Evaluation utilisation in South Africa: Reframing and improving the dynamics of the evaluation relationship

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Abstract

The utilisation of evaluation findings has been quite comprehensively theorised. The voluminous literature in this area was reviewed by way of developing an approach to researching the factors influencing evaluation utilisation in the South African context.

Following and shaped by the findings of the literature review, a mixed-methods approach to researching evaluation utilisation was developed. The perspectives of programme and management staff of a range of organisations were solicited to better appreciate the dynamics of evaluation use.

A qualitative study was conducted involving nine respondents, focused on understanding when and how the last evaluation process they had been involved in had led to programme influence. This was followed by an online survey of 44 evaluands and evaluation commissioning respondents who completed questionnaires aimed at understanding factors influencing evaluation use, with reference to the last evaluation they had been involved with.

The concept of there being an 'evaluand' that is the object of study, is shown to be something of a misconception; in the context of significant and necessary involvement of the 'evaluand' in the entire value chain from conception of the need for an evaluation, through the decision to evaluate, development of terms of reference, and participation as a participant in the various evaluation processes leading to the implementation of recommendations.

Throughout the evaluation processes the contributions of the evaluand had influence and guided key evaluation processes; and evaluation processes should be conceived as emerging in the field of interaction between evaluand and evaluator.

The study makes a contribution to understanding evaluation utilisation by emphasizing the dialogical relationship of influence between the evaluator and the programme evaluated, which tends to be overlooked if one conceives of the evaluation process as an objective research procedure. The findings point to the need to reconceptualise the relationship of the evaluated programme and the evaluation service provider.

This calls for a dialogical conception of the relationship between evaluator and evaluand, which the literature on evaluation use has in recent years, begun to articulate. It is important to pay far more

attention to the respective roles and domains of interest in this interaction. This line of thought offers prospects for a more collaborative approach to the evaluation relationship, and ultimately the development of less disappointing evaluation relationships, more perspicacious findings and better utilisation of evaluation findings.

The different institutional environments, for example government departments and civil society programmes, tend to involve different dynamics in terms of how evaluation needs are identified and how evaluations are managed. Further work is needed to understand the nuances of how institutional frameworks impact on the relationships between evaluator and evaluand at the different points in the value chain leading to effective use of evaluation findings.

Introduction

Evaluation is intended to inform decision-making around programme and policy planning, design and implementation; and to promote organisational transparency, accountability and organizational learning (Picciotto, 2016; Højlund, 2014; Patton, 1997). It is therefore intended to be a "practical craft" (Alkin & King, 2016: 569) and the utilisation or use of evaluation outputs is vital for evaluations (and evaluation practice in general) to have any value.

> *The basic rationale for evaluation is that it provides information for action. Its primary justification is that it contributes to the rationalization of decision-making . . . Unless it gains serious hearing when programme decisions are made, it fails in its major purpose (Weiss, 1972: 318).*

Given the centrality of use to evaluation practice, it is unsurprising that utilisation is the most researched area of evaluation and a subject of extensive discussion in the theoretical literature (Christie, 2007: 8). Evaluation utilisation can be defined as "the incorporation of evaluation findings in further development of a programme" (Hofstetter & Alkin, 2003 in Stewart & Jarvie, 2015: 115) or more broadly, "as the application of evaluation processes, products, or findings to produce an effect." (Johnson et al., 2009: 378). In this paper we will apply the second, broader definition of *use*.

Use and concerns about the underutilisation of evaluation – what Weiss (1972) termed a 'crisis' in use - are almost as old as the evaluation profession itself (Ledermann, 2012). Use practices are not necessarily predictable, positive or controllable (Saunders 2012) and evaluation experts have had extensive debates on the reasons why so many evaluations are not used to make policy decisions (Diez et al., 2016; Picciotto, 2016).

Despite the large amount of theorizing about evaluation utilisation and the existence of numerous utilisation frameworks that outline types of and barriers to use (Alkin, 1985; Patton, 1997; Kirkhart, 2000; Taut & Alkin, 2003, Peck & Gorzalski, 2009; Johnson et al., 2009), there has been little rigorous empirical testing of these frameworks. Existing findings are inconclusive and appear to have provided little to guide evaluation practice or assist evaluators in reflexive processes (Peck & Gorzalski, 2009; Henry & Mark, 2003; Ledermann, 2012). Without evidence on *when* and *why* evaluation findings are used, as well as *how* they are used and what actually *leads* to use, it is difficult to establish which factors are more important in promoting use (Johnson et al., 2009; D'Ostie-Racine et al., 2016). Of the empirical studies of use that do exist, very few focus on the African context and **none on South African evaluation practice.**

As evaluations are becoming a routine part of development practice and are increasingly tied to funding requirements, evaluation is at risk of becoming more of an administrative and political ritual, used more for legitimating programmes and policies than promoting organizational learning or change (Højlund et al., 2014). Concerned with the lack of evidence to support the value of evaluation, various international

agencies have recently commissioned studies on how to measure the impact and value of evaluations and strengthen evaluation uptake (Herbert, 2014; Ledermann, 2012; Johnson et al., 2009; Barre et al., 2016).

Use doesn't happen automatically or unaided. Evaluations have to be designed for use by intended users and facilitated in a way that contributes to use (Patton, 1997, 2008). Likewise, organisations that are evaluated need to have the capacity to engage with and make use of evaluation. They need to be guided by an understanding of practices that promotes evaluation use and builds the value of evaluation processes. This paper explores the dynamics around the use and benefit of evaluation findings and recommendations, the factors and relational dynamics influencing evaluation use, and what needs to be in place in order for evaluation to add more value in the South African context. This provides some indications for developing the competencies of evaluators, and building the capacity of organisations to prepare for and commission evaluations, oversee the evaluation process, engage meaningfully with findings and implement recommendations.

