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Encouraging the effective use of  
evaluations to improve program  
management and design

MDS

SAGI

MINISTRY OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND FIGHT AGAINST HUNGER

SECRETARIAT FOR EVALUATION AND INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

**Technical Note**

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The target audience are technicians and managers responsible for the policies and programmes developed by MDS in federal, state and municipal levels. From this point of view, the Notes are technical and scientific texts to be applied with adequate purpose and dimension in order to be suitable to the Policy Cycle. Their production is characterized by objectivity, specific focus and time opportunity.

The notes may be transformed in articles for publication in the future, such as in Cadernos de Estudos (Journals), Revista Brasileira de Monitoramento e Avaliação – RBMA (Brazilian Journal of Monitoring and Evaluation) or another technical and scientific magazine to reach a broader audience.

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## Abstract

This Technical Study has the objective to present some guiding assumptions of the process of production and dissemination of information and knowledge of the Secretariat for Evaluation and Information Management, aiming to potentialize the use of studies, research, data and indicators organized in the design and improvement of the management of programs of the Ministry of Social Development and Fight Against Hunger.

### 1. Introduction

There has been a rapid worldwide growth in the production of information and knowledge (I&K) about public policies and programmes. Information and knowledge are being produced by universities, research centres, multilateral agencies and by public administration officials around the world. Education and public health programmes, income transfer programmes and actions to fight hunger and poverty are among the recurring subjects of applied research into public policies in many countries. These research efforts mobilize significant groups of sociologists, economists, statisticians and other monitoring and evaluation (M&E) professionals. The relevance of Public Policy I&K is also revealed by the number of academic journals that are dedicated to this theme and the conferences that deal with M&E matters, such as the two international conferences on national evaluation capacities held in Morocco and South Africa.

But, despite vast amounts of empirical evidence and comprehensive and rigorous evaluation studies on such policies and programmes produced by M&E systems, it seems additional efforts are necessary to ensure that the I&K produced be more effectively used to formulate Public Policy and even to improve routine programme activities. Public programmes are complex systems involving various processes and activities. So, in general, specific and rigorous Public Policy I&K are dense and difficult to understand, even by the staff involved in formulation and coordination of the programmes. Programmes involve many different agents in their daily operations, each one with different skills and learning capabilities. Depending on the country, budgetary resources, the coverage and complexity of programmes,

thousands or even hundreds of thousands of agents contribute to management, preparation and effective delivery of products, services and benefits to the population. Each one of them can make a difference on the programme improvement if they can better understand the I&K produced by M&E systems.

It should also be said that policy makers, managers and programme staff do not need exhaustive data or studies about their programmes. They need information that is clear, relevant and consistent. Data should be organized geographically and by operational issue. It should be relevant for decision-making, and include information on costs, deliveries, outputs, outcomes and, above all, it should answer questions relating to the programme's implementation stage. Good and relevant I&K are the ones customized to the different needs at the formulation, monitoring or summative evaluation stage of Public Policy and programmes.

The main idea discussed in this paper is that, faced with operational complexity and the need of innovation in programme management, the effective use of evidence data from monitoring panels, evaluation surveys and studies depends largely on the relevance of the I&K organized to the formulation, decision and managing processes as well as on the creative strategies used to disseminate I&K to all personnel involved in the programme, from the field or street level bureaucrats to the strategic decision makers. Dissemination strategies of customized I&K to all technical staff involved in Public Policy can make the difference to the challenge of incorporating changes on programme's design and operations.

The argument presented in this text is that innovation in public programmes by the effective use of I&K seems to depend less on the technical sophistication and supposed independence of the evaluation study and more on the clarity and objectivity with which it responds to the specific needs of technical staff and managers. Without denying the importance of robust evaluation studies, the fact is that if they do not answer the most crucial demands for information, from the perspective of those involved, there is a risk that the resulting data and information will be of minimal use.

