

Institutionalization and Use of Evaluations in the Public Sector in Nepal

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Teertha Raj Dhakal

National Planning Commission Secretariat, Government of Nepal

Background: Institutionalization of evidenced-based policy-making, planning and decision making practices is the pre-condition for timely demand and use of evaluations in the government. Moreover, a number of factors act as enabling environment for proper use of evaluation recommendations in the national policy making and planning processes. Reviewing various evaluation reports and periodic plan documents of Nepal, this article discusses and analyzes factors that determine uses of evaluations.

Purpose: This paper aims to review the institutionalization process and use of evaluation evidences in the planning processes in Nepal.

Setting: NA

Intervention: NA

Research Design: Triangulation of document review and Key Informant Interview (KII) was done.

Data Collection and Analysis: This study reviews evaluation reports of 29 projects or programs of various sectors that conducted engaging independent evaluations during 1995-2012 and medium-term plan documents and some policies. Information generated from the Key Informant Interviews (KII) was used to triangulate the information generated from the documentary review.

Findings: It was found that proper documentation and rigorous analysis is important to promote the use of evaluations. The use of evaluations heavily depends on the independence of the evaluation process itself and quality of reports. Key findings also include: commitment of policy makers and other important actors is important for the demand and use of evaluation; the use of evaluations also depends on the clarity of objectives; and stakeholder participation is important to use evaluations and enhance accountability.

Keywords: *evaluation; use; performance management; Nepal*

Overview

Quality evaluations of development interventions aim to provide important evidence to improve future planning and programming processes and promote accountability towards the value for money especially in achieving anticipated results. For this, one of the pre-conditions is the institutionalization of the culture of using evidence

generated from monitoring and evaluation (M&E) in decision making processes. It is because if the recommendations are not used to inform policy or planning processes it has no meanings how independently the evaluations were conducted and how credible the recommendations were. A well-designed M&E plan can timely feed-in user-friendly evidence to policy makers, make evaluation processes systematic and ultimately promote the use of evaluation information. In order to promote the use of evaluation, it is equally

important to review or evaluate the evaluation processes itself and acquire information on various aspects that contribute or hinder the use of information by policy or decision makers. Taking these things into consideration, the paper aims to review the institutionalization process and use of evaluation evidence in the planning and programming processes of the Government of Nepal (GON). For this, this study reviews evaluation reports of 29 projects or programs of various sectors (available at www.npc.gov.np) commissioned by the National Planning Commission (NPC), Government of Nepal (GON) engaging third parties during 1995-2012.

Evaluation Practices in Nepal

The GON adopted a practice of reviewing and assessing progress of planned interventions along with the introduction of the first periodic development plan in 1956. However, significant efforts appear as late as in the 1990s when the Eighth Plan (1992-1997) identified monitoring and evaluation (M&E) as one of its ten priorities. Similarly, starting from 2002, Nepal has been making efforts to institutionalize Managing for Development Results (MfDR) approaches in its planning processes designing results frameworks and standardizing results indicators both at the sectoral and project levels. During the period, various institutional arrangements and procedural reforms were advanced to institutionalize M&E systems and efforts were also made to institutionalize evaluations of development interventions.

In Nepal, monitoring and evaluation has been integrated into the national development plans though there is no separate evaluation policy. Accordingly, there is no separate law or act that explicitly reflects the requirement to monitor and evaluate development programs and projects at the central level. However, some legal documents have provisions of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) including the Health Service Act 1997, the Education Rules 2004 and the Forest Regulations 1995. Similarly, M&E is well reflected in the Local Self-Governance Act of 1999 which has provisions for evaluating all projects at Village Development Committee (VDC), municipality and district levels.