The emerging South African literature on evaluation has had some focus on how evaluators should engage with programme stakeholders and beneficiaries to make evaluation more participatory and democratic (cf. Podems (ed.), 2017); also in the interest of making evaluation 'processes' learning experiences, and improving evaluator understanding of beneficiary perceptions and needs. However in both the international and South African literature on evaluation practice there has been relatively little work aimed at conceptualising the nature and intricate dynamics of the relationship between evaluator and evaluand, and the impact of the same on evaluation use.

Literature review

A comprehensive literature review on evaluation use was conducted in preparation for the study. This was aimed at taking stock of the current state of theory and practice regarding ***how*** programmatic value accrues through the evaluation process. There is a fairly substantial literature on evaluation utilisation, focused to a large extent on identifying 'types of use' and what factors promote use in each case.

1) Theories of evaluation use and influence

The early literature identified four main uses of evaluation: instrumental use, conceptual use, enlightenment and symbolic/persuasive use (Leviton & Hughes, 1981; Weiss, 1977, 1979). Michael Patton later identified *process use* as a fifth use, which is defined as the usefulness of the evaluation process itself, which can bring about organizational and individual learning, development and capacity building (Fleischer & Christie, 2009; Preskill & Caracelli, 1997; Harner & Preskill, 2007; Shula & Cousins, 1997; Díez et al., 2016). Table 1 below presents a summarised description of each of these five types of use.

Table 1: Types of evaluation use identified in the literature

1) Instrumental use	Instrumental use can be said to occur when decisions about programmes and policies are made on the basis of evaluation findings; i.e. evaluation leads to programme development. Using this definition, the impact of an evaluation can be measured in terms of how it shapes programme change and practice (Weiss, 1998).
2) Conceptual use	Conceptual level is use at the cognitive level which may lead to new ways of thinking about the programme or the problem being addressed (Mary and Henry 2003).
3) Symbolic/Persuasive	Symbolic or political use refers to the use of an evaluation to persuade or convince others to support a particular position or legitimise a programme, practice or decision (D'Ostie-Racine et al., 2016). Where evaluations are use for symbolic purposes only, there is a risk that they will be used only as a box-checking mechanism for funding or accountability purposes.
4) Enlightenment use	When evaluation findings add knowledge to the field (i.e. beyond the programme) (Weiss, 1979).
5) Process Use	Process use can be defined as: "Individual changes in thinking and behaviour, and programme or organizational changes in procedures and culture, that occur among those involved in evaluation as a result of the learning that occurs during the evaluation process." (Patton, 2008: 155) In other words, the impact on on the programme or organization evaluated comes not only from findings, but going through the thinking process required by the evaluation process.

Frameworks of evaluation *influence* rather than *use* have also emerged (Henry & Mark, 2003; Mark & Henry, 2004; Kirkhart, 2000) in response to perceived weaknesses of the utilisation framework. The primary criticism is the many ways that evaluations could be used to influence practice do not fit adequately into the five categories of use, which have also been found to be difficult to measure and operationalize (Højlund et al., 2014). Another argument made by the proponents of evaluation influence (Henry & Mark, 2003; Mark & Henry, 2004; Kirkhart, 2000) is that the concept of *use* suggests "an intentionality, immediacy, and directness that may not always exist" (Herbert, 2014: 393). The *influence* approach looks to move away from identifying 'the important' characteristics influencing use such as evaluation quality or evaluator competencies, focusing on context-bound mechanisms that influence use instead (Ledermann, 2012: 160).

For example, depending on contextual factors such as organisational conflict, an evaluation might act as an awakener (revealing unknown problems), trigger for change, referee (providing objective view) or conciliator in cases of high conflict within the organization (Valovrita, 2002; Ledermann, 2012).

'Evaluation influence' as a concept provides a more comprehensive definition of the impact of evaluation and presents a series of mechanisms that shape influence at the individual, interpersonal, and collective levels. Influence also focuses on *social betterment* rather than *use* as the intended outcome of evaluation. The approach also imagines a bigger role for evaluation, seeing evaluation itself as an intervention which can be mapped out using a theory of change approach (Gildemyn, 2014). By positioning evaluation as an intervention and paying more attention to context it also considers both intended and unintended effects at multiple levels (individual, interpersonal and collective) and much more broadly.

To conclude, there is still not a persuasive body of literature on evaluation influence (Herbert, 2014) or much in the way of empirical applications of the concept (Gildemyn, 2014). Critics of the approach (Alkin & Taut, 2003; Patton, 1997, 2008; Hofstetter & Alkin, 2003) are critical of the inclusion of events and factors outside the awareness or control of an evaluator and thus cannot lead to theorising around better evaluation practice. The ideal of social betterment and the idea that evaluation should have a moral compass - an important part of Mark and Henry's (2004) influence model - is criticized as being unrealistic and impractical and by no means guaranteed by an influence-focused rather than utilisation-focused approach (Herbert, 2014: 395; Cousins, 2004). As the pathways and processes of influence are not clearly mapped out and influence is often indirect, influence is difficult to measure and this approach is more difficult to apply empirically. For this reason, we have applied the concept of "use" rather than influence in this study.

2) Factors influencing use

There are multiple frameworks that explain evaluation use (Alkin & Taut, 2003; Højlund et al., 2014; Johnson et al., 2009; Peck & Gorzalski, 2009; Cousins and Leithwood, 1986; Fleischer & Christie, 2009). Numerous frameworks and recommendations for conducting evaluations that "are useful and actually used" now exist (Patton, 2008, xvi). However, the relative importance of factors and processes that influence use is not clear (Ledermann, 2012).

