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Evidence-based Policy Making and Policy Evaluation

Toward better use of the evaluation evidences in public policies: The MORE project

Introduction

Despite the extensive number of evaluation research, the use of evaluation results for the formulation and implementation of public policies is still quite limited (Olejniczak, 2013; Wojtowicz and Kupiec, 2016). This may derive from the fact that many of evaluation studies are of a poor quality or they do not cover the actual decision makers' knowledge needs. However, delivering credible and rigorous evidence to decision makers seems not to be sufficient either. Hence, an opportunity to improve effectiveness of public policies with the use of evidence remains a great challenge.

The implementation of a holistic approach of the provision of evidence to the policymakers may be the answer to this challenge. The approach should ensure - on one hand - reliable evidence, consistent with the needs and expectations of decision makers, and – on the other - provide that this evidence will be delivered in a proper manner, understandable to the recipient, or, to put it in different words, that the knowledge will be “broked” (Meyer, 2010; Olejniczak et al. 2016).

We designed and implemented a pilot project, which aimed at introduction of such approach to delivering useful and practical evidence for the Polish Ministries' decision makers. Within a three-year MORE project we focused on the solutions implemented or planned for implementation in the four areas of public policies in Poland: special economic zones, public transport in non-urban areas, safety of nutrition in educational institutions and employment policy. In each case we concentrated on a specific problem or question, which may have been limiting the effectiveness of adopted solutions.

We elaborated a four step process, which aimed at (1) provision of useful and practical evidence, obtained as a result of adaptation of research designs corresponding to the knowledge needs (Stern et al 2012) and (2) increase the likelihood of actual use of the results by decision makers, through the application of knowledge brokering approach (Turnhout et al., 2013).

The effectiveness of the proposed approach was proved by actual changes, which were adopted by the decision makers to the 3 out of 4 public interventions, which were the subject of the MORE project.

Evaluation as an evidence based policy tool

Policy literature and numerous empirical studies clearly stress the role of solid research in delivering effective and efficient public interventions (Nutley et al., 2007; Prewitt et al., 2012; Shulha and Cousins, 1997). By public interventions we understand activities, such as policies, programs, projects, regulations or actions taken by public authorities in order to affect or interfere with decisions made by individuals, groups, or organizations regarding social and economic matters.¹ Authorities on different levels – local, regional, national and even European, are undertaking such interventions to provide a desirable socio-economic changes. Public interventions usually proceed from agenda setting through planning and implementation to completion and assessment of achieved results (Howlett et al., 2009). Along the whole process of creating and implementing public interventions, different types of knowledge is needed to support decision of policymakers taken at different stages. They span from issues regarding diagnostic knowledge (know-about the policy issue), through know-what works and know-why things work, to more operational know-how knowledge (Nutley et al., 2007). Numerous actors are involved in creating and implementing public interventions at certain stages e.g. politicians, high-level civil servants, public managers, “first line” public

¹ See: BusinessDictionary, <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/government-intervention.html>

officers. They have different information preferences ranging from strategic issues to more technical, operational matters. They are potential knowledge users because, once involved in a particular stage of an intervention, they face certain knowledge needs. Knowledge needs can be addressed by different sources. One of the source, which provide evidence on the effectiveness of public intervention – are evaluation studies.

Along with reforms aimed at improving the efficiency of public interventions, such as new public management, new public governance evaluation research has become an increasingly popular tool supporting the development of evidence-based policy approach implemented in public administrations (Osborne 2006; Vedung 2010). Evaluation should provide tools to assess the quality, value, accuracy and efficiency of public interventions, i.e., policies, programs, and projects, and provide conclusions improving their effectiveness (Patton 1997; Royse et al. 2001). Evaluation, however, may only serve its purpose when it is used, e.g., when research process and findings impact programme orientation and its management process (Johnson et al. 2009; Højlund 2014; Lieberman et al. 2014).

Evaluation is commonly defined in the literature as a set of measures applied to determine or judge the merit, worth or significance of an object, process or intervention (Scriven, 2007; Farrell et al, 2002; Rossi et al, 2004). Other definitions additionally indicate that it is a systematic, analytical inquiry (Cousins, 2003; Lincoln and Guba, 1985), intended to support users in particular situation (Stufebeam, 2001), provide a better understanding of a programme (Korporowicz, 1997), induce positive change and improve the quality of intervention (Chelimsky, 1985).