As an effort to institutionalize results based M&E processes, especially in the public sector of Nepal, the NPC has recently brought out the National M&E Guidelines, 2013 which emphasizes the need for independent evaluation of policies, programs and projects (NPC, 2013a). It aims to serve as a framework to systematically commission

and conduct quality independent evaluations, includes concepts and methods of evaluation and indicators for different levels. The current Thirteenth Plan (2013-2016) emphasizes results-oriented M&E and the use of recommendations for policy decisions. It strongly encourages the capacity strengthening of human resources involved in evaluation (NPC, 2013b). However, these policies and plans mostly capture the executive branch of the government and are not adequate enough to streamline the role of non-government stakeholders including the networking of evaluators.

As an apex planning, monitoring and evaluation agency, the NPC facilitates evaluations engaging third parties hired through competitive bidding processes. Each year, some programs or projects are selected for evaluation using specific criteria from among the candidature projects received from the line ministries. Steering committees or task-forces formed for each evaluation to facilitate the processes right from the beginning approve the TOR, select the evaluators, facilitate evaluation processes and maintain quality of evaluations and reports. Though the policy documents have not clearly charted out the processes of commissioning the evaluations, the recent guidelines have provisions to institutionalize it as a means of correcting the development planning process in the country.

Despite the policy provisions and efforts to institutionalize the M&E system, practically, more focus has been seen on a narrow cohort of monitoring of inputs and outputs. Though evaluations of limited projects or programs were done they were ad hoc and were not systematically guided by a well-designed M&E plan. In addition, the evaluation reports were not well disseminated and documented limiting their uses by the policy makers. More importantly, low level of demand for and use of M&E information at the political level have hampered the institutionalization and sustainability of the M&E systems in the country (Sharma & Dhakal, 2008, p. 28).

Literature Review

Scholars have generated new knowledge and developed various theoretical approaches to strengthen evaluation science. Key theories of evaluations include; theory-driven evaluation (Chen & Rossi, 1990), empowerment evaluation (Fetterman et al, 1996) and utilization focused evaluation (Patton, 2008). Whatever be the theory, the value for money invested in evaluations can be high only if the evidence generated from

evaluations is properly used. Such evidence can either be used to correct the future learning from the past or make the concerned accountable on the results achieved from the money spent in programs or projects. As such, a sound M&E system is a prerequisite for informing policy and decision making, and promoting accountability (Mackey, 2007).

The use of evidence generated from evaluations depends on several things. As per Cracknell (2005), feedback of evaluations can be used at the project, program, institutional, sectoral and policy or strategy levels. In addition, evaluations can be used in trainings and also by beneficiaries or anyone interested outside the agency. However, as per Weiss (1999), policymakers rarely base new policies directly on evaluation results. Weiss gives two main reasons behind the low use of such evidences in policy making processes; (a) due to the competing pressures of interests, ideologies, other information and institutional constraints, and (b) because many policies take shape over time through the actions of many officials in many offices, each of which does its job without conscious reflection (Weiss, 1999).

An independent evaluation system that ensures the quality of the report is equally important for the effective use of evaluations. The OECD DAC (2002) defines independence as an evaluation carried out by entities and persons free of control of those responsible for the design and implementation of the development interventions. Additionally, it has certain characteristics, specifically, that it is "free from political influence and organizational pressure...and is characterized by full autonomy in carrying out investigations and reporting findings" (OECD, 2002). Similarly, independence aims to ensure objective, impartial, uncompromised and unbiased findings in order to make evaluations valuable and credible (Picciotto, 2013).

However, there is a need to strike a balance between independency and the internal relevance of evaluations. Gaarder and Briceno (2010) want "a system that is independent in order to achieve external credibility and social legitimacy, but not so independent that it loses its internal relevance" (p. 19). Moreover, management responses on evaluation reports provide a useful basis to ensure the effective use of evaluations by addressing recommendations along with identifying responsibility and timing of implementation. Bamberger and Segone (2011) argue that management responses are a practical means to enhance the use of the evaluations to improve action. Bamberger and Segone also argue for

proper dissemination of the report, identifying both direct and indirect users of the evaluation to ensure effective utilization of the evaluation findings.