While it may seem axiomatic that evaluations should be used, this isn't always planned for (Saunders 2012) and may not happen for a wide range of reasons. Failure to utilise evaluations and to promote utilisation can be the result of human, evaluation and contextual factors (Alkin & Taut, 2003). For example, the personal characteristics of and interpersonal relationships between both evaluators and intended evaluation users; the nature and quality of the evaluation process and findings and the extent to which they maximize, facilitate or disable use; and poor commitment to the evaluation process on the part of commissioning organisations, might all affect use. As well as failure to use evaluations, is also possible to either intentionally or unintentionally misuse the process or the findings (Christie & Alkin, 1999).

The section below briefly summarises the key factors identified in the literature as leading to use or non-use, as well as specific types of use.

3) Evaluation approach and design

The way in which an evaluation is used is strongly determined by the purpose and perspective of the evaluation (Chelimsky, 2006; Diez, 2016). For example, an evaluation focused on accountability will have a different kind of use (perhaps more symbolic) than one focused on demonstrating the proof of a programme concept (enlightenment or conceptual use). Use is also more likely if the evaluation responds to high priority information needs (Barr et al., 2016).

The evaluation approach and research design can also strongly influence the degree to which organisations are willing or able to engage with the evaluation process, which in turn influences stakeholder buy-in and, ultimately, use. For example, inclusive and participatory evaluation approaches focused on learning and knowledge building are more likely (although not necessarily) to be practical and useful and result in the transfer of practical skills (process use) than in cases where the evaluator takes a more external, rational and less collaborative approach (Díez et al., 2016; Loud & Mayne, 2013). Evaluations using large-scale data may be considered more legitimate and therefore may be more likely to influence decision-making than smaller, qualitative studies (Christie, 2007). However, very technical evaluations may be underutilised if evaluation users struggle to understand with and engage with the evaluation process and findings, or users feel the findings do not capture the programme or organisational context. The appropriateness of the evaluation design for the evaluation is also related to the quality of the evaluation and is discussed below.

Evaluation quality

Evaluations have value and are credible to potential users (and more likely to be used) if they are clear about the evaluation purpose and objectives, present verifiable findings which represent a plurality of views, offer useful conclusions and recommendations, clear evidence, and are communicated to the appropriate audience in a timely and user-friendly way. Furthermore, the design and methods used, perceived rigour, evaluator independence, direction of findings, affect public perceptions of the credibility of evaluation, which also influences use (Jacobson & Azzam, 2016). Conversely, poor quality evaluations (i.e. not timely, not relevant, not credible or unclear) are less likely to be used.

However, some theorists argue that quality is not directly related to use and that there is a need to take a realist approach that incorporates the realities of the organisational environment and political dynamics (Bovens et al., 2008; Pawson, 2006; Stewart & Jarvie, 2015). In other words, the underuse of evaluation is not always a supply-side problem, but an organisational-level one (Picciotto, 2016). For example, decision makers are known to make use of evaluations, even mediocre ones, as long as the findings fit their preconceptions and political agendas (Chelimsky, 1997). On the other hand, good quality evaluations are often not used because of uncomfortable findings or other contextual issues.

Evaluator competency

Strongly related to the evaluation quality, it almost goes without saying that the skills and capacities of service providers are important in facilitating use. Evaluation is a developing discipline are many violations of basic research practice (Scriven, 2016). This is likely more so in countries such as South Africa where the discipline has only really taken hold in the last 10 to 15 years.

As well as research skills, evaluators also need to have strong interpersonal and facilitation skills to promote buy-in and capacity-building, promoting both instrumental and process use (Patton, 1997). In keeping with this need in South Africa, the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation has developed a set of evaluation standards and another of competencies to promote good practice and guide the selection of evaluators in government evaluation processes (Leslie et al., 2014).

Stakeholder participation

Stakeholder or decision-maker participation in evaluation is now an accepted principle in the evaluation community (Alkin & Hofstetter, 2003; Cullen et al., 2011; Daigneault, 2014) and a survey by Fleischer and Christie (2009) found that 86% of evaluators thought that stakeholder involvement contributes to use. Stakeholder participation refers to the process of actively including potential evaluation users and others affected by programmatic activities in the evaluation process itself, from defining the evaluation questions through to interpreting data and crafting recommendations.

Involving potential users in defining evaluation questions and analysing results increases evaluation significance, ownership and utilisation and, as a consequence promotes process use (Diez et al., 2016). In a review of the evaluation literature since 1986, Johnson (2009) found that stakeholder participation in various aspects of the evaluation process was strongly associated with the commonly accepted categories of use (instrumental, conceptual, enlightenment, persuasive and process use).

Organisational context

The use or decision environment is increasingly understood as one of the most important factors determining use and in recent years there has been an increased focus in the literature on the organisational and contextual factors that shape “use practices” (Højlund et al., 2014; Saunders, 2012). Evaluations are embedded in organisations and the perceived novelty value and quality of an evaluation seem to matter more or less, based on the organisational context (Ledermann, 2012).