The use of evaluation in policymaking process – the concept of knowledge brokers

The evolution of evaluation was always closely associated with the transformation of the public sector. In the days of traditional Weberian administration, evaluation was dominated by the positivist approach and experimental methods, which did not cover the causes of the observed findings, thus making a limited contribution to the improvement of programmes (Gruening, 2001; DeLeon, 2006). In the era of New Public Management evaluation has become a tool used by policymakers and programme managers (Rossi et al, 2004). The constructivist paradigm has been accepted and qualitative methods have been applied more often. Interest has been extended from exclusively ex-ante analyses to the ex-post measurement of the results (Ferlie, 2011). Evaluation research has been perceived as a management tool, and its use has become the key concept in the field of policy analysis (Alkin and Coyle, 1988). Many studies in the field have led to the development of taxonomies

of types of use, with the most popular one including (Knorr, 1977; Weiss, 1980; Patton, 1997; Shulha and Cousins, 1997): (1) instrumental – the use of evaluation findings for decision making, such as intervention continuation or change; (2) conceptual – enlightenment, impact on the stakeholders' attitudes and an understanding of the programme; and finally (3) symbolic – the use of evaluation to legitimate and justify decisions or to support policies decided on a different basis.

For many years, evaluation theorists and practitioners have also sought to determine and classify evaluation use factors. The first empirical studies were conducted in the 1970s (for example, Weiss, 1972; Patton et al, 1977; Alkin et al, 1979; Weiss and Bucuvalas, 1980) and were followed by dozens more in subsequent decades. Popular literature reviews (Cousins and Leithwood, 1986; Shulha and Cousins, 1997; Johnson et al, 2009) analyse over one hundred empirical research studies about evaluation use that offer a broad catalogue of potential evaluation use factors. Use factors can be divided into two broad categories referring to (for example, Saunders, 2012, and Owen, 2007):

(1) the evaluation study itself, for example, the organisation of the research process, quality, relevance, and reliability of the findings. Their credibility is determined by the quality of methodological rigour - a match between research design and the research question (Stern et al., 2012).

(2) the evaluation context, for example, institutional capacity, organisational structure, approach to evidence use, practice and political climate. It should be stressed that evaluators have a limited (if any) influence on this factor.

However, there are two more significant factors, which may influence the use of evidence from evaluation studies in the process of formulation and implementation of public interventions. The first one is related to the way the evidences are delivered to certain actors involved in policy-making process. Different actors have certain preferences for "feeding methods", which include forms of presentation of study results (f.e. concise message, dashboards, infographic, detailed reports) and channels of communication (f.e. formal meetings, face-to-face discussion, emails).

The second factor is the moment when the evaluation study is conducted: evaluations which suppose to support decisions should provide evidences in time when the decisions are taken. At the stage of designing a public intervention, a number of assumptions are made regarding the functioning of the environment in which a particular solution will be implemented as well as the expected behavior of the actors affected by the intervention. The knowledge about the

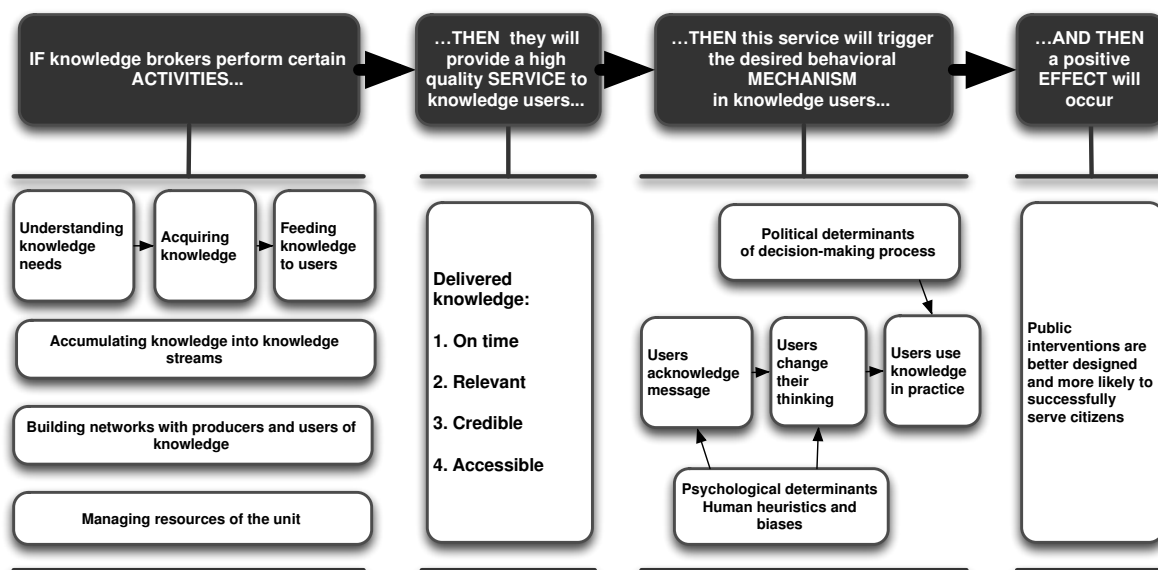
accuracy of assumption, that is about the relationship between planned interventions with the expected effects is crucial at this stage of policy making process. At the stage of implementation an operational knowledge is needed to provide seamlessly, “stick to the plan” enforcement of a certain intervention. Once the intervention is put in practice (or it is finished) questions on its effectiveness and sustainability arise. Knowledge needs are linked to issues regarding whether assumptions have been correctly adopted, whether they were realistic, and what actual effects (intended and unintended) appeared.