Methodology

This paper aims to briefly review the use of evidence generated from the evaluation of programs and projects within the executive branch of the government in Nepal. Data for the paper came from the evaluation reports, plan documents, progress reports and other published and unpublished documents. Review of documents including the evaluation reports of altogether 29 programs/projects, five medium-term plan documents and some policies were done to assess the use of the evaluations in the country. In addition, in order to triangulate data the writer conducted Key Informant Interviews (KII) with nine individuals—three from the NPC, two from the Ministry of Finance and four relevant officials from the line ministries directly relevant with development activities – in order to generate information on the use of evaluation findings. Further, the writer's long engagement and experiences in designing M&E frameworks, facilitating evaluation studies and engaging in formulating the periodic plans and projects as a personnel of the NPC have been extensively used in developing this paper.

Findings of the Review of the Use of Evaluations

The evaluation studies so far done in the public sector of Nepal are very low in number and even in cases where such studies are done they are not guided by clear evaluation policies. In addition, in the absence of time-bound M&E plans they are not considered as a routine process. During the period from 1996 to 2012, NPC has conducted evaluations of 29 policies, programs or projects. More than 50 percent (16) of those evaluations were from agriculture sector including irrigation and land reform sub-sectors. It is noted that from the irrigation sector alone 9 evaluations were done. In addition, the sectoral disaggregation also shows that eight evaluations (28%) were from social sector, three (10%) from infrastructure and two (7%) from the economic sectors. Additionally, most of the evaluations done by the NPC were of development projects (66%) followed by programs (24%), and policy evaluations (10%). It also clearly reveals that the share of policy evaluations (10%)

during the period was very low. The scenario tells us that the planners and policy makers want to learn more about projects and programs compared to policies. It is also not clear why more than fifty percent of the evaluated projects or programs were from the agriculture sector.

The review also indicates that evaluations in the NPC have not been institutionalized as a regular phenomenon since it has not been consistently done during the period. Thirteen evaluations were completed from 1996 to 2000, while 12 were completed between 2001 and 2005 from the NPC, the apex agency for coordinating evaluations; however, not a single evaluation was done between 2006 and 2010.

There are several other findings which provide enough evidence to question the quality of evaluations and their uses in making decision-making processes evidence-based. Firstly, out of the 29 evaluations, only 60 percentages had the baseline data whereas 40 percent used a recall method to create figures to compare with the current status and come up with the achievements. Secondly, the evaluation reports mostly focused on the processes of implementation, efficiency in functioning, outputs delivered and the analysis of cost effectiveness of the interventions rather than the upper hierarchies of the result chain especially the outcomes and impacts. The explanation can be that the evaluators might have not found enough evidence to measure the outcomes or impacts in the absence of clearly defined results chain and indicators. Thirdly, methodologically, all studies reviewed in this paper were mostly quantitative in nature, though attempts were made to use some qualitative tools. In most of the studies, only methodologically weak before-after comparisons were made. However, proper triangulations have not been done on the tools both in the design of instruments and integrating the data in the analysis stage.

Fourthly, the evaluations have collected rich sources of data but the analyses of some evaluations have been so weak that the recommendations can also be seen to question their overall quality. Fifthly, the NPC has established practices to disseminate evaluation findings inviting a broad range of stakeholders including policy makers from the line ministries and relevant partners in addition to the uploading of the reports in the website. However, systematic practices have not been institutionalized to invite civil society members and representatives from local bodies to such dissemination events. Dissemination of evaluation reports to these important stakeholders can create a conducive environment to promote use of evaluations since

they can exert pressure on policy makers if they receive the information and evidence properly. Finally, it was found that none of the offices prepared management response plans to effectively plan and implement the recommendations.