Given the importance of context, ‘situational responsiveness’ needs to guide the interaction between the evaluator and intended users within the organisation (Patton, 2008). Saunders (2012), Ledermann (2012),

Højlund et al. (2014a) and Fleischer and Christie (2009) maintain that because evaluation is highly dependent on social and organisational context, we need to move beyond the evaluation literature to look at organisational or institutional theory to understand how organisational interests and rationalities influence the interpretation of evaluation and knowledge use. Based on our review of the literature, the following contextual factors may affect evaluation use:

- *External pressure to evaluate (e.g. from donors or for public reporting) vs. internal propensity to evaluate*. When an organisation commissions an evaluation because of external pressure rather than genuine interests in the outcome, use is less likely (Johnson et al., 2009).
- *Evaluation culture within the organisation* – i.e. how is learning framed by the evaluand? Use is more likely if there is a history of evaluation, interest and experience with self-reflection and evidence-based learning practices, and openness to change or experimentation within an organisation (Mayne, 2009; Loud & Mayne, 2013). Where a weak evaluation culture exists, evaluation will be seen as a disconnected process rather than something embedded in culture and mindset of the organisation.
- *Organisational form, preferred ways of working and interests* may influence how willing an organisation is to take up evaluation findings and recommendations (Alkin & King, 2016). Organisations may become defensive or resistant to evaluation findings if they challenge the status quo (Matheson, 2007) or challenge organisational values, norms or worldviews (Ledermann, 2012)
- *Evaluation structures and capacity within the organisation* (Fierro and Christie, 2016; Saunders, 2012). Organisational capacity in terms of collecting monitoring data, conceptualising an evaluation and staff resources may shape the extent to which an organisation can participate in and benefit from the evaluation process and make programmatic changes in response. There is an increased emphasis on consciously building evaluation capacity within the organisation through the evaluation process, promoting both process and other forms of use.
- *Turf considerations and in-fighting within organisations* can affect use (Sabatier et al., 1995). Competition between agencies may also prevent learning from occurring (Stewart & Jarvie, 2015).
- *The policy, political and financial climate* all shape responses to and decisions made around the evaluation (Johnson et al., 2009). The usage of evaluations is more likely if findings are consistent with the current decision climate and there is pressure for change and reform within the organisation (Valovirta, 2002). Where there is organisational conflict or the policy or programme environment is contested or politicised, symbolic use or misuse of an evaluation is more likely (Cousins and Leithwood, 1986; Picciotto, 2016), although objective evaluation findings can also be used to resolve conflict (Valovrita, 2002). Evaluation use is less likely if there is no perceived need for change.

Human Factors

Alkin and Taut (2003) identify human factors as a category of factors influencing use. These factors include the characteristics of both users and evaluators and the relationship between them. For example, the leadership qualities, enthusiasm for and interest in the evaluation, aggressiveness, determination and access to power of individuals, shapes how they respond to evaluation findings (Patton, 1997). On the other hand, the interpersonal and facilitation skills of the evaluator may shape how users respond to the evaluation process and ultimately, use. Where relationships of trust and transparency rather than fear and transparency can be developed, evaluations are more likely to be seen as positive and enriching learning experiences and utilisation is more likely (Peck & Gorzalski, 2009).

Evaluation audience and plans for use

Patton's 'Utilisation-focused Evaluation' (Patton, 1997, 2008) focuses strongly on intended use for specific categories of users. Important here is the extent to which use is planned for. Identifying users, planning

for their inclusion and learning and formal plans for engaging with and responding to evaluations findings and recommendations is crucial to their implementation and use (Højlund et al., 2014; Díez et al., 2016)

Commissioning process & management practices pre and post evaluation

Related to evaluation capacity and ultimately evaluation quality is the process of commissioning and managing an organisation – the scope of the evaluation, terms of reference and selection of evaluators, role definitions and expectations about the relationship that to be established between commissioners, users and evaluators - what Loud and Payne (2009) call the "tricky triangle of evaluation."

Time dimension

The timing of the evaluation in the programme cycle may also affect use. Evaluations need to be timed in a way that it can influence key decisions and needs to be available prior to the making of these decisions, otherwise instrumental use is limited (Barr et al., 2016). For example, an evaluation at the end of a programme may lend itself more to 'conceptual' or 'enlightenment' use than a mid-cycle evaluation, which has more potential to inform ongoing programme activities. An evaluation that is not appropriately timed or which is delivered late can make the evaluation redundant. Another temporal aspect of evaluation use is *when* evaluation use can be seen or expected and Kirkhart (2000) distinguishes between immediate, end of cycle and long-term effects of evaluation.

This review of the literature has demonstrated that multiple factors drive use and that the evaluation process is an interactive process, which is strongly shaped by contextual and relational factors. However, the dialogical and interactive dimensions of evaluation process have not been adequately looked at in relation to their impact on the use of evaluation findings and value of evaluation processes. We have aimed this study at understanding the dynamics of this relationship and its relation to questions of utilisation.

Much of the literature on use is theoretical or based on case studies or systematic reviews and few studies have sought to investigate the relative importance of the various factors identified in the literature as influencing use. Our desire to understand these contextual issues and the factors influencing evaluation use in the South African context drove the decision to use as respondents those involved in conceiving, commissioning and managing evaluation processes.

Based on our review, Peck and Gorzalski's (2009) Integrated Conceptual Framework for Evaluation and Johnson et al.'s (2009) meta-synthesis of empirically-supported use factors appear to present the most comprehensive frameworks of evaluation utilisation factors, and their work was used as a resource in developing the methodology for this study.

Methodology of study

The study employed a mixed-method research approach, combining qualitative interviews with a survey focused on factors influencing evaluation use.

