

Evaluation in the Nordic Countries

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Evaluation in the Nordic countries of Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden varies substantially with regard to how well developed it is, as well as in the extent to which it is used. However, in all these countries evaluation has been developed within the public sector, whereas evaluation as a separate field of research and study hardly exists. This is to some extent changing with the establishment of the evaluation societies and their annual conferences.

In all the Nordic countries auditing of state accounts is mentioned when discussing evaluation. However, the role of auditors will not be discussed here since that would require a detailed country by country account, and would not be of interest to a more general audience of evaluators.

Evaluation in Denmark

Evaluation in Denmark has rapidly become more common and valued since the 1980s. Evaluations are now being done at state, regional, and local levels within the public sector. Even so, Hansen and Foss Hansen (2000) argue that not much is known about the actual evaluation praxis, the institutionalization of evaluation, and its impact in politics and administration. At the state level there are several

different kinds of evaluation. There are cross-sectional evaluations where several ministries are involved in a particular area evaluation. Then there are evaluations within specific ministries. From 1993 to 1998 about 400 evaluations were done within the ministries. Here Hansen and Foss Hansen mention the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as being particularly active. In 1992 the Ministry of Education established an evaluation institute for continuing education, which in 1999 was renamed the Danish Evaluation Institute. Approaches to evaluation vary from ministry to ministry. For example, within education evaluation has been institutionalized and conducted by the ministry's (and the evaluation center's) own employees while in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs the evaluations of international assistance have all been done by outside consultants. Understandably the criteria within the more institutionalized approaches are more homogeneous than in evaluations done by a variety of groups. Interestingly the evaluations within the labor market and social services areas were much more research-oriented in the beginning and these research-oriented evaluators tend to follow particular evaluation paradigms more than do the evaluation consultants.

The Danish Evaluation Society

According to the [Danish Evaluation Society Web page](#), the society was founded in 2000 and is “an association for academics, commissioners of evaluation, evaluators and students working with evaluation.” The association is very active and focuses on both theory and practice, as well as evaluation standards and professional development. Evaluation as a field is quite well established with the Danish Evaluation Institute and the additional Aarhus Evaluation Institute being planned. Last year there were several meetings on the role of the new institute. Questions

such as the following were explored: how will municipalities and the state benefit from the institute; will research or monitoring be the task; should economists or social scientists work there; and how independent of the government should it be?

The society publishes a newsletter four times a year with evaluation news and activities, articles and debates. In addition, the society also organizes evaluation seminars and workshops several times a year in different locations focused on a wide area. Seminars have been offered in relation to medicine, crime prevention, appreciative inquiry and learning, knowledge management, etc. The seminar series also includes some more unusual topics such as whether storytelling (and in particular corporate storytelling) can be combined with evaluation, and how to get the most disadvantaged citizens (for example, the unemployed, the non-Danish speaking, and marginalized youth) involved in evaluation. Evaluations in the fields of health care and labor market policies have been discussed several times over the years, but methodological issues have also surfaced. For example, the use of focus groups and ethnography have been discussed.

The annual conference theme in 2004 was the role of evaluation in the modernization of the public sector. Questions were raised as to how early in the evaluation of programs and projects the evaluator should be involved in order to develop good criteria. Furthermore, since evaluators are more and more asked not only to judge the effectiveness of a program but also to provide suggestions for improvement, questions arise as to the role of the evaluators and their independence from the employer and society in general. The 2005 conference theme was evaluation and democracy. Papers focused on design, capacity building, competencies, and public policies. Among the papers presented there was also an emphasis on self-evaluation.

