity to choice of membership in a community that grants them some ethical identity…or, simply, a role. Ethics is always about individual choices, moral justifications and responsibilities, not just manifestations. The concept of objectivity is based on rationality, lack of personal involvement, universality of the self, and the assumption that the self can be divided into intelligence and aspiration. For ethics to be realised in action, one needs to be enthusiastic and committed to them.

The central question here concerns the hermeneutic perspective from which the evaluation ethic is examined, and its possible norms derived. In order for the moral to be effective, each individual must commit to it. Morality is not a behaviour regulation system in which standards are binding. Evaluation ethics is therefore faced with a new challenge: to provide theoretical frameworks through which practical evaluation problems can be solved. Standards may be used as an expedient in the process, but they do not guarantee the whole system of ethics evaluation.

Moreover, in applying standards, it is essential to appreciate the difference between goals, principles, operative rules and concrete solutions. In the ethical context standards are not commensurate; they refer to different matters that call for different scales. Ethical evaluation cannot be rated according to the overall technical skill of the evaluator.

Being an "Evaluator" is never just a role. The evaluator is always a human factor, part of wider society and societal ethics. The ethics of evaluation are not separate from the surrounding community but a part of the societal context. The evaluation process is never carried out in closed conditions; an evaluator as an individual and society as a whole are not ethical counterpoints but connected to one another.

The ethics of evaluation should be attractive rather than intimidating and enforced. Professional evaluation associations could instil morals by being transparently ethical and promoting the process of evaluation ethics – for a process is indeed involved, one that cannot be reduced to simple and pure outcomes or indications. Instead of merely having plain common standards,

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there should be different ways to process the evaluator's inner sense of public reason, the morals of society, and the moral conduct of evaluation communities.

A value framework for ethical evaluation

General surveys of evaluation ethics show that the definition process for values is not simple. They also prove that these values exist regardless of the definition process. In fact the main question is, which values can be seen to actually steer concrete evaluation practices? One way of answering that question is to use a value framework, originally drafted as a basis for ethics work in the Finnish Evaluation Society (FES).

The risk of having moral language applied to a value definition process is that it presents impersonal descriptions, when in the end moral choices are always personal acts. Theories and frameworks can nonetheless be used to outline one's moral choices. Intuition alone is never enough for moral justification.

The ethics behind a value framework do not give concrete indications of what is right and what is wrong. They only supply methods and measures for one to conclude what is right and good. Ethics lie between the levels of morality; they aim at making that area visible and understandable.

If values are seen as the mainstream of Western moral philosophy teachings, they are more than just a parcel of words or descriptions. Actually, values can be seen as ambitions or aims that are valid in practically all circumstances. It can therefore be said that a person equals the values they stand for. Interpreted this way, values are not realised as lists of words but as one's personal choices, and actions taken in accordance with those choices.

The defined values of the Finnish Evaluation Society are presented in Figure 1. The necessary point of departure for this approach is that the evaluator is a moral person. The assumption is that the evaluator's human essence and function as a moral agent in a societal context remains the same even if the circumstances change.

The framework is constructed so that the left side introduces the dimensions of an evaluator and an evaluation process – *i.e.* certain value-based rights and responsibilities. The right side introduces the other actors, the individual objects of evaluations and the surrounding community. The framework indicates that the evaluator and the community are interactive and inextricably linked; it consists of the different aggregates of an evaluation process. The values of evaluation are based on these aggregates. Therefore, the core of evaluation ethics is an assumption that the good of another and the good of oneself are of equal importance.

Table 3.1. **A framework of defined values**

Evaluator *Truth* – Freedom of research. – Truth and knowledge-based approach.	**Object of evaluation** *Justness* – Treating people with dignity, protection of an individual. – Ability to adjust to the role of those being evaluated. – Providing those evaluated with sufficient information about the use of evaluation results.
Evaluation process *Ability* – Expertise, holistic process management. – Professional capacity required by the evaluation project.	**Community** *Responsibility* – Accountability for, and implementation of, results; securing the inviolability of communal rights. – Responsibility for actions following the evaluation results.

Source: FES.

Evaluator – Truth

According to the framework, good evaluation refers not only to value-based evaluation practices but also to the way of perceiving evaluators' rights and responsibilities. An evaluator must have free access to information and freedom to seek the truth. Truth is therefore the ultimate qualifier of his or her actions.

Object of evaluation – Justness

The fair treatment of an evaluation object means taking into account their rights and treating them in a just manner. Also implied is the concept of reciprocity: equal rights, equal responsibilities, freedom and well-being are the ultimate goals of the exercise. To gain this perspective, an evaluator might try to place themselves in to the object's position, become the "victims" of evaluation so to speak, and investigate their own values and motives from that angle.