1) Literature review

The study reviewed literature focused on factors influencing utilisation of evaluation findings. A fairly extensive literature has emerged on the theory of evaluation utilisation or what has more recently been conceptualised as *evaluation influence.* This literature identifies failures to utilise evaluations as the result of: organisational or contextual factors; the personal characteristics of and interpersonal relationships between both evaluators and intended evaluation users; the nature and quality of the evaluation process and findings; weak knowledge of evaluation and its purpose; and poor commitment to the evaluation process on the part of commissioning organisations. However, very little empirical research has been done on *when* and *why* evaluation findings are used, as well as *how* they are used; and following the literature

review an exploratory field study was conducted with a view to understanding these questions in the South African context.

2) Interviews

Following the literature review a series of qualitative interviews was conducted with members of agencies that regularly have evaluations conducted or that support organisations to internally manage evaluation processes and use evaluation findings. The overall purpose of this component of the research was to gain insight into the positive and negative factors perceived as having an impact on evaluation utilisation.

We specifically excluded from this study evaluation practices which might be termed 'pre-programmatic', such as randomised control trials and other experimental designs which are conducted by way of testing interventions under closely monitored conditions. There are also hybrids between 'implemented programme' evaluations and experimental evaluations, for example using methods such as stepped wedge trials (Hemming et al., 2015). These approaches to evaluation are usually conducted under controlled conditions and by way of safely discovering new avenues of intervention. They are distinguished apart from implementing programmes designed for the express purpose of bringing about particular changes; and based on the implicit or explicit assumption of a workable theory of change. We make this distinction with some circumspection for a range of other reasons, most important of which is that programme evaluation is not always retrospective and most programme evaluations are conducted with a view to improving programmes, rather than only measuring change, value for money and so on.

The cases included: 1) a government department and provincial evaluation unit; 2) a grant-making organisation that supports evaluations of funded organisations and commissions evaluations; 3) an organisation started as an organisational development consulting company rather than an M&E specialized organisation, but which has conducted and facilitated the conduct of evaluations on multiple occasions, following an internal and developmental approach.

The specific interviewees included programme managers, evaluation practitioners responsible for commissioning evaluations, and leadership members of organisation. A total of nine interviews were conducted, some telephonically but more than half the cases in person.

A semi-structured interview format was developed to guide the interviews, with a view to engaging respondents in reflecting on the factors that that influenced utilisation and the perceived value of evaluation processes. The probe was not limited to use of evaluation findings, but explored a range of preparatory and management processes involved in evaluation commissioning and management processes upstream of utilisation.

3) On-line survey

Following the interviews, a survey protocol was developed.

The survey tool was influenced by the 'Integrated Conceptual Framework of Evaluation Use' identified by Alkin and Taut (2003), Peck and Gorzalski (2009) and Johnson et al. (2009); and also shaped by the findings of the case study interviews. Since utilisation was the focus, the respondents sought were evaluands rather than evaluators. They included evaluation managers, evaluation funders and those tasked with supporting evaluation processes in a range of ways.

The content of the protocol was focused on factors influencing use at all stages of the evaluation process from determining the need for the evaluation and developing a terms of reference to implementing changes following evaluation recommendations. We required respondents to complete the survey with reference to the last evaluation they had been involved in as an evaluand, to avoid generalisations and rather ground their perspectives in actual an actual experience of evaluation commissioning and utilisation.

Five point Likert scale questions were developed to assess various parameters or the evaluation process that may have influenced utilisation. We required respondents to focus on the last evaluation that the respondent had been involved with.

An online survey tool (Qualtrics) was used to administer the survey.

The research team requested access to the SAMEA member database as a source of contacts to be sent the survey. Additional participants from government, NGOs and donor organisations were requested to participate after the initial call for participation produced only a few responses. Identification of respondents was guided by the principle of maximum variation in terms of *inter alia*: types of commissioning organisations, sizes of organisation, types of evaluation, and types of programme.

The aim was to recruit 100 survey respondents with a target of a minimum of 60 completed surveys. However, respondents were less forthcoming than was anticipated and although more than 200 people were sent requests to complete the survey, and 54 commenced the survey; the final tally of completed responses was 44.

4) Analysis of data

The literature reviewed was summarised with specific reference to factors influencing evaluation utilisation.

The qualitative responses were identified and categorized using principles of grounded hermeneutic research (Packer & Addison, 1989). The analysis aimed to determine the conditions underlying more and less successful utilisation of findings. The key areas of enquiry concerned: 1) programmatic and management factors influencing the use of and value-add of evaluation processes, either positively or negatively; 2) how evaluands and others supporting evaluation processes conceive of their roles in supporting utilisation; 3) the modes of engagement of the evaluand in evaluation processes and the influence of the relationship between the evaluand and evaluator on the utility of evaluation processes; 4) organisational conceptions, practices and management arrangements in support of or detrimental to evaluation use and value-add; 6) the stages and processes of utilisation (i.e. where and how it takes place).

The quantitative data was analysed descriptively using Tableau software.

A discussion was developed to integrate the literature review and the qualitative and quantitative findings. This includes recommendations for improving of the understanding of evaluation process and practice in the South African context.

5) Limitations of study

As only a limited number of people were interviewed in the qualitative component of the study, it is possible that there is wider diversity in how government and civil society organisations approach evaluation or the type of relationships they develop with evaluators than is represented in this study.

It must be noted that the experiences of evaluators was not sought in this study; although three respondents were evaluation practitioners working within organisations that are the subject of evaluations. They expressed views reflecting their experiences as evaluators as well as being internal supporters of evaluation processes. These proved useful in understanding the different dynamics of internal and external evaluation processes. But we specifically set out to understand utilisation from the point of view of the intended user. It is likely that understanding of the influences on evaluation use would likely have been enhanced had there been greater probing of both the sides of the relationship of evaluand and evaluator; and in concluding we make specific suggestions about the need to pursue understanding of evaluation use in this way.