The web site also provides very useful reviews of both Danish and international evaluation publications. Recent examples of Danish books are on focus groups as used in evaluations (*Fokusgrupper* by Bente Halkier, Samfundslitteratur, Roskilde Universitetsforlag, 2002); theory and praxis in the evaluation design process (“Evaluering: Teori og praksis i designprocessen,” by Hanne Foss Hansen, Institut for Statskundskab, Københavns Universitet) ; and evaluation of the public sector (Olaf Foss & Jan Mønnesland (ed.): *Evaluering af offentlig virksomhet. Metoder og vurderinger*. Oslo: NIBRs pluss-serie 4-2000). Rieper edited a handbook in evaluation in 2004 (Olaf Rieper (ed.): *Håndbog i evaluering - Metoder til at dokumentere og vurdere proces og effekt af offentlige indsatser*. AKF Forlag, København, 2004). In the first section the concepts of evaluation, models, and paradigms are explored while these are then exemplified with actual examples of evaluation in the second half of the book. Much discussion seems to focus on the different approaches to evaluation ranging from process and outcome evaluations to collegial and economic evaluations (see book review by Sidsel Sverdrup¹). Interestingly, it is argued that no one method is better than others, but that the models and approaches represent different field of knowledge. A book on trends in evaluation in Denmark seems to have provided material for substantial discussion about the field (*Tendenser i evaluering*, edited by Peter Dahler-Larsen og Hanne Kathrine Krogstrup. Odense Universitetsforlag, 2001). It contains many different views on what evaluation means and whether it should be considered a science. Vedung in his review of the book claims that there is an overrepresentation of evaluators critical of the quantitative and experimental approaches to evaluation.

¹ http://www.danskevalueringsselskab.dk/Anmeldelse_af_ny_litteratur.asp

He calls for an inclusion of economists, psychologists and educators in this kind of anthology². He reports that there is a trend away from positivist methods and that the value dimension within evaluation is gaining in importance. Likewise there is an increased emphasis on the process not just the result. In other words, formative evaluations are on the rise. In the theoretical section there are ample warnings against the institutionalization of evaluation within politics and government agencies. Interestingly, they also argue that it is important for citizens to participate in public service evaluations as a step towards assuring a more democratic society. Overall, increased participant involvement is an important trend either via, for example, administrators using evaluations to secure participant satisfaction, or more as an empowerment tool among participants.

Evaluation in Finland

Evaluation in Finland started later and more slowly than in, for example, Sweden and Denmark. However, due to public sector administrative and managerial reforms in the early 1990s evaluation expanded rapidly in the mid to late nineties. This expansion has taken place mostly at the initiative of the various ministries. However, the quality of the evaluations has been uneven (Ahonen, 1998; Harrinvirta, Uusikyla, & Virtanen 1998).

This public sector evaluation is loosely structured and controlled, which leads to problems such as the recommendations not being acted upon, or evaluation results not being tied closely enough to the budgeting process. In addition, since the ministries direct most of the evaluation, it has become somewhat unclear who

² http://www.danskevalueringsselskab.dk/Anmeldelse_af_ny_litteratur.asp

should be in charge of conducting evaluation of municipal services at the local level (Temmes 2000).

The Finnish Evaluation Society

The [Finnish Evaluation Society](#) was established in 1999 with the purpose of furthering practice and research in the field of evaluation in Finland. The board is made up of public sector administrators and researchers and university researchers. The society has served as a way to establish an evaluation network and to create international contacts by publicizing international conferences and events. A major society activity is an annual one-day seminar. The themes the last few years have been:

- 2002 Empowerment through evaluation
- 2003 Who benefits from evaluation – views from the evaluated and the evaluators
- 2004 The use of evaluation knowledge – good examples, lost opportunities and possibilities
- 2005 Evaluation and impact – from theory to practice

The FES also organizes discussion seminars every year about current evaluation topics. For example, in 2003 one of the topics was “Evaluation of public programs: What, for whom, and why?” Another seminar topic in 2004 was the development

of the labor market from an evaluator's perspective. FES does not have its own journal but publishes an annual supplement (2001, 2002, 2004, 2005) of articles focused on evaluation in a journal of public administration (called Hallinnon Tutkimus). Some of these articles are published in English. Many of the articles focus on the roles and uses of evaluators and evaluation overall. Others focus on specific areas such as [evaluation of educational topics](#) or the [effectiveness of environmental policy](#).

Evaluation is less developed as an academic discipline. Teresa Wilen concluded in a survey of evaluation education in 2001 that the field needed to be more developed.³ Currently, there are individual courses about evaluation in specific areas like public administration or health, but no degree program in evaluation.

There are two particularly active groups of evaluators. One is found within the [Finnish Environment Institute](#)⁴. This institute and its evaluators are administered by the Ministry of Environment and focus on the study, monitoring and evaluations of environmental changes.