Evaluation process – Ability

The evaluator is expected to manage evaluation methods and procedures. The value behind this is ability. Some of the evaluator's responsibilities tend toward those of a researcher; there are also the responsibilities to the community that grants the evaluator permission to perform the evaluation and also forms evaluation practices. In authorising the activity, the community also sets up norms of evaluation. Therefore, ethical evaluation means more than just a proper use of evaluation methods. Discussing the values of methods, one refers to the norms within evaluation practice – in other words, to the validity of procedures. The external norms of evaluation are factors that connect the results of the process to the larger societal context. Evaluation is also always a product of co-operation and

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therefore linked to the surrounding community, at least indirectly. The premise is that integrity and fairness are achieved in the evaluation process, and that the process provides socially relevant information.

Community – Responsibility

Finally, it is about how all this is interpreted in a society that enables the evaluation practices, maintains responsibility for the results, and authorises the ensuing action – thus adopting the perspective both of an evaluator and of a client commissioning the project. Even when all aspects of a framework are of equal importance, the starting point should be the community. The collegial evaluation community validates the evaluation. It must always be remembered that the evaluator, the object, and the commissioner of an evaluation are always a part of their surrounding community, and thus *not* independent or self-sufficient.

Introduction

The present chapter offers preliminary guidelines for approaching the subject of evaluation. It has benefited greatly from guidance and input provided by the OECD Expert Group on Government Relations with Citizens and Civil Society, whose members also contributed numerous country examples in the course of 2002 and 2003. In particular, this chapter seeks to develop a framework for the evaluation of government performance in informing, consulting and engaging citizens in public policy making. The analysis sets out the key issues, elements and options for consideration when building such a framework. The aim is to provide practical guidance and offer concrete examples.

But why is evaluation such an important topic? The purpose of evaluation is to help government agencies strengthen their efforts to inform, consult and engage citizens in public policy making. The one overriding reason to evaluate is to ascertain what works in this respect, what does not work, and why.

Definitions

First of all, it is necessary to agree on definitions. Evaluation is a young discipline in the social sciences, and although it is the focus of several professional organisations, annual conferences, scientific and popular journals, university programmes and shorter training opportunities, there is actually no common definition of the subject. The closest one can arrive at is the definition adopted by the American Evaluation Association (Joint Committee on Standards, 1994), which says that:

"*Evaluation is the systematic inquiry into the worth or merit of an object.*"

This is a brief and elegant definition, and it is also the lowest common denominator of elements that researchers in the field have been able to agree upon. There are a few things to note about it.

- *First, the definition does not specify that evaluations have to be independent* – that is, undertaken by independent, unbiased experts. Evaluations can also be internal, and they can build on stakeholder participation.
- *Second, an evaluation is not defined by its purpose.* Whether undertaken for monitoring and control, learning, decision making or any other purpose, the study can still be called an evaluation.

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- *Third, the definition does not specify what the object is.* An evaluation can assess a project, a programme, an organisation, a policy or even a discrete object (such as an information toolbox or a Web site).
- *Fourth, the definition does not specify what constitutes worth or merit.* This could be goal achievement, efficiency, effectiveness, relevance, beauty, durability, survival capacity, or any other quality or combination of qualities.
- *Fifth, the definition does not say anything about how the evaluation is disseminated* – whether it should be formally presented, open to the public, or even presented in writing. Presumably, an evaluation process could end in a seminar, and it does not necessarily have to lead to a written final report.

Consequently, evaluation in practice varies; different organisations specify more precisely what evaluation is in their context. It is, for example, common to state that evaluations have to be undertaken by independent experts. The definition cited above is firm in two respects. First, evaluation has to be an assessment of worth or merit. This distinguishes it from research (pure and applied), which does not necessarily have to arrive at a value assessment. Second, evaluation has to be a systematic process of inquiry – it has to build on the methods of social science research, on a systematic collection and analysis of data.

Evaluations within the field of information, consultation and participation thus have to assess the worth and merit of those processes. The people who commission and actually do the evaluations will thus have to define what constitutes a good process – for example, in terms of number of participants, the quality and effects of participation. Furthermore, the assessment has to be systematic; that is, when the evaluation team arrives at conclusions about whether the processes were "of worth and merit", the conclusions should be based on empirical data and a logical process.