All of the evaluation use determinants mentioned above are closely connected to the idea of knowledge brokering and the role of evaluators as knowledge brokers. In general, knowledge broker can help to run better policies by providing credible knowledge, to the key user, on the right moment and in an accessible way.

By providing reliable knowledge (from various sources), handing it over to politicians and civil servants involved in public policy making process and helping in its practical application, knowledge brokers help to bridge the gap between so called “know-do gap”. Therefore, knowledge brokering is the process of connecting people, building relationships and sharing knowledge, evidence, and experiences that improve the effectiveness of public intervention (Lin, 2012). It consists in intermediating between the languages of three different worlds - science, politics and social interests (Gutierrez, 2010; Fischer, 2003, p. 230)

The detailed logic of knowledge brokering activities can be formulated as a theory of change (see Figure below).

Figure 1. Logic of knowledge brokering activities



Source: Olejniczak et al. (2016)

The key success factor of knowledge brokers is quality of their service. The four aspects of quality are: (1) delivering knowledge when users need it, (2) being relevant to their information needs, (3) keeping methodological rigour of the particular study and (4) using right feeding method (form of presentation and channel of delivery).

The mechanism of user's knowledge absorption and decision-making is complex. It is influenced both by human constraints and political dynamics. A high quality service of knowledge broker substantially increases the chances of knowledge use, but it is rarely decisive because evidence is just one of the factors in the complex decision-making (Nutley et al., 2007; Tyler, 2013).

Implementing the knowledge brokering concept – the MORE project

Bearing in mind the factors that may raise the probability of using evaluation research result in policy making process, we elaborated the assumptions for a 3-year MORE project², which aimed at delivering “broken” knowledge to policy makers from different ministries in Poland.

² The official project's title is: Regulatory Impact Assessment Based on Evidence. Model of use of existing analytical and evaluation evidence in the process of assessing the socio-economic effects of public interventions. The project was implemented in 2014-2016 by a consortium consisting of higher education institutions (Kozminski University - project leader, Jagiellonian University), NGO (Idea Development Foundation) and private company (HMR Strategic Consulting S.C. Stanisław Mazur Jacek Radwański).

We concentrated on evaluation of four public interventions (in form of regulations), which were about to be implemented or which have been already introduced.

- Act on Promotion of Employment and Labor Market Institutions (14/03/2014). Due to the wide range of amendments introduced, the scope of the study was limited to the following elements of the reform: (1) introduction of remuneration mechanisms for labor officers, depending on achievement of performance indicators or performance standards (reward for results); (2) procedures on profiling unemployed, (3) outsourcing activities, (4) organizational changes in labor offices - introduction of a new function of the customer adviser.
- The Special Economic Zones Act (20/10/1994), which provided the possibility of creating administratively isolated areas, where economic activity may be conducted on preferential terms. The main idea behind the Act was to alleviate structural unemployment and trigger economic growth in less developed regions. Enterprises located in the SEZ may receive state aid in the form of tax exemptions. Under this Act, 14 SEZ was created in Poland.
- Regulation on changes in the system of reimbursement of statutory discounts in public transport in non-urban areas. It was assumed that from January 1, 2017 statutory discounts would apply only to public transport (that is contracted by local, municipal and provincial authorities), and only those transports were to be reimbursed from the state budget. Planned changes would aim, among others to reduce the scale of fraud and to bring funding into line with the specific requirements of the quality of transport services – suitable timetable, vehicle standards, etc.
- Amendments of the Food Safety and Nutrition Act of 25 August 2006 (which were about to be implemented 1/9/2015) regulating the introduction of additional requirements (restrictions) on the sale, servicing, advertising and presentation of foodstuffs in educational and guardianship institutions. The aim of the Act was primarily to strengthen the protection of the health of school and pre-school aged children by limiting access to so called “junk food” and to food containing large amounts of ingredients not recommended for their development. Proposed solutions should have helped to eliminate causes of overweight and obesity among children and adolescents in Poland.

Our proceeding was organized in four steps, as presented below:

Step 1: Recognition of knowledge needs

In the first stage we tried to identify what the main questions that concern persons involved in policymaking process at this particular stage of implementation of each intervention are. For this purpose a number of meetings and individual interviews with public managers were conducted. On that basis, for evaluations of each regulation a few main research questions were stated.

Step 2: Matching a proper research design with stated research question.