Another strong group of evaluators is found within the [National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Development](#). This group is focused on the evaluation of social services in Finland. However, there is also an interest in evaluation methods and research in a more general sense. For example, Vedung

³ http://www.finnishevaluationsociety.net/tiedoston_katsominen.php?dok_id=27

⁴ The English language Website is available at:
<http://www.ymparisto.fi/default.asp?contentid=98279&lan=en>

describes the trends in evaluation in Finland in a working paper⁵ where he says “there was a time when evaluation was an unambiguous phenomenon. Its aim was to explore the achievement of targets and the impacts of inputs. It was carried out by academic researchers and commissioned by public decision makers. Evaluations were conducted externally and associated with upcoming, weighty and broad scale political decisions to be made on a high level in the system. Today, the situation is not as straightforward anymore. The evaluation sector is characterized by a wide variety of forms.

Trust in centralized planning has crumbled in the public sector, which in the post-industrial countries has also had to face a cost crisis since circa 1990. The latter has increased the emphasis on evaluations utilizing financial models, specifically measuring effectiveness and efficiency. However, evaluation is also linked to the critique of the way representative democracy functions. Evaluation has become more democratic. It includes interest groups and clients. Evaluation involves not only academic but ordinary people as well. There has been progress from scientific research to participation and deliberation.

There is a trend in evaluation towards more client-oriented evaluation, which may manifest itself in the form of management of quality, but it is a novelty that in the evaluations carried out today, the clients themselves can set their own quality criteria and conduct evaluations accordingly, i.e., the evaluation criteria have undergone a changeover from aiming to satisfy administration and policy to quality targets set by clients. Evaluation is also incorporated in the trend towards cost-effectiveness. Politicians and citizens demand value for their money.”

⁵ Available at: <http://www.stakes.fi/finsoc/english/abst%5Fwp2%5F03.htm>

Evaluation in Norway

Due to the difficulty in finding information about overall evaluation issues and trends in Norway, only a brief summary will be given despite the numerous evaluations being conducted in this country. Evaluation is not institutionalized in Norway either as a field of expertise or as an administrative area as in the other Nordic countries. Traditionally evaluation in Norway has been the responsibility of the different ministries. Even though each ministry has to provide an annual activity report, periodic evaluations are encouraged. Having evaluation responsibility spread out over the different ministries has lead to a fairly uncoordinated approach. Øvrelid (2000) states that with the exception of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it is unclear how evaluations are done and whose responsibility they are. In the 1990s evaluations were done with regard to whether program goals were achieved, but rarely used for budgeting purposes. However, evaluations were used in the ministries for directing daily work as well as for reporting to the parliament. Many of the evaluations were commissioned from outside consultants since the ministries did not have the expertise nor the capacity. However, the view recently is that maybe the ministries should do more of their own evaluations. Current discussion is also focused on the need to establish clearer parameters and expectations between the researchers and those ordering the evaluations.

A real attempt at more coordination and unity of standards was brought to evaluation by the establishment of The Research Council of Norway (Øvrelid, 2000). "The Research Council of Norway bears overall responsibility for national research strategy, and manages nearly one third of public sector funding. The

Council identifies important fields of research, allocates funds and evaluates R&D.”⁶

It is built on a research approach to evaluation. Hence, a line between research and evaluation is not drawn. One of the tasks for this council is to evaluate research projects and institutions as well as the efficiency within research overall (Øvrelid, 2000).

Evaluation is in the process of becoming more institutionalized because of new regulations about evaluations of all public activities and use of public funds. This will also tie evaluation more closely to the budget process. However, neither in the public sector nor within the bodies governing institutionalized research has evaluation seemed to develop as a field on its own (Øvrelid, 2000). This is probably a contributing reason for there being no evaluation society in Norway alone amongst the Nordic countries.

Evaluation in Sweden

Some argue that evaluation in Sweden has its roots in Gunnar Myrdal’s thinking from the 1930s. True evaluations were certainly done in the 50s focused on educational reforms (Foss Hansen, 2000). Traditionally, many of the evaluations within the public sector have been done by short-term committees consisting of public employees and experts. In the 60s the Swedish government established some longer term expert groups for evaluations. These groups are also expected to give suggestions for changes in programs and reforms and sometimes to do an

⁶ Available at:

http://www.esf.org/esf_genericpage.php?language=0§ion=8&genericpage=1303

evaluation of the changes. They are supposed to be critical, politically independent and research based. They have a close connection to university researchers. (Vedung, Furubo, and Sandahl, 2000).