As already noted, our quantitative analysis would have been greatly strengthened by a higher survey response rate. Given the small sample size and the use of convenience sampling, it is not possible to draw inferences to the broader population of evaluation users, particularly those who are not members of SAMEA or who have never attended trainings run by the lead author.

Findings

Interview data

1) The relationship of the external evaluator and evaluand and its impact on evaluation use

The respondents were mostly of the view that whereas the generation of evaluation questions are determined by the evaluand, the methods used for answering these questions are significantly "in the hands" of the evaluators, and evaluation bids are often settled on the basis of the evaluation methods proposed. The analysis of data is likewise the business of the evaluator.

This more than anything establishes the externality and ultimately objectivity of the evaluation process, notwithstanding the significant time that evaluands spend managing evaluation processes as evaluand. The period of data gathering and analysis were seen as a respite from involvement in the evaluation process, although support in making contact with respondents involves sometimes quite intensive involvement, from putting together contact details and data bases to informing respondents of the evaluation and its purposes.

It became quite evident that the intensity of required evaluand involvement commitment came as a surprise to members of evaluand management and staff teams; although in some organisations (e.g. the funding organisation) there are specific evaluation experts in place who tend to buffer programme staff by taking the responsibility for internally managing evaluation processes.

Where a strong interactive and mutually accountable relationship developed between evaluator and evaluand, recognizing their respective roles, the evaluation process flowed more smoothly and ultimately the product of the evaluation was better in quality and more strongly owned by the evaluand; and hence more likely to be used.

There appears to be some difference in the dialogue between evaluators and government evaluands, as compared to the civil society evaluands. This difference appears to have some implications for use?

2) Commissioning processes and their impact on use

The 'use value' of evaluation processes is strongly dependent on the quality of service providers contracted to as evaluators.

Commissioning processes vary considerably across organisations, and appear to have a strong impact on clarification of roles of evaluator and evaluand. Government departments are bound by very well defined and strictly monitored evaluation procedures and in many respects the protocols available and the rule-bound contracting environment creates clarity. But at the same time it provides strictures in terms of head-hunting appropriate evaluators, and which may ultimately diminish the quality of evaluation services procured and the value accrued.

Non-governmental organisations and independent funding organisations on not subject to the same strictures and can seek out specific evaluators for particular tasks. They can for example head-hunt an anthropologist to perform particular services, or use hand-picked experts to provide advice on elements of evaluation design or impact measurement. This flexibility is not available in the government environment, and the result is that government departments are less able to be flexible in obtaining specific experience in a field. This sometimes results in them using services of evaluators who are quite unacquainted with the particular field of the programme.

The field specific experience of evaluators is not necessarily a problem, especially since seasoned evaluators appear to pride themselves on their ability to understand and work in different programme environments. However, in at least in one case there was a clear example of evaluators being unfamiliar with the programme environment to the extent that the evaluation product and its utilisation were compromised.

3) Background knowledge of evaluation service providers and its impact on use

A Government department programme manager recounted having been reluctant to agree to undertake an evaluation proposed by the Department, mainly for reasons of feeling unprepared and unskilled for the task and wary of the volume of work that was involved in supporting an evaluation. These concerns were in some respects justified, as there was no previous experience in the programme in preparing terms of reference for evaluation and managing evaluation processes.

It was a common refrain on the part of interviewees who had their programmes evaluated that the evaluation process was more time consuming than they had imagined. They had not been prepared for the high degree of 'hand-holding' that was necessary in familiarizing evaluators with the programme, acting as a gatekeeper and guide, and supporting evaluators in obtaining needed information. They were also not prepared for the numerous meetings and multiple iterations of reports and reviews of same.

Moreover, the evaluation service providers required much more engagement and support throughout the evaluation process than they had anticipated and they required "hand-holding" in many phases; especially in gaining access to respondents and stakeholders, but also for guidance at multiple points during the evaluation process. Arguably the most serious risk was the evaluators not having the necessary background knowledge to be able to sensitively and perspicuously understand roles, mandates and responsibilities of various programmes.

In many respects, Government programme managers were guided by comprehensive frameworks and guidelines for evaluation practice produced by the National Department of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation and this significantly assisted them to take charge of their part of the evaluation in circumstances such as above; including oversight of the evaluator's performance.

4) Ownership of evaluation findings is a critical step toward utilisation

Ownership of evaluation findings is strongly emphasised in the literature, with stakeholder participation in evaluation processes an important determinant of evaluation use.

It was not always the case that managers and staff of evaluated programmes saw the need for evaluation or expect that they would be involved in the evaluation process. The need for an evaluation may be determined at higher levels in the organisation, to meet objectives not of immediate concern to programme implementers; for example, to showcase the work of the programme for political or other purposes or to meet a funder requirement. In this context evaluation is not "our" evaluation, but "their" evaluation.

One respondent spoke bout "owning" the evaluation **process** as a key determinant of the propensity to accept and use evaluation findings. This was understood to be enhanced when the organisation had conceived evaluation as a learning process. An experienced evaluator described having witnessed much better utilisation of an evaluation when supporting processes of 'self-evaluation', as opposed to when she has conducting external evaluations for organisation where a report was produced for their consumption, with relatively little organisational involvement in the process, other than members of the organisation being respondents to interviews or suppliers of information. This is a relatively uncommon form of evaluation, and appears to draw its effectiveness from a programme turning a reflective lens on itself.