As it was mention in the previous part of the paper, in order to deliver a credible knowledge, determined by the quality of methodological rigour, a match between research design and the research question must be assured. Based on the rich literature review we identified 8 research designs used in policy analyses. Each of research design provides answers to different knowledge needs. The Table below presents the usefulness of certain research design in finding responses to particular research questions.

Table 1. Credibility of evaluation research - a match between research design and the research issue

RESEARCH DESIGN	KWKNOWING ABOUT THE CONTEXT What is the situation, context, problems, trends, etc.	KNOWING ABOUT THE EFFECTS (ex ante) Will the intervention work? What kind of effects shall we expect?	KNOWING ABOUT THE EFFECTS (ex post) What worked? What were the effects of intervention?	KNOWING ABOUT MACHANIMS Why intervention worked or will work? What change mechanisms appeared/will probably appear)?	OPERATIONAL KNOWLEDGE How to implement the intervention seamlessly?
Meta-analyses (systematic review)	++	+++	-	+	-
Experiment, quasi-experiment	-	-	+++	-	-
Statistical studies	+	+++	++	-	-
Simulation (serious) game	-	+++	-	++	++
Theory Driven Evaluation	-	++	++	+++	-
Case study	++	-	+	+++	++
Participatory approach	++	+	+	+++	+++
Descriptive research desing	+++	-	-	++	++

Source: Olejniczak, Wojtowicz (2017), based on Bamberger et al. 2011, p. 31, 394-420; de Vaus 2006; Petticrew,

Roberts, 2003, Stern et al. 2012, p. 24, 48.

Step 3: Conducting research

Each evaluation study based on several research designs. The studies allowed for the accumulation of extensive material that was used in the formulation of the final conclusions and in preparing preliminary recommendations for the changes needed to be introduced in order to increase the effectiveness of each intervention.

Step 4: Adaptation of tools and communication channels in order to increase the probability of using the knowledge in policy implementation.

The results of each evaluation were elaborated according to knowledge brokering concept. For each study we prepared: visualization of logic of intervention (which is crucial to understand and explain the assumptions that laid behind the intervention and to identify the expected outcomes), iconographics with evaluation results and a 3-page executive summary (concise message), where - apart from results of our analysis - main recommendations were proposed. Depending on the identified knowledge users of given evaluation, additional feeding methods have been provided. It must be stressed that a specific scientific language was “translated” to relatively simple and practical message addressed to policymakers. All of prepared forms of presentations of the research results and channels of communications used enabled to discuss the practical changes that should be made to increase the effectiveness of the intervention being evaluated. Along with persons involved in the planning and / or implementation process, issues that should be taken into account when implementing the proposed changes has been developed. The following table shows the activities (in line with the idea of knowledge brokering) that have been taken to increase the probability of implementing recommendations and thus to the realization of evidence based policies.

Table 2. Organization of evaluation research of 4 interventions according to knowledge brokering concept

Area of intervention	Identification of knowledge needs: evaluation questions	Research designs adopted	Feeding methods
Special Economic zones	Did the intervention work? Were the assumptions made at the planning stage correct and in particular: did SEZ triggered the development of peripheral regions and did they influenced the unemployment rates?	TBE; quasi experiment; descriptive research design	Conference with participation of national and regional authorities and media; Concise message; Iconographics; Dashboards; Visualization of logic of intervention
Organization of public transport in non-urban areas	What will happen if we introduce changes? What intended and unintended effects may it cause?	TBE; Descriptive research design; Simulation (serious) game	Small discussion meeting with main stakeholders; Map of arguments; Concise message; Iconographics; Visualization of logic of intervention
Safety of nutrition in educational institutions (i.e. kindergartens, primary and secondary schools)	Are the assumptions lying under the intervention logic correct? What unintended effects may appear? What are the factors crucial in implementation process?	TBE; Systematic review; Participatory research; Case study	Discussion meeting with main stakeholders; Concise message; Iconographics; Visualization of logic of intervention
Organization and accounting for efficiency of job centers	Did the changes introduced in job centers (accounting for the effects; outsourcing part of tasks) increase the effectiveness of supporting the unemployed in return to the labor market?	TBE; Descriptive research design; Case study	Individual meeting with Department staff; Concise message; Iconographics; Visualization of logic of intervention

Source: the author

Conclusions

Despite the fact that evaluation research is perceived in the literature as an effective tool to provide the knowledge needed in shaping and implementing public intervention, the actual use of its results by policymakers remain a great challenge. The answer to this challenge may be the implementation to the evaluation process the concept of the knowledge brokering. As highlighted in the text, among different factors that may increase the likelihood of using evidence from evaluation research are those that the evaluators have no influence on.

However, the introduction of activities that are the attribute of knowledge brokers can push public policies towards the evidence based idea as in case of the evaluations conducted within the MORE project in 2 out of 4 intervention some modification was introduced and one of the intervention was suspended to implementation according to provided evidences.

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