The first [evaluation network](#) was established in 1993 (Foss Hansen, 2000), which was renamed and restructured in 2003 as the Swedish Evaluation Association. It lists its goals as supporting a continuing and diverse discussion about the roles of evaluation and evaluators in society, developing practical and interdisciplinary competency among evaluators, and international connections. Today evaluation is as an integral component within areas such as governmental budget and governing processes, higher education, and environmental policy.

The annual evaluation conference is an inclusive three day event with numerous pre-conference workshops, panel discussions and individual papers. Professional evaluators, evaluation researchers and graduate students are the major participant groups. The first conference in 2004 had three major themes. The first focused on who decides what to evaluate and what questions to pose. Historically, evaluation in Sweden emerged from the need to supply useful information for governing bodies at the state and local levels, and more recently for the European Union as well. The key question here was the relationship between power and knowledge. The second theme focused on what kind of knowledge it is possible to obtain through evaluation. The belief that evaluation can produce research based on knowledge is being questioned both from a theoretical and a practical stance. This debate is about whether evaluation should produce information about what works and does not work, or more experience-based information for organizational development. The third theme centered on learning based on evaluation. Do those evaluated learn and change based on the evaluation? Does the learning process

change the power relations among those participating in the activity or program being evaluated? Furthermore, do evaluators learn from the evaluations? In other words, are programs and activities evaluated in the same way time after time because there is no connection to more general or theoretical knowledge? Do evaluations contribute to the development of new knowledge?

Some of these themes were followed up for the 2005 conference. The question about the kind of knowledge that is produced, and whether it is used to question or to conserve the status quo was further probed. Is there a risk that knowledge is produced in a ritualistic and mechanistic way within the established evaluation systems? In Sweden evaluation systems have over the years been built up within institutions such as government agencies, higher education, and foreign aid. However, interesting questions are being raised about how independent these evaluation systems are both intellectually and organizationally, and whether the established systems have marginalized other forms of evaluations. Besides sessions on evaluation related to specific areas such as schooling, national and local government, and methods (such as the use of focus groups), there was also discussion about whether evaluation is a profession or not, and the role of self evaluations. There were a couple of plenary sessions examining the role of evaluation systems overall and the relationship between individual evaluations and evaluation systems.⁷

⁷ These are available in English by clicking the titles

http://www.svuf.nu/arrangemang_konferens2005.shtml

Despite the fact that evaluation is well established in Sweden a search of the major universities yielded no professional program for evaluators. Individual course exist as in Finland, such as evaluation in education at Stockholm University.

Trends and Commonalities

A common aspect of evaluation in all the Nordic countries is the connection of evaluation to the public sector. Evaluation was established and developed within the public sector, and particularly in relation to the development of the welfare state. Most of the evaluation is sector specific (for example, evaluations of educational programs are run by the Ministry of Education) but especially in Finland there is much discussion on how to connect the sectoral and cross-sectional evaluation. A good example of the cross-cutting type of evaluation is found in Denmark, for example, in the evaluation of the Eastern European assistance program which is cutting across numerous sectors. There is also an increasing interest in meta-evaluations as well as methodological developments in the evaluation praxis. Since the 90s there has been increasing pressure in all countries to connect evaluation more closely to the budgeting process due to the economic downturn. Evaluations in Denmark and also Sweden are closely tied to the changes in the welfare state.

There are major differences between the four countries with regard to the extent to which evaluation is established and developed, and whether it is centralized or decentralized, with Sweden and Finland being at opposite ends of the spectrum. Overall the connection between evaluation and outcomes is being emphasized more and more. Evaluators are increasingly being asked to provide suggestions for actions instead of only reports on whether goals have been achieved. Questions

about who is responsible for following up on the implementation of the suggestions seem to be an issue in most places. Increasingly those who are being evaluated are brought into the evaluation process as participants more than subjects. With Denmark, Finland, and Sweden joining the EU the demand for more evaluations for the European Commission has increased substantially. It is unclear how much these EU evaluations influence the types and processes of evaluations in the individual countries.

References

Unless otherwise noted the information for Denmark, Finland, and Sweden comes from the evaluation societies' webpages and has been translated by Gunilla Holm.

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