In some government programmes a similar effect was noted when there was involvement of officials in all stages of the evaluation value chain from development of terms of reference to review and approval of evaluation reports. Strong investment and involvement in the evaluation undoubtedly resulted in a context where the Department felt secure in developing a management response to the evaluation. They had an understanding of the evaluation processes, including the limits of the evaluation research. In addition the type of involvement (e.g. enlistment of respondents; introduction to stakeholders and gatekeepers) was often a necessary intervention in support of the evaluators, especially in relation to sensitive topics and work in rural areas.

There were various other views expressed on the process of accrual of value through the evaluation process, with the key point being that the involvement of the programme team at all stages of the evaluation adds value in terms a sense of ownership and investment in the evaluation process, and ultimately an informed use of the evaluation findings.

Use of evaluation findings strongly relies on there being a strong learning orientation associated with the evaluation. Where evaluation is not seen as 'imposed', but rather as a practice and part of what an organisations does; there appears to be stronger ownership and ultimately use.

This is significantly developed when it is programme managers that develop evaluation terms of reference. Efforts to train managers in evaluation management in a government department have born good fruit, and many successful evaluations have been implemented and used to make important decisions with only a modicum of well-focused support. However, there have also been evaluations which stand out as having not optimally built on evaluations. This is sometimes due to failure of relevant staff to appreciate the possible value of evaluation, and at other times it reflects perceived weaknesses in the evaluation report and lack of trust in its perspicacity.

It is apparent that buy-in and ultimately use of evaluations on the part of evaluands at the programme management level, requires higher level leadership and endorsement of the value of evaluation processes. A respondent in above-programme level leadership noted the importance of getting programme managers to think thus: "We are going to do this not because of the donor or external pressure, but because that's part of how we work." It was said that internal motivation for evaluation and an organisational culture of evaluation was proposed as the most critical driver of utilisation. Examples of good evaluation engagement and use were contrasted with negative experiences of evaluation when the evaluation was externally decided by the donor and the external evaluator contracted and held to account only to the donor.

5) Social sensitivity, relationships and utilisation

There were a number of stories about evaluators not meeting the expectations of the programme team and not sufficiently connecting with the programme. When external evaluators are given too much leeway to develop evaluation methodologies there are risks in terms of producing a useful evaluation. At the same

time when evaluands are too prescriptive they lose the opportunity of benefitting from the evaluators expertise and ability to creatively and accurately measure programme performance.

An example was provided of an evaluator being given too much freedom to determine the evaluation scope of work and methods, with the result in a largely worthless evaluation. It was said that "It is hard to get evaluators on-board and into the *essence* of a programme". There was also evidence provided of an evaluator developing a complex technical design which produced little of real value to the programme.

Another interviewee perspicuously commented on a less than successful technical evaluation process, saying that "It's two worlds layering on top of each other and evaluation doesn't tell you anything because it didn't capture the heart of the programme".

Evaluation might be conceived as a social process, which is more effective when it is conceived as bringing the organisation into alignment with its own abilities and aims; i.e. clarifying what the it is good for and what it achieves best.

The relationships between evaluator and evaluand plays out even in technical evaluations. One Government respondent was incensed at being treated patronizingly be the evaluation team that clearly had not grasped the expertise and experience of the programme leadership and implementation team. After some time had passed the evaluand began to point out to the evaluator where they had been "missing the boat" and misunderstanding the programme and what was required from the evaluation. There was something of a standoff, where the evaluators were critically confronted with harsh reviews of some of the early evaluation products delivered. It was noted that this reset the evaluand as "in charge" of the overall process of the evaluation and set a different and more collaborative relationship in place.

Ultimately some useful and relevant evaluation findings emerged, but it was clear to all that this was the product of a partnership between evaluator and evaluand. The overall outcome for the evaluand was very positive and significant in terms of recommendations which were owned and acted upon. Getting to partnership, gradual clarification of respective roles, respect for each other's experience and knowledge, and recognition of the respective expectations and contributions of evaluator and evaluand; seem to have been the keys to producing an evaluation process that was deemed very useful by the evaluand.

Survey findings

1) Respondent characteristics

Although a total of 54 participants commenced the questionnaire, only 44 respondents completed it; and the analysis is limited only to the 44 completed questionnaires.

The following are the characteristics of the respondents in relation to the types of organisations represented, the size of organisations, the role of respondents in organisations, the number of evaluations they have been involved in over the past five years and their roles in the most recent evaluation which is the subject of the questionnaire.

Types of organisation represented	
National government department	30%
Provincial government department	23%
Non-profit organisation	18%
Academic institution	9%
Municipal government department	7%
Corporate	7%
Other	5%

Grant-making / Funding organization	2%

The sample of respondents reflects a broad range of types of organisations, but most respondents were from government departments, followed by non-profit organisations. The method of recruiting participants as well as the realized sample cannot be said to represent a cross-section of those involved in evaluation commissioning and utilisation in South Africa and the findings are limited by the high proportion (60%) of government respondents (national, provincial, municipal).

This prevented adequate quantitative analysis of the relationship between the type of organisation and factors influencing evaluation utilisation. This was mitigated by qualitative interviews which covered the lack of representation of some institutional types that did not respond to the survey, with the exception of academic and corporate institutions.

Size of organisation, department or programme	
More than 100 employees	59%
0-10 employees	20%
51-100 employees	9%
21-50 employees	9%
11-20 employees	2%

The size of the programmes reflects the fact that most of the respondents are from large government departments.

