

Reflection on: “The Circulation of Evaluative Information” Inga Nyholm

Inga Nyholm
inga.nyholm@hel.fi

I started my career as a researcher almost 20 years ago in a project to evaluate a local government reform that was topical at the time. During the past two decades I have mainly worked as an expert in different public sector organisations, but from time to time have also continued to do research, which has focused on the areas of local governance, state-local relations and evaluation of government reforms.

In this text I will focus on evaluation and evaluative information in a rapidly changing environment, as well as evaluation as a process determined by multiple and sometimes even hidden choices. “Evaluation has become such a widespread social phenomenon that the term ‘The Evaluation Society’ is often referred to. This is a society with flows of evaluative information.” This quote from the article “The Circulation of Evaluative Information” (hereafter: the article) illustrates that today evaluative information, the number of evaluations performed, is increasing steadily, at the same time as types and levels of evaluation are becoming more and more diversified. In addition, it illustrates that evaluation has become highly significant in a complex, rapidly changing and challenging environment. The rising number of actors, new information technology and factors such as improved data collection capacity are definitely providing more opportunities to demonstrate results, to learn from experience and to generate knowledge and evidence that helps organisations to improve their functions and effectiveness. However, the same factors also pose some challenges for the practice of evaluation.

This well-written article reminded me that evaluation might still often be understood as a simple approach or a straightforward process involving clear phases through which organisations’ actions are analysed from the perspective of impartial experts and within a normative framework or certain defined criteria. However, in practice, the process is more multidimensional. Behind every evaluation there are, first of all, certain values, underlying assumptions, expectations and choices that are seldom addressed. For instance, the criteria used set out what will actually be evaluated, the kind of data that will be collected and the topics on which the evaluation will focus. In addition, as the article demonstrates, the process after data has been collected and a report written also matters.

The more complex the environment becomes and the more actors there are producing various kinds of evaluative data, the more relevant the above questions become. Research related to the underlying assumptions and choices made before and after the actual process of evaluation is also societally relevant because the primary purpose of evaluation is to help decision-making in an organisation, programme or project – either directly or indirectly. This is the case despite the fact that the purpose of an evaluation depends on what type it is. Thus, regardless of the data knowledge, interests, methodologies or perceptions of reality, examining needs, impacts, outcomes or implementation – they all aim to make some kind of judgments, to gain insight, to facilitate evidence-based decision-making and/or to assist in the identification of (future) changes needed. And where decisions are taken, power is of concern. Power serves an important

role in decision-making processes and thus also in evaluation processes: power and authority to decide what kind of evaluation and data is needed and collected, power to circulate evaluative information generated, or power to prevent evaluation or collection and circulation of data and information.

Underlying values or power (games) might be both hard to recognise and difficult to study, particularly in a complex environment filled with evaluative data. They are often hidden elements that remain undetected as it is easier to focus on the more visible ones. However, it is clear that the choices made before and after the actual evaluation process are also worth analysing. The choices that are not straightforward but that are regulated by infrastructures, by organisational and administrative structures, by involving actors and their interests and positions and by different kind of rules and regulations. These are choices that are not inconsequential as they can have an effect on the evaluation itself and on its effects on the decision-making process that follows. As the article points out, by focusing solely on the methodological aspects like the validity or reliability of the evaluative data, attempts to channel or even stop streams of information may remain hidden. In addition, attempts that aim to stop evaluation of undesirable issues or prevent the disclosure of undesirable findings may also stay unknown. "Theoretical studies should therefore treat circulation of evaluative information as a variable and as a contested social process that depends on many factors" (quote from the article). Studies should also aim to understand evaluation as a broad process depending on the power and choices made long before the first phases of data collection and long after the results are made public. Evaluation should furthermore be understood as a method with the aim of highlighting different views on challenging and complex issues, as well as the arguments behind them, and increasing our understanding of them. For instance, government reforms - the subject on which I have concentrated in my research work - are like chains of actions in which the principles selected typically lead to deeds, to acts and to results. As a consequence, evaluation of reforms should concentrate on revealing the dynamics of these multidimensional processes. (Nyholm & Airaksinen 2011). This might enable evaluation to have a more active voice in the public debate and better redeem its primary purposes.

References

- Nyholm Inga & Airaksinen Jenni (2011) Kuntahallinnon uudistaminen arvioinnin kohteena. *Hallinnon Tutkimus* 30 (2011): 4, pp.297-312. Tampere: Hallinnon tutkimuksen seura. (In Finnish).