Evaluation of New Public Governance: Dealing with Complexity

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Welcome to this seminar on the evaluation of new public governance. My name is Thomas Delahais and I am an evaluator at Quadrant Conseil, a French co-operative company specialised in the design and evaluation of public action. I was myself trained in political science and in urban planning and development.

New public governance is one of the ways through which we deal with complexity. In this seminar, I will talk about how evaluation is a key part of new public governance, and in particular how it helps deal with uncertainty.

WHAT IS EVALUATION?

> *Evaluation is the process of determining the merit, worth and value of things (Scriven 1991).*

Evaluation is an everyday process. Indeed, we evaluate all the time, such as when we choose what to eat or when we reflect on our work, or the work of others. We usually base our judgement on our own values: for instance, what we like to eat, or what we believe is good work or what is not; or on the norms of society: such as, people should eat vegetables, etc.

Programme evaluation is a similar process aimed at **judging the value of a public intervention**, e.g. projects, programmes, policies, or interventions of public interest.

The thing is, it is quite difficult to do so, if only because there is no easy measurement of a programme's success. A company can look at its bottom line at the end of the year, or its cashflow, and have a view of how it fares. One could also argue that only the best products are available, as consumers express their choices. This does not however make any sense for public authorities. Even the level of activities does not indicate success: having too many people receiving benefits could rather be seen as a sign of failure, for instance.

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A key aspect in determining the value of an intervention is **to consider the consequences for its addressees**[1]. This is because public interventions are developed to address problems faced by society, but without ever knowing if they will work or not: **public interventions are, in a way, like a leap of faith**. Job programmes are created because people are unemployed, but it is impossible to know beforehand whether they will find an occupation: this is out of anyone's control (including jobless people).

Evaluation is a feedback mechanism bringing useful insights about whether these interventions are working well, and why. It does so by asking questions such as:

- Did the public authority in charge and its partners understand the problem at stake?
- To what extent does the evaluated intervention complement, or interact with, other existing interventions focusing on the same audience, or the resolution of the same problem?
- Did it work? For whom, to what extent, in what contexts, and why?

To answer these questions, the evaluator will:

- develop an evaluative framework in which the assumptions made about the intervention are made explicit (for instance: banning tobacco from public places will support the efforts of smokers to totally quit smoking), as well as the data used to assess them;
- gather existing and build new evidence through data collection;
- cross-analyse the evidence to confirm or disconfirm the assumptions made about the intervention;
- come to a conclusion over if, how and why the intervention has been a success or failure, and propose recommendations, for instance as to how the critical issues identified can be addressed.

This process can be independent; in support of decision-making bodies; or participatory. Evaluators can be public agents; consultants; researchers; or even activists or citizens.

Evaluation can serve many purposes. An authority can use it to account for its interventions and what it did with the taxpayer's (or the donor's) money. But **evaluation's value is much more in learning and in informing political action than in accountability**[2]. Evaluation is an excellent tool to put an intervention into perspective and learn from design and implementation efforts, as it

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[1] *i.e. the persons, groups, organisations that are targeted by an intervention, for their benefit or not, and which may change their attitude or practice as a consequence of the intervention.*

[2] *Performance audits, for instance, are far better at providing an accountability assessment than evaluation in most situations. They will focus on whether an intervention's initial objectives have been reached, on the delivery of activity as measured through indicators, and on budget consumption, when an evaluation would focus on the actual consequences of the intervention on its targets, and explaining them.*

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changes your view of the issues at stake. It can also make clear what is important ("what counts") for stakeholders and therefore what goals a policy should pursue. This is why evaluation is often a starting point for redesigning interventions.

In a nutshell: Evaluation is an instrument to gain knowledge of a situation, think differently, and discuss with counterparts and stakeholders, all of which can help to take decisions, learn, and improve public action.

WHAT'S NEW IN NEW PUBLIC GOVERNANCE?

