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# Growth and Integration in the Evaluation Profession: Some Perspectives for Consideration

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## Abstract

This article sketches the growth and accompanying challenges that face development evaluation in the future, by showing that whilst the progress in expanding the geographical presence of evaluation has been impressive, much more needs to be done. Important work has been done in promoting guidance through agencies such as the (UNEG, OECD/DAC and NONIE), and the recent coalescing of evaluation forces under EvalPartners help entrench evaluation. However, there needs to be a more deliberate effort to ensure that new entrants, many of who draw attention to their countries which have not had an evaluation culture, and which would potentially benefit from greater accountability and transparency, need support. The need to adapt methodologies to context is important but this should not compromise minimum evaluation standards, and high level political support for the function is critical. It is also necessary at a very practical level for there to be a contextual appreciation. The article recognizes that the freshness brought by new entrants should be welcomed and this means new levels of engagement with established practice, many of which are not known due to the limited publishing of work from this area. The active participation of evaluation leaders and professionals to support through mentorship and volunteerism is necessary, to accompany the technical and political dimensions of development evaluation.

## Keywords

development evaluation, emerging, volunteerism, profession

## Context

The rapid growth of the evaluation function and profession, evident in the increased number of evaluation offices, networks, and associations and frequency and diversity of evaluation events across the globe, make it an exciting time to be an evaluator. There have been positive trends in the

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past decade that need emphasis. Considerable impetus for the change has come from international networking to share practices and approaches and address overarching challenges. This includes OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC), the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG), the multilateral development banks forum, and the Network of Networks for Impact *Evaluation* (NoNIE). The scope of the evaluations has expanded from project evaluations to evaluation of development results and strategic evaluations. The evaluation units in multilateral organizations and donor organizations have been professionalized in terms of both accountability and management responses. There is increasing interest shown by governments to establish and strengthen evaluation functions. There are now more umbrella bodies for civil society organizations, attempting to harmonize efforts, and bring about more cross-regional and cross-country collaboration. For example, the launch of the EvalPartners (a network of networks, donors, agencies, and associations) in Thailand and the signing of the *Declaration of Chiang Mai* in December 2012 is taking collaboration to a new level.

Despite the momentum and shared objectives, challenges remain in sustaining initiatives to strengthen the evaluation function, establishing accountabilities of different stakeholders, and engaging hierarchies of evaluation partnerships. The new pins on the global map of evaluation may indicate presence, but this cannot be an indicator of professional growth unless there is sufficient institutionalization of evaluation function and use. The euphoria of launching a national and regional association may be short lived if support is not carried through. The more detailed examination would temper euphoria with realism, as the issues in this article reflect.

The uneven trajectories of different formulations of evaluation reflect complex contexts related to governance, democracy and freedoms, and perspectives on what constituted performance varies geographically. It is thus not surprising that geopolitical and other factors will impact on the space and opportunities available for evaluation to flourish. What this means is that while evaluators come together in international conferencing and training and engage in discussion on the principles of evaluation that is rightfully advanced by the profession, many new participants from countries which have or are in the process of political transition are challenged on how to be independent and talk truth to power in the countries they come from or work in. The evaluation profession has spoken less about this.

## **Embracing Context but Not Compromising on Quality**

With development results becoming an important parameter in development cooperation and program funding, national policies and frameworks have increasingly become an object of evaluations. Given that the push for evaluations is increasingly seen as donor-driven, it is important for evaluators and evaluation associations to pay attention to furthering enabling environments to be receptive to evaluation. Often considerable time and effort is focused on establishing the frameworks and modalities necessary for evaluation to take place. Any support that may be offered to evaluators should begin with a recognition that many established practices and methodologies may need to be modified to respond to context, and more work needs to be done on establishing what constitutes minimum levels for acceptable practice to meet evaluation standards.

Evaluators from countries where the enabling environment does not exist or where only elements of it do, often grapple with the lack of support and legitimacy. An evaluation of a development project or program can easily be seen as an attack on persons or institutions, and in the absence of evaluation champions or advocates, it is difficult to sustain evaluation practice. There is need for greater attention to ensure that evaluation is indigenous process, rather than a thrust from outside, and there are many successful examples, where national governments took a lead in establishing evaluation function. Legislation to protect and advance issues relating to transparency and accountability has in many instances advanced the evaluation function. In South Africa, for example, transiting from

a secretive and autocratic apartheid state was possible due to the negotiated settlement and democracy, and more importantly the establishment of oversight in the constitution that helped in the growth of the oversight institutions. A Minister for Performance Evaluation in the country, first ever globally, has made this possible, with the independent Public Service Commission tasked to oversee the state also embracing the evaluation culture. In other contexts, particularly those countries emerging from repressive regimes, the enabling environment is not present, and although many see the importance of evaluation in advancing democracy and the performance of institutions within countries, this is not easily accomplished.