In Nepal, recommendations derived from evaluations are not mandatory to use in the policy making processes as there is no legal requirement to do so. Despite this, it was found that the evaluation results have been used instrumentally in formulating or refining policies and making decisions whether to continue, upscale or modify projects and their implementation modalities. Among the key policies introduced based on the recommendations of evaluation include the Build Operate Own and Transfer (BOOT) policy to promote public private partnership and a micro-finance policy as a measure to increase access of the poor in resources to improve their livelihood situations. Policy measures introduced to expand agriculture extension services in the hinterland of strategic highways and integrated conservation and management of watershed with basin approach ensuring public participation was introduced as per the recommendations. Moreover, in order to promote gender equity and equality mainstreaming gender aspects in each development sector, gender-based budgeting was introduced with clear gender-budget codes. The Road Maintenance Board was created to focus efforts on maintaining roads and make them sustainable based on evaluation recommendations and the Department of Irrigation restructured to improve its functioning to effectively achieve results. Further, the safe motherhood plan, multi-sector nutrition plan, roads maintenance plan and social protection framework were developed to promote coordinated efforts in the implementation of such cross-cutting themes.

In addition, evaluation results have been used in the discussions and decisions of annual programs and budgeting projects. Similarly, the results of the on-going evaluation of projects have been used in their amendment also in requesting more funds during the fiscal year. Line ministries have also used evaluation results as evidences when they have to respond to concerns that come up in the legislature in the debates of budget allocation to sectors or projects. Further, evaluation of the projects are also documented and used to review and evaluate the medium-term plans and also relevant policies.

In contrast to the above, positive aspects in the use of evaluations in various purposes, it was also found that most of the recommendations including those that repeatedly appear in evaluations have

not been implemented. These include correcting the practices of frequent transfer of key project staffs, introduce implementation plans in projects, refine the inconsistencies between Local Self-Governance Act and other sectoral Acts and policies, provide technical skills to beneficiaries before transferring the ownership of local level projects in order to promote their sustainability, mandatory provisions for built-in M&E mechanisms and introduce participatory monitoring and evaluation in projects. In addition, key problem factors in project managements well documented and recommended in various evaluation studies, but not so far addressed effectively, include a low level of managerial capacity, procurement problems, late appointment of consultants and contractors, retention issues of key staff in projects and inadequate delegation of powers and responsibilities. Even more, none of the reports are used so far to ensure accountability of those who were engaged in the implementation processes even in cases where the projects were not implemented well or have not been operating in a way to realize the theory of change initially developed.

There are some explanations behind the low use of evaluation recommendations in planning and decision making processes. Firstly, evidences indicated that evaluations were not owned and used when the NPC commissioned them without proper consultation and engagement of line agencies who are supposed to implement the recommendations. Secondly, some recommendations of evaluations were generic or can only be implemented in the long-run sometimes only in the successive medium-term plans. It was found that policy recommendations outlined in the evaluations were mostly addressed in successive period plans so that in the short-run one can see very low uses. Thirdly, some of the evaluations were done before the full development of the program or project without having anticipated results delivered. In such cases, the evaluations were not used well since they were not able to recommend convincing measures to influence the policy decisions regarding the projects. Fourthly, the quality of evaluations and its recommendations have been considered as an important factor behind the effective use of the reports. The review found that a majority of evaluations though methodologically sound and did capture lots of facts; cases were observed where the recommendations were not based on rigorous analysis consequently affecting their quality and uses. When asked about the quality concerns of the reports with the concerned policy maker in the NPC he responded,

It is the unhealthy competition among the evaluators that they bid very low amount to get the assignment since the procurement act provisions to hire among those who quote lowest from among the technically thorough but lower rated proposals.

Moreover, about the low quality evaluations a policy maker in a line ministry commented "it is due to low capacities of both the parties who facilitate or conduct evaluations". This narrative is important in the sense that capacities both commissioning and conducting evaluation is important to improve quality and ultimately use of evaluation findings.

Though efforts are made to institutionalize the practice of evaluations of public sector projects it has not been systematic nor conducted with a clear definition of purpose. This means the designers were not clear whether the evaluations are for lessons learning or ensuring accountability or to serve both of these purposes. In addition, the policy makers in upper echelons are not always clear about the value for money allocated to conduct impact evaluations. A high level M&E official in a line ministry clearly said,

Time and often questions come from the policy makers about the benefits of investing resources for evaluations arguing that issues in project implementation are visible in the surface so that there is no need to pour resources in studies.