The text that follows is based on this understanding of what an evaluation is – and what it is not. But the reader should be aware that there are other definitions and other approaches (see annex for further information on the subject). The definition used here has several advantages: it is the one most commonly accepted by all professional associations, it is clear and simple, and it can be applied flexibly. There are many other, more specific approaches, but these fall within the broad family of activities under this definition.

The chapter is organised in three main sections. The first deals with how an evaluation is set up and its possible focus and purposes. These are basic parameters that influence how the process is organised; it is very important to be clear about the focus of the evaluation. It is obvious that evaluators will go about the practical task differently if they are assessing citizens' participation in a legislative process, for example, than if the object of the evaluation is an information campaign.

The second section addresses the process of the evaluation. Those who fund an evaluation have a right to expect that the process will be sound. There is a discussion of what constitutes a good evaluation, followed by a brief survey of methods and how these may be applied to specific evaluation purposes and objects. One of the most important design features concerns the level of public participation. The question is not whether to have public participation but how it can be organised and at which stages of the process it will be useful to invite a wider participation of stakeholders.

The third section treats the final stages of the evaluation process – putting the findings to use. There is much to say on this subject, an area as methodologically significant as any other though it deals with the methods of communication rather than methods of scientific inquiry. Finally there is an annex, which provides sources of information on evaluation.

The organisation of this paper into three sections underscores the fact that the preparation, conducting and conclusion of an evaluation process are equally important. It is not uncommon that the conducting of the evaluation receives the most attention, but if we neglect to think clearly about the starting point, and if we fail to conclude the process well, it will have been wasted effort. To begin with a provocative statement: when allocating resources to an evaluation process (the time and money of all involved), a good rule of the thumb would be to spend 30% on preparation, 40% on implementation, and 30% on communication to make sure that the findings are used.

Preparing for the evaluation

What is the purpose of the evaluation?

It is commonly said that evaluations are undertaken for three specific purposes: 1) audit, 2) management, and 3) learning. Evaluations are expected to verify whether results are delivered in line with objectives; at the same time they are meant to improve performance (Stokke, 1991). It is through evaluations that one can document good practice and learn from experience (Cracknell, 2000). Quite apart from the inherent value of evaluation as a management information system, it is impossible to conceive of a "modern" organisation that spends public money not having an evaluation system. Evaluation systems establish legitimacy. Evaluators do, however, sometimes come up with embarrassing information. There is no doubt that evaluation systems can create trouble.

While evaluation reports can be uncomfortable, it is through diversity of opinion and argument that learning occurs (Majone, 1989). Learning means changing ideas and getting new information. It means that old and customary ways of thinking are challenged. This cannot always be a smooth process

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(Weick and Westley, 1996). There is an inherent tension in evaluation: in order to pave the way to decisions, evaluators need to speak the same language as the people in those organisations. Evaluation reports can indeed challenge their audiences, but if their messages deviate from views commonly held, they will be deemed irrelevant.

Is any one purpose more common than others with respect to informing, consulting and involving citizens? The answer, really, is no – it is just as relevant to evaluate for purposes of monitoring and control as for learning or obtaining decision support. However, in the near future it is likely that evaluations will be undertaken for purposes of learning, as the field itself is rather new and there is much to learn from the experiments currently under way in different countries. That will influence a number of design issues, as for example who does the evaluation, when and how.

The need for an audit?

Most evaluations are undertaken because there is a wish to establish control, to audit the subject of the evaluation. In the public sphere, there is obviously a need to find out whether public funds have been put to good use. Civil servants need to show managers, board members and political leaders – not to mention the media and the public at large – whether the funds entrusted to them serve their intended purposes. To point to some examples: national school boards evaluate the performance of schools to ensure that they follow the national curriculum; regional development authorities need to convince their constituencies that targets of growth, employment, migration, etc. are met. The emphasis in these and many similar examples lies in auditing – were objectives met, have funds been wisely spent, were programmes efficient and effective?

Evaluations in the private sector are equally if not more concerned with auditing. Those of marketing campaigns show whether the messages in media have the desired effect. Most companies carefully evaluate human resources and undertake specific evaluations of training and development programmes. Banks evaluate credit performance, and venture capital firms evaluate the business prospects of their clients. Evaluation for audit purposes is as pervasive in the private sector as in the public field.

When the primary purpose of an evaluation is to audit, it is more common to subcontract it to independent experts. The fact that the view is one from the outside would presumably guarantee that it is unbiased, and hence more likely to establish the true state of affairs. Similarly, it is common that audit evaluations are conducted with little or no participation from other stakeholders. The methods used in such evaluations are often quantitative

and usually rely on studies of documents and analysis of costs, while surveys and interviews are rarely used as the main source of empirical data.