A popular way to look at policy making is through the policy cycle (Lasswell 1971). **Policy making is seen as a "problem-solving" activity**: there is a problem affecting society that a public authority wishes to address; the authority goes through a design process to develop a new policy that comprises one or several instruments, sets objectives, allocates resources; then, the authority implements the instruments, has the policy evaluated in order to determine whether the problem has been solved or mitigated; and eventually decides to continue, update or cancel the policy.

Figure 1 : a policy cycle
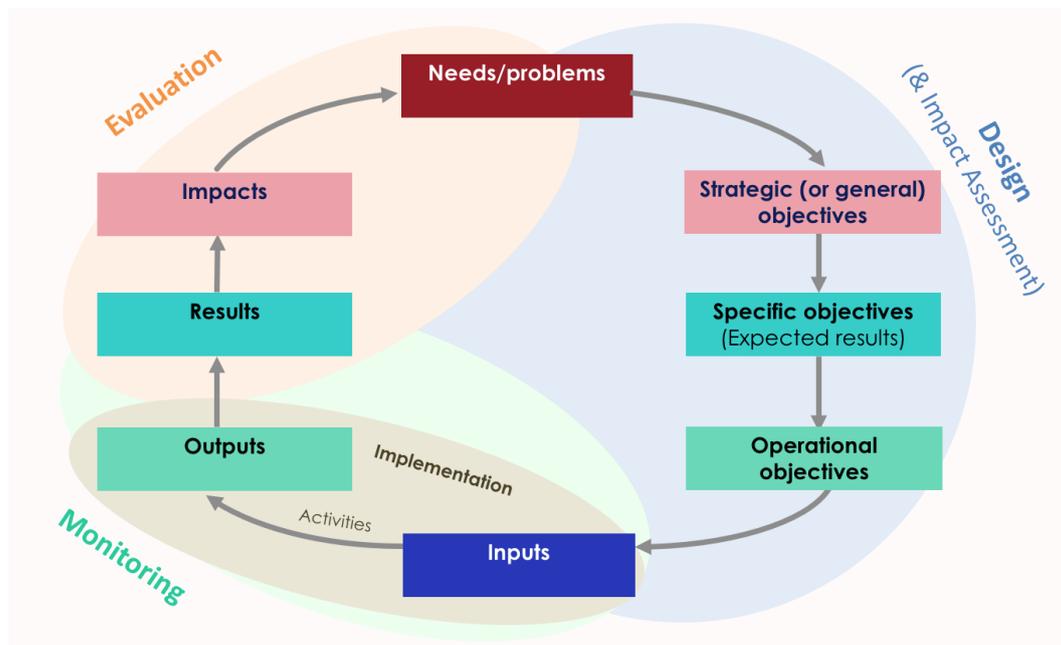
The policy cycle is still a useful tool to look at policy making, but times have changed since it was first developed. In many cases, national authorities can no longer impose their decisions (Pitseys 2010) and their ability to adequately address socioeconomic needs is contested. Other stakeholders (authorities at global and local levels, non-governmental organisations such as associations or private companies or even citizen groups with no legal existence) feel entitled to participate in the making of public policies, and may engage in policy making even without (or against) the authorities

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(Lagroye, François, & Sawicki, 2012, p. 544-545)[3]. The world is also facing new kinds of problems that no one can even expect to solve alone (e.g. climate change[4]), and levels of complexity unexperienced before (e.g. "XXL metropolis", see Lorrain 2011).

In the public sector, **the term *governance* is used to describe a form of government which recognises, at least partly, the legitimacy of these actors to take part in the design and implementation of public policies and develops instruments to cope with, or support, their participation.**

Under a regime of "collaborative" governance:

- Policy making becomes (more or less) a continuous negotiation process between stakeholders rather than a one-off internal process.
- This process is affected by its context, history and the people who are involved in it; as well as by the existence of other processes that happen in parallel at other scales and levels (for instance, the preparation of a law at national level to deal with an issue felt at local level);
- It includes different stakeholders at the design, implementation (and evaluation) stages.