The review findings of the policy papers and the KIIs clearly tell that the use of evaluation recommendations by the policy makers as feedback is not encouraging in Nepal. Even if some of the recommendations are implemented they are used in learning lessons but not in ensuring accountability due to the lack of comprehensive performance management system in the government.

Discussion and Analysis

Some key findings of the above review include: in the absence of clearly defined evaluation policy, norms, standards and plans evaluations have not been systematic and methodologies and evaluation approach were not robust so that the overall quality of evaluations was questionable. Moreover, the use of evidence in regular feedback and informing policy processes has not been effective and a long way to go to institutionalize the culture of evaluation and its uses. According to Malhotra (1991) M&E was used as a 'routine chore' and a

post mortem activity rather than as a regular and effective management tool in the country. Moreover, line agencies took M&E as formality to be done for the NPC and MOF not for their own uses. The discussion and analysis based on these important findings is organized in the following sub-headings.

Evaluation policy is the starting point

In order to institutionalize the culture of systematic evaluations one crucial factor is clearly articulated evaluation policy. The policy needs to include evaluation norms, standards, regulations and plans so that it can guide both the commissioners and evaluators to systematically and independently conduct evaluations maintaining acceptable standards. In addition, an overall development framework also based on the policy assist the senior policy makers develop a culture of an evidence-based policy practices guiding how and when knowledge generated from evaluations can be properly used.

Proper documentation and rigorous analysis promote use of evaluations

An informed policy or decision process can be effective in situations where a system of feedback-loops in learning institutionalized and user-friendly evidences is easily and timely available to all concerned. It is equally important to have consolidated policy briefs in line with the evaluations to be taken to feedback mechanisms in learning. Proper documentation and rigorous analysis of the evaluation evidences created by various actors provide such information to policy makers. This can be possible only if evaluations done by every actor including development partners are readily accessible to policy makers, for which proper documentation of the information is utmost essential.

Commitment to use of evaluations

Evaluations can provide reliable and comprehensive bases of evidence to support the improvement of policies and programs, expenditure management and important decision making processes. The users of the evaluations range from the national level policy makers in the planning agency, financing agency, line agencies, programs or project managers as well as sub-national level actors. Commitment to use evaluations among these actors especially the

policy makers at the higher levels naturally affects the demand and use of evaluations in the public systems. However, though commitment of the policy makers promotes the use of evidences, it is equally important to know that they have different sources of evidences in addition to evaluations to take as feedback so that it is not always right to expect one to one relations between each recommendation with every relevant policy statement.

Quality of reports

The use of evaluations heavily depends on quality of the reports. Quality concerns can come on the theory of change of the intervention, methodologies used and on the analysis of the data generated. Despite this, in some of the evaluations discussed in this paper, the evaluators did neither find the theory of change of the programs/projects nor the indicators already defined to evaluate results. In such cases, the evaluators were not clear on the program or project theory of change especially impacts or outcomes, rather focused only on the outputs delivered. In such cases institutionalization of results-based management approaches can act as a useful measure to ensure quality throughout the implementation process from planning for results to improved monitoring measures that lead to better data to support higher quality evaluations.

Clarity of objectives

For quality evaluations and quality reports clarity of objectives of an evaluation is extremely important. It is because without such clarity it is not easy to frame specific evaluation questions to provide evidence in areas where the policy makers are interested. The commissioners and evaluators need to keep in mind that the users of evaluations are policy makers mostly politicians who do not have detailed technical knowledge of evaluations. Due to this, though demand of evaluations is done by politicians and policy makers, the evaluators need to try combining both technical and policy level factors so as the users are comfortable to interpret the findings of evaluation and implements them effectively.