## Addressing Diversity

The evaluation profession in its entirety as a global phenomenon needs to focus some of its attention on evaluators who come from complex contexts. There is need for greater exchange of the expertise that is present across the globe, so that support can be offered to emerging practitioners who normally will not be able to tap into existing networks or easily acquire evaluation skills and knowledge. Long-term investments required for evaluation capacity development are often not seen as worthwhile in many conflict-affected countries and in addition financial constraints prevent direct interaction between emerging evaluators and the more established communities of practice. Therefore, for evaluation to be an effective development tool, it is important for established professional networks to work toward strengthening the evaluation role and function in complex contexts, walk the journey in building skills and systems, and promote evaluation volunteerism. There are several tools now available for evaluators, but there is need for more. The initiative of the e-learning program [www.mymade.org/elearning](http://www.mymade.org/elearning) is notable; yet, there is need for more such initiatives.

Evaluation practices and approaches need to be better informed by perspectives from the global South, particularly better connections between the rich body of experience and expertise in global and regional evaluation associations and the country experiences. A key issue underlying the acceptability of evaluation approaches and standards is the metanarratives associated with the validity of approaches in relation to developing contexts. There is need for mechanisms that will help bridge conflicting perspectives (and regional narratives), perceived and real. These issues have been increasingly voiced in regional evaluation forums.

Evaluation practice in much of the developing world is often concerned with matters other than traditional indicators of professional or academic standing (e.g., membership in associations, publications, and citations). Practice is more focused on the use of the craft of evaluation to bring about social change; the evaluator is more than a detached outsider but often seen as one who can talk truth to power and transform lives. This discussion has not been heard much in the networks, and perhaps the time has come to reflect on what the evaluator identity is in different contexts, and why this is so. Stemming from this there shall perhaps be a reflection of evaluation processes and methods; both of which would serve particular identities and agendas. Evaluation works on judgment and values performance, it would thus be unwise to define it too narrowly. I do believe that such a contextual appreciation shall help bridge the divide, real or otherwise, between the global North and South, and address the issue that often emerges that evaluators from developing countries lack the independence or requisite skills.

## What New Entrants Bring

Evaluators from the global South, the new entrants in some way, bring to the profession a freshness of perspective, especially since many are from countries that have just recently transformed from repressive and closed societies to more open ones, thus providing the space and opportunity for

evaluation growth. More specifically, these new entrants bring to the discussion a more frank perspective on the challenges posed by context, as there is a parallel between the extent to which accountability in governance is addressed and the opportunities for evaluation. This means that evaluators in contexts where there are inadequate measures to guarantee access to information and freedom to criticize must work independently and rely on well-developed negotiation skills to frame an evaluation as a worthwhile undertaking. It is all too easy to say that politics and resistance is a given in evaluation, and then focus on methodology, when much of the initial planning time goes into these basic issues. There are implications for training with such a scenario.

The growth of the international evaluation community is evident at the geographic level where countries gain prominence as newly formed evaluation associations participate in existing platforms and form new regional ones. This has resulted in an unprecedented exchange between evaluators (who bring along knowledge about their countries, in particular on issues relating to governance), and who often feel isolated in the pursuit of their profession. In such an environment, new evaluators from the global South provide opportunities for engagement and exchange, sharing context-specific challenges and methodologies. Such engagement is also critical for evaluation capacity development and for strengthening the interface with the global south.

The number of new participants in the evaluation community is probably understated, with their views on key debates and narratives of practice unknown, given that their work is often not published and escapes the mainstream discourse. The situation over the past decade has changed considerably, with the growth of continental evaluation associations, subregional and country associations and networks, but the work of these associations and networks continues to be underrepresented in the literature. The effect of this is that many positive efforts in developing countries go unnoticed and unrecorded. The emerging and established professionals in developing countries are not adequately maximizing the opportunities brought by the growth at global levels for optimum impact either within these regions or internationally.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

While the benefit of having new entrants participate in international events is good and helps in their orientation, they often face challenges when they return to their countries and are faced with limited budgets and resistance. The solutions to the issues discussed above are not as simple as the diagnosis, but I would urge evaluation leaders, evaluation offices, and evaluation managers and practitioners to examine ways to engage such professionals by offering mentorship, internships, and even volunteerism in the difficult situations where such people work. This is the only way to accelerate the integration of new entrants into the global evaluation community, where sharp differences exist and where the lack of support may lead to many of the emerging evaluation voices disappearing off the map we like to pepper with pins to show new entrants. If evaluation is to be emancipatory and progressive, it needs to also address the political dimension that accompanies its work.

## **Author's Note**

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the United Nations Development Programme.