This text is organized in two sections. It begins with a more conceptual discussion of Monitoring and Evaluation Systems and its integration into the policy and public programme cycle. The extent to which managers and staff are interested in-

and actually use- the information and knowledge produced in M&E Systems depend on the adequacy of their design and purpose to answer the questions that program team and officials consider relevant to improve their job. So, the nature of the questions answered by the M&E System, the choice of instruments – monitoring indicators, implementation studies, impact and results surveys– determine the involvement and interest of managers and technical staff in the use of the system’s products. Besides credibility and independence, evaluation studies must be relevant to their potential users.

The second section is dedicated to the different strategies used to disseminate monitoring tools and evaluation studies for different public users of the M&E Systems. As it was already pointed in this introduction, I&K produced in these environments can be complex and not easily assimilated by managers and technical staff. It is not enough to produce an extensive research report, or to have an informative online application with multiple functionalities. Lectures, publications and courses need to be tailored to their audiences, seeking to bring the most relevant aspects of the evaluation studies that may be of interest and relevance to them.

## 2. Producing information and knowledge relevant and useful to management and programme improvement

M&E Systems have many conceptual definitions in specialized literature, broader or more operational, according to MacDavid and Hawthorne (2006), Mackay (2007), Owen (2007) and Cunill and Ospina (2008). Based on these concepts, M&E Systems can be defined as a set of articulated processes for raising, organizing, analysing and disseminating information and knowledge about public policy and its programmes, according to the different needs of decision makers and operational managers over the policy and programme life cycle, from diagnosing the social problem, the formulation and design of a programmatic solution to its actual implementation in field and the overall evaluation stage. They aim to support the improvement of programme’s design and management, to ensure greater

transparency of government action, or even to provide evidence on the merits and effectiveness of policies and programmes.

This definition makes clear that, in addition to providing information for analysis of 'deliveries' of products and services and to correct any failures of government action, M&E systems are also designed to produce knowledge about the impacts of policies and programmes, as well as about costs of production of their deliveries. By definition, M&E systems are important mechanisms for ensuring greater transparency in the use of public resources. They also contribute to decisions relating to the merits and relevance of policies and programmes.

Although complementary, these three basic purposes of an M&E System—information to help improve programmes, public transparency and budget merit evaluation – compete with each other on the evaluative efforts, available human resources and largely define the methods and techniques chosen for the work. Of course, the primary purpose, the evaluation focus and, consequently, the effective use of System of M&E products depends on where such a system is based. If it is based in a sectoral ministry or in a programme agency, the creation of monitoring instruments and evaluation research will aim to provide the means by which the programme's implementation and results are continuously improved. If the M&E System is based in a public control body or in the Parliament, the evaluative focus will be on producing and organizing information on the results and impacts of public policies and programmes on society. If it is based in a body responsible for budget management and/or medium-term planning, it is natural that the processes and activities are oriented to the production of studies on the cost-effectiveness and impact of public programmes, and to guide the allocation of available public resources.

So, clarity over the evaluative focus of a M&E System is a key factor in ensuring the successful and effective use of information and knowledge by technical staff involved in policy and programme implementation, by civil society, by parliament or by budget managers. The evaluative focus helps to orientate the main efforts and activities of the M&E staff. That therefore determines the choice of instruments and methods used to generate information and knowledge that are relevant and useful to the user. M&E Systems oriented to the needs of management and programme improvement (henceforth M&E-PI, over which this paper is specially concerned) are

characterized by research designs, surveys, information systems or monitoring indicators that focus on specific aspects of programme implementation. Such research generally depends on qualitative methodological strategies, such as discussion groups and in-depth interviews, taking field staff and programme beneficiaries as main sources of information. It aims to generate rapid empirical evidence concerning the programme's management and any difficulties experienced in its planned implementation.

