The Need for a System of Evaluation in Public Administration

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In recent years there has been an increasing emphasis on evaluation. In Norway the need for evaluation has been discussed in connection with a productivity campaign, a plan action for user-minded public services and reforms in the government budget system. This article provides a description of some initiatives used in Norway and then discusses the need for a system of evaluation in public administration, along with the associated problems.

In recent years there has been an increasing emphasis on evaluation. The purpose of this paper, using a broad definition of the term evaluation as a starting point, first is to give a short description of some initiatives in Norway and then to discuss more generally the need for a system of evaluation in public administration, along with the associated problems.

Why the Emphasis on Evaluation

Until just a few years ago the main emphasis in Norwegian government was on planning and budgeting, with rather little attention given to evaluation. There are several reasons for the present increased interest in evaluation of government programs and measures. These reasons include:

- limited economic resources;
- questionable quality of the service rendered by government administration;
- emphasis on improved productivity in government administration;
- strong trend toward decentralization and delegation of authority with an emphasis on goal-oriented and result-oriented management. Thus evaluation is an important element in the feedback process; and
- desire to simplify regulations and understand how the present set of regulations work, and the effect of altering these regulations.

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The Term Evaluation

The term evaluation will be used in a very broad sense in the following discussion. Evaluation will be defined as the process by which one tries to define the results of policy and programs. This, process of course, can be done in many ways: continually monitoring information, doing user investigations, registering reactions in mass media, and making scientific evaluation studies on policy and programs. In other words: information about the results of policy and programs are collected from many different sources and stored in a systematic way for later retrieval. The utilization of multi-sources, multi-level, and multi-method approaches is the reason why evaluation sometimes is viewed as an art rather than a science.

What Is Meant by Effects of Programs

When discussing different aspects of evaluation, one should bear in mind that the concept of effect may mean many different things. It may be difficult to know precisely what is meant by the effects of a measure effect may be direct or indirect; some measures have immediate consequences, whereas others take time; the effect may be permanent or short term; or the measure may have side-effects.

The Interpretation of Results

Another area which offers considerable problems is the interpretation of evaluation results. Measures which are adopted clearly have political and other interests attached to them. Evaluation results often will be viewed in different lights depending on how they are interpreted. However, it would be too much to go any further into all the problems which arise in connection with the interpretation of evaluation results.

Three Norwegian Initiatives in the Eighties

The need for evaluation has been the object of many general discussions. Attention will be drawn to three initiatives in the 1980s: the 1982 productivity campaign; the plan of action for user-minded public services; and reforms in the government budget system. These efforts emphasize the need for evaluation of both efficiency and effectiveness and give some advice on how to do it.

The 1982 Productivity Campaign

Following government discussion, a productivity campaign was launched in January 1982 and continued throughout the year. Two types of productivity were discussed, external productivity, which relates goal achievement to resources used (effectiveness), and inner productivity, which relates production to resources used (efficiency).