Networks of governance are instruments through which governance "delivers" interventions (Howlett, 2019). They may take the form of:

- occasional or permanent partnerships or advocacy coalitions (Sabatier 2007), that may include individuals and public or private organisations, to highlight a problem and/or design a new solution and/or implement and run it. Authorities can be part of these partnerships, act in parallel, or confront them;
- public-private partnerships under various forms, from outsourcing or delegation of public services to private-led initiatives with public support or authorisation;
- the establishment of specialised agencies or bodies, which concentrate high-level expertise and resources to deal with complex issues[5].

These networks may complement the traditional administration and instruments (and even deliberative democracy) or (attempt to) supplant it. Governance can be encouraged by authorities in some ways, and it may also be something that they have to endure in others.

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[3] *e.g. private projects which have consequences over the public, or which business model is to address a public problem in a certain way. Uber epitomises such practices when it aims at "replacing" taxis with its service. However, charities, or international NGOs can do the same at their own scale, sometimes without consideration or in opposition with national or local governance.*

[4] *Initiatives such as Transition Towns that aim at ecological and social resilience typically consider collaborative governance as a necessary condition to reach that goal (Hopkins, 2009).*

[5] *Typically technical issues in the context of the big metropolis, such as mobility, waste, etc. See Lorrain (2011).*

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Formerly the sole decision makers, authorities have had to reinvent their role: they now facilitate negotiations and ensure that stakeholders buy into the new solution, and finance experiments to test solutions brought by stakeholders. They do not decide anymore *ex ante* what is good for the people. Nevertheless, their role is all the more important as they are the "guardians of the general interest" all along the policy processes and as a last resort (e.g. when facing private initiatives with undesirable consequences) – a function which they cannot always fulfil when too much power has been lost to other stakeholders (Stame 2006).

KEY ASPECTS OF EVALUATION IN NEW PUBLIC GOVERNANCE

Governance and its instruments can be evaluated.

> For instance, in the evaluation of the *Transformation écologique et sociale régionale en Nord-Pas-de-Calais (TESR)*[6], we found that closely involving stakeholders in policy making at regional level could lead to: a better, and shared, understanding of the problems justifying a public intervention; the development of synergies among stakeholders, including local businesses and associations; and eventually innovative, sustainable, impactful solutions. Yet that came at the cost of longer and more complex processes, therefore more prone to failure (Quadrant Conseil 2015).

Evaluation *of* governance and governance instruments is particularly useful in answering questions such as:

- What is "good governance"[7]? Does governance, as it is implemented, fit in or conflict with the values of stakeholders, etc.
- What are the *right* practical arrangements of governance? What can really be expected from such arrangements in a given context? How do governance instruments have desirable consequences over the attitudes and practices of stakeholders? Are there some side-effects of governance instruments that are undesirable?
- Eventually, do these arrangements change policy making in a positive way?
- How do governance instruments contribute to the general interest? In new public governance, public missions are often carried out by non-public actors, or by technical bodies, and evaluation can be used to keep them accountable, especially regarding their pursuit of the public interest.

Ultimately, evaluation *of* governance can be used to adjust the perimeter of governance and what should remain in the realm of "traditional" government.

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[6] *The TESR was a process aimed at redesigning regional policies related to topics of general interest, such as food, forests, energy consumption, involving all relevant stakeholders.*

[7] *We do not consider here the concept of "good governance", which is used in international aid mostly, and relates to values associated by donors with the modern/Western State, such as accountability, transparency, efforts to tackle corruption, results-based management, etc.*

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But **evaluation is also, in itself, an instrument of governance**[8] and should be used as such to improve governance. Here are six ways in which evaluation can be useful to governance, to stakeholders of governance, and ultimately, to social betterment:

1. **Evaluation helps us understand what is at stake and how things are working**. A key aspect of new public governance is that it deals with complex situations, which are difficult to apprehend. Modern evaluation approaches[9] take complexity as a starting point and are designed to deal with it. For instance, evaluation can identify unanticipated consequences due to how stakeholders, or users of publics services, react to a new intervention, and explain them;

2. Evaluation can "increase the degree of confidence" regarding the success or failures of interventions (Befani and Mayne 2014) and determine how the problems are evolving and whether the solutions are relevant. The evidence generated by an evaluation helps change the terms of the public debate, and mitigate, to some extent, the rise of populism (Picciotto 2018).