Part of field evaluation surveys may not need to be performed if the set of monitoring indicators, created from the programme management systems' database, is able to answer basic evaluative questions. Appropriate choices of key indicators, with a detailed geographic and demographic focus, may provide valuable information that is accessible and can be used effectively by technical staff and managers. As 'thermometers', these indicators may diagnose the 'fever' (or the healthy status) at critical points in the programme's intervention model. That can help technical staff and managers to make informed decisions on how to address the problem. Or they can commission specific research – or 'clinical investigation', to continue the metaphor – to investigate the causes of the implementation problems – or the fever causes and the reasons for its persistence (Jannuzzi, 2011a).

Nationally representative sample surveys or research with a quasi-experimental design are certainly important tools and products of M&E-PI of sectorial Ministries. But the time and effort they require make them more useful as ways for transparency and budget practitioners to appraise merit, legitimacy and impact. M&E-PI staff should be involved in a broader technical agenda. Their time and concerns cannot be captured by impact or national evaluation surveys. It should be recognised that in order to legitimize the political priority given to certain social issues, and in the interests of public accountability and efficient use of scarce public finances, quantitative research using probability samples, such as those conducted by national statistical agencies, and impact assessments with control groups and beneficiaries offer important measures of the adequacy of public programme design, coverage, beneficiaries, results and impacts, and the programme's distinctiveness. But those evaluation studies are not the unique inputs in the decision to maintain, modify or discontinue a policy or programme. This decision is not merely technical, but primarily political, because such

a decision has implications for the lives of beneficiaries and for the programme's institutional arrangements.

Large surveys, or those that are methodologically or operationally complex, can be justified at the outset of a policy or programme to define the situation it seeks to address. Further surveys of a similar scale, however, should wait until after any problems in programme implementation have been identified and resolved (Rossi et al., 2004). Otherwise, because of the implementation problems, those evaluation studies may conclude that the programme's outcomes and impacts are minimal or absent. These facts may create hasty mistrust of public opinion over the merits of the public policy or programme and, also, of officials' perceptions of the utility of M&E products and research. The fact is that, despite the prestige conferred by certain academic communities, quasi-experimental evaluation research is not the most legitimate scientific method, nor is it the gold standard for programme evaluation (Worthern et al., 2004).

There are several ethical conflicts and operational constraints on the realization of large surveys, which have been widely noted in the international literature (Jannuzzi, 2011b). Moreover, daily programme management requires packets of information and knowledge far beyond those produced by such research designs. Rather than produce evidence for a 'revolutionary innovation' intended by impact assessments, it is necessary to have information that can contribute to the continuous improvement and incremental innovation of public action. Without denying the importance of empirical evidence that is nationally representative, collected with technical rigour and analytical depth, managers and technical staff involved in programme implementation need a more eclectic methodological approach, to gather the information and knowledge of the complexity over social problems and over programme operations context.

The misconception of the relevance of a mix method approach rather than a quantitative and impact evaluation focus has contributed to scepticism about the value of M&E tools among managers and technical staff in the public sector. Thus, in the context of scarce human and financial resources, M&E System should focus on a response to management and programme needs, using a structure of centralized databases extracted from computerized management systems or from the countless



spreadsheets and paper controls done by program managers. These M&E tools may include key programme indicator dashboards, logical framework processes, or research recommendations on dealing with implementation issues. In situations of limited resources and time, it can be more useful and productive for programme management teams to use evaluation studies of secondary data, study reviews and international publications, and meta-evaluations of similar programmes in other countries.

As well as the clarity of evaluative focus and appropriate choices of methodology, if an M&E System is to offer information and useful knowledge to improve programmes, it is essential the participation of technical staff and managers in drafting instruments. If it is true that external teams can ensure technical credibility of the evaluation study – assuming they are competent, reputable and committed to a multidisciplinary view and to a mix-method evaluation approach – the relevance and ownership of results will depend on the extent of involvement of programme managers and technical staff in the evaluation process. Internal teams typically know more about a programme's most pressing problems and difficulties, but they need technical support from specialized consultants as well as from field surveys to properly understand the causes of those issues and the resolution strategies.

