INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS FOR EVALUATION

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What institutional arrangements are best for conducting evaluations? To answer that question one must first consider why we have professional evaluation in the first place. Evaluation, as an institution for informing public decision makers, has emerged only in the last third of the twentieth century, and it has emerged first, and most extensively, in advanced capitalist societies.

Advanced capitalism—highly valued for its effectiveness in improving living standards—is also very destabilizing. Great masses of people migrate far from their homes and families to seek jobs in strange cities, cut off from their friends and family, their traditional associations and even their native language. When all human enterprises are subject to standards of productivity and efficiency, there is little room left for the traditional or communal. Yet, it has been the traditional forms of authority—the church, the community and the family—that have supported the legitimacy of governments.

As the traditional bases of support are weakened by the mobility of capital and labour, and as rapid changes in technology bring changes in lifestyle, governments must find new sources of legitimization for their actions other than traditional ones. There are several sources of legitimacy, but most important is a government’s ability...
to sustain material improvement for its society, that is, its ability to increase the material prosperity of its population. Few regimes can survive without providing such material largess. Thus, the governments in these societies try to create economic conditions that facilitate capitalist endeavours.

Another source of legitimacy is the institution of professional science, which has assumed some of the authority once vested in religion. Professional evaluation, through its identification with science, provides legitimacy for government actions by evaluating government programmes and policies for their social worth. When President Lyndon Johnson advanced his controversial Great Society programmes in the United States in the 1960s, he secured legislative passage for them only by assuring the Congress that these programmes would be evaluated. Large-scale evaluation (of these programmes) began in the United States around 1967.

Now, I am not saying that evaluation is undertaken purely for legitimacy purposes. Evaluation does serve to determine the effectiveness of programmes, policies and personnel. It does inform government actions and educate public opinion. However, without the legitimating function that evaluation provides to a sceptical public, other information sources, such as the use of experts, would be adopted instead. Scientific evaluation has an advantage in that its findings are deemed credible by the general public.

Credibility

To provide such credibility, the evaluation must be perceived as being independent and fair in its findings. If it is seen as being improperly biased, it loses its credibility. A loss of credibility is a problem facing some government commissions. Commissions lacking credibility are usually ones in which prominent citizens have produced findings desired by the government. Often such commissions are unbelievable because they lack independence and scientific credibility. In short, they appear to reflect only government influence and direction.

To be seen as credible, evaluations rely on two major practices. One is to employ an objective scientific methodology; the other is for the evaluators to be politically independent of the programmes and policies being evaluated. Within the professional evaluation community, there is constant debate about the efficacy of different evaluation methodologies. These discussions range from the best ways to collect data to how to present findings. Even though these debates are highly technical, they are often hotly contested.

Most judgements about whether methodologies are proper or not reside in the hands of the professional community, rather than with the government. The professional evaluation enterprise, like the professional medical enterprise, depends on a free marketplace of ideas to forge its methodologies. The government influences methodology indirectly by approving and using certain methods in its studies, but seldom does the government engage in the methodological debate directly.

For example, in a five-year study of the major evaluation office in the National Science Foundation (NSF), I found that government agencies tend to approve