

Reflection on:
“Evaluation in Norway: A 25-Year Assessment”
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My comments are based on extensive experience of evaluation work over a period of more than 30 years, both as an evaluator, manager, member of review panels and advisory committees in Norway and in multilateral organisations, as well as an author of several books and articles on evaluation and organisational development. I am currently associate professor II at VID specialised university.

The assessment under discussion in the article *Evaluation in Norway: A-25-year assessment* is unique in various ways. It has a long-term perspective, it is based almost exclusively on a public database, and it was conducted by someone outside government. Similar Norwegian assessments use data from surveys and interviews, have a short-term perspective and are performed by someone on the inside of government. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the article is the interpretations by the authors of what this says about the status of evaluation in Norway. During my more than 30 years' experience from a range of positions in Norway and internationally, I have had a particular concern about institutionalisation of evaluation and the differences between Norway and other countries. In the light of this, I have three reflections.

Firstly, the authors seem to take it as a given that all entries into the evaluation portal actually are evaluations. My experience is that this may not be the case. Unlike other Nordic countries, the use of the term “evaluation” does not have a long history in Norway. The practice has been to view evaluations, assessments, investigations and other forms of reports on results as a single category. Even though the official definition in the guidance material issued by the Ministry of Finance is in line with the international definition, ministries and agencies do not really share a common view on evaluation.

There is little academic interest in evaluation, limited scholarly literature, and almost non-existent formal academic training. The Norwegian evaluation association was established in 2009, a decade later than similar associations in the other Nordic countries. As pointed out in the article, the first formal evaluation requirement came about as part of the Government Financial Regulations in 1997. Apart from an independent evaluation department in the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation, there are no other similar separate evaluation units in other parts of central government. Even though evaluation is formally institutionalised in the government, this is not the case in practice. A possible explanation is that for decades Norway has had a successful economy with no real need to use evaluations as a basis for setting priorities.

Any assessment of Norwegian evaluation practice – especially in a Nordic perspective – needs to take this into consideration. The weak Norwegian evaluation tradition has a bearing on how “evaluations” are carried out, how conclusions are used and, consequently, on their quality.

My second reflection relates to the authors' finding of a decline in the number of evaluations in the portal after 2010. One interpretation is a change in what is being reported, another is of course that fewer evaluations are being undertaken. We have seen a similar pattern in the sector that has been my particular focus the last few years – international development. One possible explanation relates to reporting and results assessment fatigue. In the first

decade after the Government Financial Regulations were revised, there was intense demand for frameworks and reports in relation to results. While the Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals were subsequently introduced, along with all manner of reporting requirements, there was insufficient capacity to deal with it all. Producing and receiving all the reports had noticeable cost and time consequences for everyone involved. Critical questions were asked about the use and effect of these efforts. It is likely that this fatigue led to fewer evaluation reports and a preference for assessments which consumed less resources. Similar patterns have been observed in international organisations.

An additional explanation might be a reduced political interest in critical reporting. The traditional division between politicians and the administration has become increasingly blurred. Politicians live under constant scrutiny from all sorts of different media and may be less interested in initiating critical assessments themselves.

A third reflection concerns the increase in consultants as producers of evaluations. I agree that this partly reflects the professionalisation of evaluation among consultancy companies. It may also indicate a stronger relationship and dependence between the government administration and consultants and an increased use of consultants. While consultants are external, there is no indication that they are independent. Rather the opposite.

The article argues indirectly that the quality of evaluations would increase if academic researchers had done more. My own experience does not necessarily support this view. Academics are under constant pressure to produce products of academic quality. Evaluations are more of a mixed category and thus may not be fully appreciated as something into which one should put one's efforts.

So, what are the implications? I have argued in a range of different contexts that institutionalisation of evaluation is the only way to increase the quality of evaluations. This implies that evaluation systems should be established in ministries and agencies, with commitments (and policies) from the top, guidelines for what is to be evaluated and by whom, and how findings and recommendations are to be used for learning and management, as well as quality criteria related to independence, credibility and utility. This is in line with the conclusions in a recent OECD study of policy evaluations in 42 countries. Evaluations are too important to be left to random decisions on how they should be carried out and used. Good quality evaluations can serve as an important instrument to improve public management. As shown in the article, evaluations in Norway are currently a long way away from serving this purpose.

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