It is worth noting that the professional market of evaluation consultants is far from perfect in many developing – and even some developed – countries. Running field evaluation surveys or conducting evaluation studies based on secondary data requires skilled people and teams. It must be recognized that increased demand for the evaluation of social programmes has outstripped availability of properly qualified private consulting firms or academic research groups. The pool of evaluators is dominated by companies specializing in public opinion and market research, whose problems require less complex design and effort to understand compare to social programs. Although they may have a good academic pedigree, those firms or consultants often have limited knowledge of the reality of public programmes. Social surveys, particularly those related to programme evaluation, can be more complex than market or academic research. Therefore they require more robust, specific and responsible approaches, because their results guide critical decisions about the design, results and merits of government actions.

In this context, it is necessary very intensive monitoring over the contracted evaluation study by the technical teams of the M&E System. It is not just the case of leaving the hired firm or consultant to design the survey sample, the questionnaires, the training of the field staff or its supervision. If the program managers want answers to their specific problems they must participate in all evaluation process. Not all contracted companies appreciate the experience of having their technical procedures questioned or altered by internal teams. Mixed teams of contracted and internal personnel can help to achieve a synergy of internal knowledge management and external technical expertise. This can help create products by combining their respective areas of expertise, and may increase the overall legitimacy and relevance of the evaluation effort.

The credibility of results and the legitimacy of the evaluation process are two values that must be pursued jointly. After all, what is worse than the lack of information for decision-making is the making of technical and political choices based on studies and knowledge that are limited in their operational survey and analytical scope. In some situations, it may be preferable to have no evaluation than to rely on misconceived, mishandled or rashly contracted research.

### **3. Disseminating relevant and useful information and knowledge for management and the improvement of programmes**

The formulation, evaluation and management of policies and programmes require, like any other activity in human organizations, training of technical staff and managers involved in decision-making as well as in the provision of services (field workers). Leadership, communication, ethics and response to the public are among the training topics for technical staff and managers, and are as important as project management and evaluation methodology development. Experience suggests that a significant reason for the failure or lack of impact of public programmes lies in the difficulties in maintaining continuing education programmes for teams involved in policy development.

There is no doubt that the impact of public programmes would certainly be higher if those involved could understand more about the programmes' objectives, their logical design and related activities, the role of each institution and member of staff, and the characteristics of the target beneficiaries. Although planned in the framework of many social programs, courses and operational training may not be fully equipped with materials, regulatory documents, classrooms and teaching staff to train multiple technical persons involved. In some situations, the trainees may not even engaged or informed about the training. There is certainly much to be done in terms of training human resources involved in public service delivery and management of public programmes. This is, of course, an issue that goes beyond the scope of this text. However, it must be a matter of concern for multilateral organizations, with the same emphasis attached to the dissemination of methods and techniques for planning and evaluating social programmes and projects.

This section addresses two central issues: dissemination strategies in M&E, and training on M&E tools. Both are important for enhancing the informed use of M&E products and studies, particularly those designed to improve public programmes. As with information in science, technology and innovation, information and knowledge in public policy is complex and require training programs. Indicators such as infant mortality rate or monetary extreme poverty are part of the technical vocabulary of evaluators and the academic research community working on evaluation of social programmes, but they are not necessarily part of the vocabulary of programme managers and technical staff. Similarly, evaluation reports and their results may be differently understood by evaluators and the programme's technical staff.

If the knowledge produced by M&E is to reach broader audiences, it is necessary to make its products – reports, indicators, evaluation studies – understandable and attractive to a range of public users. It is not enough to simply post all data sheets, indicators and evaluation reports on the internet. Data production does not generate demand for knowledge. It is necessary to develop 'tailored' products for targeted audiences of technical staff and managers by appropriately adapting format, content and complexity. Results from evaluations should also be disseminated through lectures or multimedia recordings, and they should be readily accessible to internet users.