Independence and credibility of evaluations

In addition to quality, use of evaluations also depends on the independence and credibility of the process. Independence helps reduce biases and increase credibility of evaluations that ultimately

promote the implementation of evaluation recommendations. In order to maintain independence, mechanisms need to be established to ensure that evaluators can perform evaluations free from pressure from program designers and implementers. The funding source is one of the factors that can intervene such independence in evaluations. One such measure to avoid pressures to evaluators from financiers could be the establishment of a trust fund to be used for evaluations demanded by various actors.

Identification of possible users and uses

The extent of the use of evaluations also depends on the clarity of recommendations addressed to the responsible agencies for implementation. The action plan to implement both strategic and operational recommendations along with timing and tentative resources need to implement them have important meanings in its effective uses. Nepal's experience shows that the users of the evaluation reports were neither identified nor involved right from the conceptualization and design phase to its dissemination which is one of the reasons behind its minimal uses. Unless and until the agencies who facilitate evaluations do not have pre-determined ideas about the use of the evaluation or the decisions for which the evaluation provides evidences, the report would not be used effectively. This means identification of possible uses and potential users is extremely important.

Stakeholder participation

Stakeholder participation is important in the effective use of evaluations especially to enhance accountability of fund users' downwards to people. A sound evaluation policy as such should aim at involving a wide range of stakeholders in all stages of the evaluation process. Nepal's case revealed that the stakeholders mostly from public agencies and at the national level have been engaged in the dissemination but not in earlier stages of the evaluation process. This issue of not capturing all the stakeholders including those at the grass-roots level has weakened the effective uses of evaluations especially in promoting downward accountability. This is in line with Patton's theory (2008) which justifies the importance of stakeholder participation in the evaluation process right from the beginning to the end to ensure effective utilization of evaluation findings.

Evaluation as a part of annual performance management cycle

In order to use evaluations to promote accountability there is a need to develop a system that takes evaluation as an integral part of the annual performance management cycle of the government. For this, enabling environment of using the evaluation evidence to ensure accountability needs to be institutionalized. Such an environment includes oversight function of parliamentary committees and demand of transparency and accountability of decision makers on the value for money from the civil society and general public. Such enabling environment is weakened in Nepal due to the political transition in the country since the last decade and also due to the lack of efforts to include the oversight agencies and civil societies in the overall capacity building programs for strengthening evaluation practices in the country.

Lessons Learned and Conclusion

Based on the review of Nepalese experiences the following lessons can be drawn. Firstly, integrated evaluation policy framework that makes mandatory provisions to institutionalize evaluation as a core and continued function in the public agencies is crucial to improve the use of evaluations. Secondly, sectoral result frameworks with clear baselines and defined theory of changes of program interventions are urgent for quality outcome or impact evaluations. Thirdly, well designed mixed methodology using a range of techniques of quantitative and qualitative nature is important to improve the quality of evaluations and consequently their uses. Fourthly, both for effective facilitation and conduction of evaluations there is a need to strengthen capacities of the government personnel who facilitate evaluations and local evaluators who conduct evaluations. In addition, more orientation and advocacy is needed at higher echelons to demand and use evaluations. Fifthly, dissemination of evaluation findings and preparing management responses are important pre-conditions to improve the usability of the reports. Finally, usability of evaluations heavily depend upon the quality of the recommendations which itself rely on the independency of evaluation studies.

It can be concluded that reform to effectively institutionalize and promote the use of evaluations need to be implemented as a part of overall performance management and accountability

reform rather than on a piecemeal basis. Moreover, the uses of evaluations increase if the evaluation system is designed as a regular and integrated feature of the development planning process aiming to correct the entire planning cycle. National planning agency such as NPC in Nepal can play a vital role in promoting the use of evaluations by proper disseminating evaluation objectives and requirements at various levels. Promotion of an evaluation culture at various levels, securing a higher level policy commitment and addressing capacity gaps in managing evaluations are key attributes to promote utilization of evaluations.

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