3. Evaluation makes it possible **to adapt to changing contexts**. The evidence it generates provides a good basis for future improvements (or the termination of existing interventions), especially when cumulated over time. Evaluation of experiments helps testing new arrangements and learning from them. "Conceptual use" of evaluation refers to the ideas, perspectives, concepts brought by evaluation that are not of direct use but can be very influence over time. (Weiss, 1998)

4. During an evaluation, participants can discuss and share their concerns and values. This process can lead to consequences such as "individual changes in thinking and behavior and program or organizational changes in procedures and culture that occur among those involved in evaluation as a result of the learning that occurs during the evaluation process" (Patton 2008). In other words, **the mere process of evaluation, if participatory, can contribute to common understanding of the issues at stake**, an agreement over solutions, and make stakeholders willing to change their practices. This is particularly useful to discuss within partnerships;

5. Evaluation is a way to **give a voice to those interests that are not heard enough in public governance**. An equity or a gender lens can make apparent that some people, especially silent or vulnerable groups, are adversely affected by a problem, or are not benefiting from interventions, or are facing unanticipated effects. Involving those stakeholders in the evaluation process can improve the balance of powers in governance – given that they are not just consulted but have their say over the questions asked in the evaluation, and its conclusions (Bourgeois and Hurteau 2018).

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[8] *In France, for instance, evaluation was explicitly introduced at national level, at the beginning of the 1990s, as a way to allow the "civil society" to have their say over the State policies (Viveret 1989).*

[9] *Approaches such as Contribution analysis (Delahais & Toulemonde, 2017; Mayne, 2012) or Realist Evaluation (Pawson and Tilley 2004) for instance.*

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6. Finally, evaluation is an instrument of **transparency and accountability towards the general public**. A criticism of governance is that it introduces a new "black box": who does what, and on behalf of whom?[10]. Missions are outsourced or shared in the name of increased efficiency, but can this efficiency be proven? And is the measure of success chosen by stakeholders shared by the people? These are questions an evaluation can answer (Stame 2006).

CONCLUSION: MAKING EVALUATION USEFUL

The above is much about what stakeholders *can* do with evaluation. Evaluation is still too often absent from public governance, or limited to a formal exercise of window-dressing, or not used enough for what it is the best at, i.e. understanding, learning, and sharing. But the continuous rise of new forms of governance as well as the immense challenges we are facing are an opportunity for growing use. Four keys in developing evaluation would be:

- **Building capacity**. Bad evaluations make people wary of evaluations. Also, bad evaluations can be used in decision-making (Delahais and Lacouette-Fougère 2019), but with what consequences? It is not just about having the right consultant: capacity is a collective process in which people and institutions understand evaluation: how it can be useful, how they can prepare for it, and how they can make the most of it;
- **Making your own evaluations**. Evaluation should not be something one has to endure in a kind of top-down process, but a choice. Voluntary evaluation is much more likely to bring about changes;
- **Finding users**. Evaluation can only be useful if there are people or organisations that are interested in its process and results (Patton 2008). The more they are, the more likely the evaluation can be useful (and then repeated);
- **Thinking over the long term**. Evaluation should not be viewed as occasional studies, but thought within a stream of knowledge needed for policy making (Rist & Stame, 2006).

Thank you for your attention.

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[10] *When compared to an authority that draws its legitimacy from democratic choice.*

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