There are a number of virtual applications on internet platforms with many interactive and visual resources, and with links to other documents. Executive summaries of evaluation reports, small datasheets (one-page papers) with the essential results including graphs, maps and descriptive reports may have a utility and aesthetic appeal greater than that of tables, dashboards or massive publications with inscrutable content for those without specialized training in those subjects. Results of econometric models developed with evaluation data are frequently presented, but have limited capacity for diffusion to the uninitiated public. It is surely possible to make such outcomes more tangible and concrete for technical staff and managers who want to learn more about the programmes.

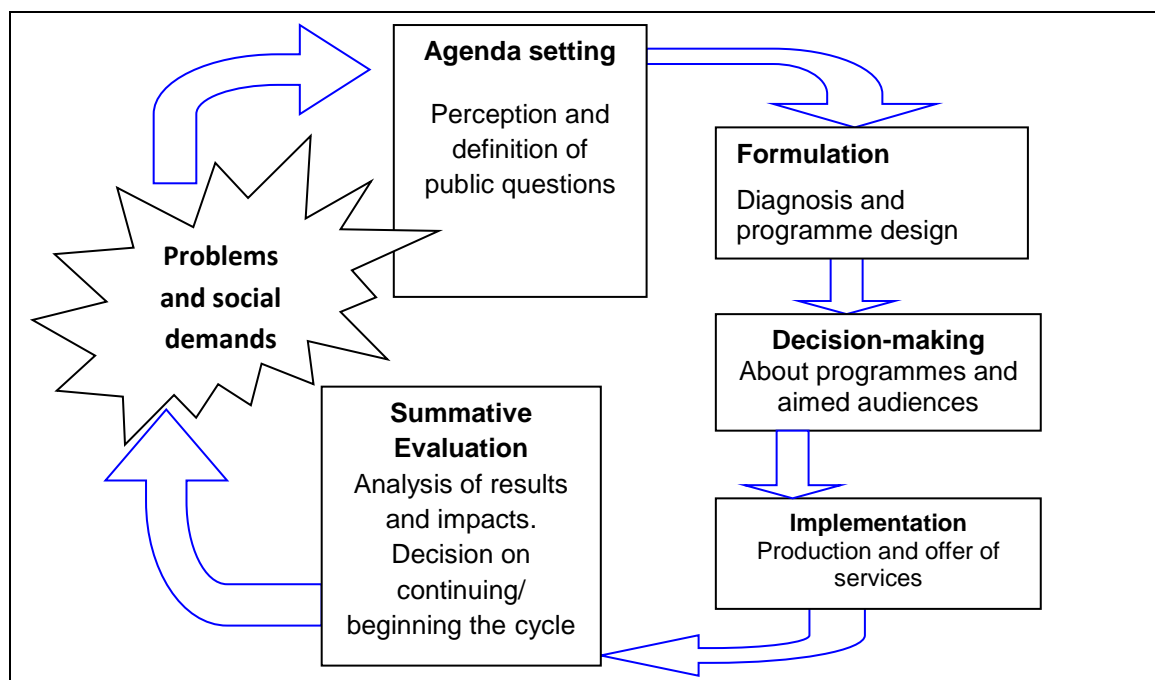
Efforts to disseminate M&E content electronically to technical staff and managers may be more effective in combination with their continuing education – either classroom-based or by distance learning. There are always technical staff and managers interested in deepening their knowledge of M&E, but they have not found an appropriate, relevant course in a university or research centre. An M&E training programme for technical staff and programme managers, which aims to develop skills and improve understanding of monitoring tools, evaluation and the application of information and knowledge should be organized using the basic cycle of policies and programmes processes (Figure 1).