To support decisions?

There is not always a clear dividing line between the different evaluation purposes. An evaluation initiated because of an auditing need may lead to decisions based on what is found in the process. But there is still a practical difference. When evaluations are performed for audit purposes, they are usually ordered from above or even from the outside. These evaluations may not be that concerned with establishing facts about goal achievement, the use of funds or the like. Instead their primary emphasis is often to find out what went wrong or what worked, and why. The *process* becomes more important, because the knowledge of process issues is what will be used in future decisions.

If an evaluation of an information campaign is established to gain input into how the next campaign will be undertaken, the evaluators would be more interested in finding out how target audiences were identified, whether the messages were understood and appreciated, and whether the audiences have suggestions on how the campaign could be improved. If the focus is on auditing, the questions would concern the use of funds, measures of efficiency, etc.

An evaluation that is meant to support decisions often needs to be undertaken in close contact with the decision makers. They must be involved in establishing the terms of reference, and they may need to be briefed about the progress of the evaluation when it is under way. An external evaluation team can be contracted, but more for the sake of convenience and comparative advantage than for the legitimacy of the findings.

To document experiences?

In recent years, evaluation has increasingly come to be seen as an instrument of learning. In such instances its purpose is to document experiences, make sense of them, and store the information and analysis in reports, databases and the like. The knowledge thus accumulated could then be disseminated to provide others with a more general intellectual understanding – as opposed to the concrete recommendations needed for a specific decision-making situation.

Studies of evaluations have often found that they are not much used, but these findings have in fact given rise to new types of use. Conceptual use is one such idea: the lessons learned in an evaluation may come to surface in a very different context many years later. An agency that designs a referendum

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Box 4.1. **Sweden – Evaluating a pilot project to initiate dialogue and citizens' charters**

In January 2001 the Swedish Government commissioned a number of agencies dealing with citizens and private companies to participate in a pilot project involving service charters and dialogue, as part of a government initiative called "Public Administration in the Service of Democracy – an Action Programme". The objective was to adapt the service of the agencies more closely to citizen needs and to clarify what citizens and private companies can expect from the agencies. An improved quality of public services and developed mechanisms of participation would help to generate public trust in democracy and democratic institutions.

About 21 public agencies were invited to take part in the project. Among them were such large organisations as the national tax board, the police, the social security board, the migration board and regional authorities. Project activities were co-ordinated by the Swedish Agency for Public Management (SAPM) and the National Council for Quality and Development (NCQD). The agencies taking part in the project were expected to:

- Develop and publish a Citizens Charter – a service declaration that gives clear, relevant and binding information about the range of services and level of service.
- Conduct a continuous and systematic service dialogue with citizens and businesses. Establish internal processes for dealing with complaints and the external feedback of customer surveys and citizen consultations. Use modern ICT for these purposes.
- Integrate the views of the citizens and businesses in developing their own activities.

The pilot project lasted two years. The agencies taking part were requested to evaluate their own experience and report back to the government by the end of 2001, and then to conclude with a final evaluation in 2003. From the beginning it was specified that the project as a whole should be evaluated at the end of the trial period, which would lead to recommendations as to whether service dialogue and charters should be introduced throughout the public administration.

The evaluation was expected to provide the government with the basis for deciding whether the pilot project should be continued and extended – a decision that is clearly of great significance to the entire public sector. The 21 agencies decided to do a participatory evaluation, as this was felt to generate the best learning and also provide decision support in the course of the pilot project. A working group was established to coordinate data collection and to draw conclusions of an evaluative nature. The working group

Box 4.1. **Sweden – Evaluating a pilot project to initiate dialogue and citizens' charters** *(cont.)*

regularly reported to the whole group of agency in plenary sessions. The full report was published in 2003 by Statskontoret (Swedish Agency for Public Management) but is only available in Swedish. The evaluation concluded that service charters were welcome by the public, and by many in the organisations, but had to be connected to planning and management. The evaluation contains many detailed operational lessons on how to introduce service charters and improve service dialogue.

in one country may take note of lessons learned from an evaluation in a different country – an impact not initially intended but direct nonetheless.

When learning is the primary purpose of evaluation, there are two things in particular to keep in mind. The first is that those who learn most in the process of evaluation are those who actually do the job – who interview, process surveys, etc. Therefore, efforts should be made to ensure that those who are meant to learn also get involved in the process. Secondly, the ways that results are managed and disseminated are of extreme importance. What media are to be used? How is the information to be stored? How can it be retrieved? – and so on.