In classical political science textbooks, the public policy formulation process has been repeatedly presented as a cycle of successive steps, with a number of stages (Jann and Wegrich, 2007). Despite longstanding criticism of the simplified way in which this diagram shows the political process as an empirical truth, the separation of steps demonstrates that the process gives different emphases on a programme's planning, implementation and evaluation. This model lends itself well to teaching, particularly for the way it contextualizes the issue for technical staff and programme managers.

In this model, the first step – definition of political agenda (agenda setting) – corresponds to the multiple paths and processes that culminate in recognition of a social issue as a public problem and the need for government action to solve it. In other words, it legitimizes the introduction of the issue on the policy agenda. The next step – formulation of policies and programmes (formulation) – refers to the processes and activities involved in the development of possible solutions, legislation and

programmes to deal with that defined social issue. In the decision-making step ('decision-making'), the crucial choices are made on the interventional model, institutional arrangements and the target public – narrower or broader – considering the feasibility of the alternative solutions and their budget implications. Step four – implementation of policies and programmes ('implementation') – corresponds to the launching of the actions, allocation of resources and development of process to guarantee the deliveries of public programmes. Finally, the assessment of policies and programmes (summative evaluation) reviews the extent to which the work is solving the defined problem. This step assesses any requirement to change the programme to ensure its effectiveness, or to discontinue it if the problem is no longer part of the agenda, or to adapt to a new reality, restarting the cycle.<sup>1</sup>

**Figure 1: The cycle of policies and public programmes**



<sup>1</sup> It is appropriate to note that evaluation, as part of the cycle, takes place after implementation. It is a more reflective process that helps inform the decision to continue or stop the programme. It is distinct from monitoring and evaluation activities, which are characterized by indicators, among other things. Such investigative tools can be used at any time during the cycle. Renaming this decisive stage of the cycle as 'summative evaluation' could help to avoid confusion between these two distinct activities.

Although there may be different ways to implement a training programme based on this cycle, it seems appropriate to organize it into three modules, each of 40 hours. Its content should include diagnosis/formulation of programmes, research tools and monitoring and evaluation studies, with complementary objectives. The course will become gradually more complex, as envisaged in Table 1, dealing with construction of indicators in the beginning and the methodologies of social research used in evaluation studies in the final stage. As well as presenting M&E concepts and methodologies, it will be important for programme managers and technical staff to submit case studies from their own experience that show the effective use of course content.

**Table 1: Basic training programme in M&E**

<b>Course</b>	<b>Objective</b>	<b>Timetable</b>
1. Diagnostics for programme formulation	Develop capacity to use information sources from programmes and official statistics to diagnose a situation and propose a public programme.	20 to 40 hours
2. Tools and indicators for programmes monitoring	Prepare participants to use information systems, and to develop methodologies to build indicators for public programme monitoring.	20 to 40 hours
3. Introduction to research methods and evaluation studies	Develop skills essential for the understanding of evaluation results and methodologies, their potential and limitations.	40 hours

#### 4. Final Considerations

The effective use of M&E products and surveys depends very much on factors related to the supply of information and knowledge produced and to the demand from potential users. Evaluation can focus on the production of information to improve programme management, to produce data to public transparency, and/or to inform budget decisions. Those evaluations are targeted at a range of users with different demands for information and knowledge.

Once the focus is established, the methods used to develop knowledge products must be appropriate in terms of content, costs and schedule so that they meet their users' needs. Information and Knowledge produced by Monitoring and Evaluation System are complex and efforts should be done to disseminate it in the most proper strategies, as customized publications and training courses. As the publishing market has so clearly demonstrated, especially with the advent of the internet, there are many different and creative ways to communicate simple or complex messages for a range of audiences.

There is certainly much to be done to maximize the effective use of public policy assessments. National experiences presented at the Third International Conference on National Evaluation Capacities in 2013, as the others in previous conferences, have been showing how different countries are dealing with it. Let's share our experiences and challenges!

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