To discover unexpected effects?

Interventions in social processes always have unexpected effects – positive as well as negative. Sometimes these are more interesting than ascertaining whether targets were met or analysing how a project was implemented. But it is often difficult to commission an evaluation to detect unexpected effects, precisely because they are unknown at the time of commissioning. Conventional evaluations seldom discover either positive or negative unintended consequences – and when they do, such effects are usually underestimated.

Michael Scriven (1982) has long been a proponent of goal-free evaluation. In the pure form of this type of evaluation, the evaluator is not told the purpose of the programme; the mission is to find out what the programme actually does, what it has achieved, without being cued as to what it is trying to do. Thus unintended effects will show up just as clearly as accomplishments. If there are reasons to believe that a programme is producing unintended effects that are substantial and of some interest (as is often the case in the realm of government-citizen connections), it may be worth the risk to conduct goal-free evaluations, at least occasionally and as methodological experiments.

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Box 4.2. **Norway – New forms of civic participation in government administration**

Norway's Ministry of Labour and Government Administration has commissioned an exploratory evaluation of new forms of civic participation. The study focuses on two main areas: 1) participation in political processes that take place outside the parliamentary channel, and 2) participation characterised by the presence of voluntary organisations and citizens and their representatives. The study shows that Norwegian ministries generally do make use of many new forms of participation. Seventeen different initiatives in the period 1997-2001 came in four main varieties:

1. Surveys.
2. Contact meetings and conferences.
3. Committees, panels and boards for non-specialist and voluntary organisations.
4. Electronic participation.

Contact meetings, conferences and consultative panels made up about two-thirds of all measures. The ministry of health and social affairs has acquired the most wide-ranging experience and uses different forms and measures, while the ministries of justice and foreign affairs also reported more activities than the other ministries.

Compared with the other forms, the level of electronic participation was not very high. The ministry of finance has developed a Web site and created its own interactive portals. The ministry of foreign affairs provides electronic information aimed at the press and organisations; two-way communication is currently being developed. The data indicate that participation efforts aim at having (primarily) ordinary people and voluntary organisations exercise influence over the implementation of political decisions.

The exploratory study raises many new questions, the most interesting of which is whether these new forms function in compliance with the original intentions. Without real influence, the participatory measures could end up as mere symbols. On the other hand, one could examine the way in which participants react to proximity to government, or the way the new forms work in relation to ordinary channels of influence. Do they represent an unproblematic complement or do they challenge – even threaten – ideals central to traditional notions of democratic governance?

Writing terms of reference

The concrete starting point of an evaluation is to write terms of reference. This is a fine art, and there are many different approaches to the subject. Good

terms of reference are not overly burdensome or detailed – they give the evaluator a relatively free hand to pursue the subject matter. The purpose of the evaluation must be clear and the evaluation team must be set a precise task. It is a fine balance between specifying too many details and leaving too much to the discretion of the evaluator.

Terms of reference may consist of some three to four pages of text. If they are longer, it is likely they are too detailed, and if shorter they may not be sufficiently clear. A major portion of the terms should go into providing an understanding of background and context, so that the evaluator can get an overall picture of the programme. The most important part specifies the purpose of the evaluation, and formulating the questions that the evaluator has to answer.

Terms of reference do not usually specify methods, as that is considered the choice of the evaluators. But if those commissioning an evaluation have specific requirements with regard to the process – for example, whether it should be a participatory evaluation – then this must be noted. Finally, the terms of reference should specify practicalities such as deadlines, treatment of draft reports, and forms of publication. The budget usually appears as an annex.

Some organisations facilitate evaluations by providing standardised terms of reference. This has drawbacks as well as advantages. It makes life easier for the person in charge of commissioning the evaluation, but may come at the cost of not thinking through the purpose of the exercise. In the long run, well-meant assistance may produce evaluations that are mediocre, trying to do too much and without focus or specific purpose.

It is usually expedient to have a consultation process around the terms of reference, first among the stakeholders directly involved. It is also common to have a dialogue with the evaluators on the terms, not least to ensure that the task is properly understood by all partners.

What is the object of evaluation?

Evaluation is a concept with such general applicability that it is easy to forget that in practice it must be tailor-made to specific situations. Evaluating, for example, a process of participation in policy making is an entirely different task from evaluating a public information campaign. Even if the purpose of the evaluation itself is the same (*e.g.* to learn from the experience), the resources needed and methodological approaches taken will differ. This section underscores the need to consider the object of evaluation. It builds on the definitions set out in the OECD (2001a) publication *Citizens as Partners*.

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