Main role of respondent in organisation	
Other*****	41%
M&E manager	27%
Programme manager	16%
Executive management	14%
Stakeholder who has been consulted about the evaluation	2%
*****The 'Other' category included a range of participants who supported or otherwise participated in evaluation processes including executives, participants in evaluation committees, sectoral experts and project officers	

There is a good range of representation of different types of participants in evaluation processes from the evaluand side, exemplified in particular in the 'other' category

Number of evaluations respondent has had a role in during past 5 years	
1 to 3	50%
More than 10	30%
4 to 10	20%

Half of the respondents have been involved in three or less evaluations during the last five years, and hence have fairly limited experience of evaluation practice. The other 50% of respondents have had a role in at least 4 evaluations and 30% have considerable experience with having been involved in at least 10 evaluations. We do not have a representative sample of which allows us to comment on the

organisational experience factors that shape the ability to manage evaluations and implement findings, although at face value is seems that experience in managing evaluations would be a determinant of effective evaluation management and use.

Role of respondent in most recent evaluation (subject of questionnaire: more than one role could be noted)	
Evaluation manager/lead	41%
Evaluation oversight without management responsibilities	32%
Report reviewer	23%
Crafting of terms of reference for evaluation	23%
Internal evaluation manager	18%
Evaluation steering committee member (or similar)	16%
Programme manager	7%

It is evident that a good range of different types of participants in evaluation processes was recruited; although relatively few programme managers were included in the survey. This likely reflect a conflation of the category of 'evaluation manager/lead' and 'programme manager', overlooking the option of a respondent fulfilling more than one of the designated criteria.

2) Internal programme dynamics influencing evaluation use

Respondents were required to rate conditions related to the execution of the on a five-point scale, reflecting the quality degree of quality of each practice with regards to how it affected the usefulness of the evaluation.

Figure 1: Rating of contribution of evaluation management practices to evaluation use

	No/Weak	Partial	Quite a lot/Very much
There was a clear need/purpose for the evaluation acknowledged by the programme team	5%	15%	80%
The organization actively supported the evaluation process throughout	5%	18%	78%
The organizational executive or leadership level had a strong interest in the evaluation and its findings	10%	13%	78%
There was interest by the funder in continuing with the programme, hence to use the evaluation as a developmental process	18%	10%	73%
The project team reviewed and had an opportunity to shape the evaluation questions	15%	15%	70%
There was a clear terms of reference for the evaluation	8%	25%	68%
Formal structures were set up to manage the evaluation process from start to finish (e.g.evaluation steering group)	20%	23%	58%
The evaluation was appropriately timed in the programme life cycle	10%	35%	55%
A clear management plan was developed to implement recommendations emerging from the evaluation	30%	20%	50%
Programme partners or stakeholders were involved in the steering group or evaluation processes	25%	25%	50%

It is unfortunate that the institutional representivity of the data was skewed by a preponderance of Government respondents (60%). This prevented us from disaggregating the findings by institutional type, and as mentioned above we have had to rely on qualitative data to distinguish the perspectives of other types of organisation.

It is interesting to note that in a high proportion of cases (80%) there was an acknowledged need for the evaluation, which was supported by the organisation and the evaluation and its findings were of strong interest at the executive level. Notwithstanding this, there was relatively weak support for the evaluation at the level of formal structures to manage the evaluation processes, timing of the evaluation, management responses to the evaluation and involvement of programme partners and stakeholders in steering the evaluation.

Arguably the most important utilisation question relates to development of management response in the form of a plan to implement recommendations emerging from the evaluation. It appears that the strongest support for evaluation processes was at the front end of the process. By contrast there were relatively low proportions of positive responses on: 1) existence of a clear terms of reference for the evaluation (68%); 2) existence of formal structures to manage evaluation processes internally (58%); 3) appropriate timing of the evaluation in terms of the programme life cycle (55%); 4) development of management plans to implement recommendations (50%); and 5) stakeholder engagement in evaluation processes (e.g. as members of an evaluation steering groups).

It appears then that the commitment to evaluate is often not matched by commitments to practices known to secure good utilisation of evaluation findings.

Factors noted by respondents as important in shaping usefulness of the evaluation in question

Respondents made a number of comments on factors influencing evaluation use, most of which point to delivery of evaluation findings which are quite specific in terms of assessing results and attributing change to specific programme outputs and funding commitments, the presentation of appropriate recommendations, and assessing alignment of programmes to institutional objectives.

- Whether evaluations are able to accurately assess outcomes and impacts of programmes, policies and funding; and the extent to which evaluations are able to attribute success to specific programme components;
- Whether evaluations help the client to reflect on the programme, learn from those reflections and put new measures in place to improve practice in future;
- The degree to which evaluations are able to assess whether strategic objectives are being met, or on target to being met;
- Whether evaluation helps programme planners and implementers to understand change, both anticipated and unanticipated, and to plan for what happens next;
- The ability to assess the impact and cost-effectiveness/cost-benefit evaluation of a programme;
- Assessment of the effectiveness of delivery and impact of training programmes;
- The ability to make appropriate recommendation for improvement on the basis of evaluation findings;
- The inclusion of planning processes as a subject of evaluation;
- Assessment of the social, economic and development impact of grant funding towards a project;
- Identification of success stories which can be built on;
- Assessing whether targeted activities are aligned to the institution's strategic objectives.

3) Quality of evaluation practice and its influence on evaluation

Respondents were required to rate various evaluation practices on a five-point scale, reflecting the degree of quality of each practice with regards to how it affected the usefulness of the evaluation.

Figure 2: Rating of quality of evaluation practice and its contribution to evaluation use

	A little & Not at all	Moderately	Quite a lot & Very much
The evaluator/s showed that they had or developed good understanding of the programme area	8%	13%	79%
The report presented clear findings and recommendations	10%	13%	77%
Recommendations were relevant and appropriate	10%	13%	77%
The evaluation report was of a high quality	13%	15%	72%
There was good communication between the project team and the evaluator	5%	26%	69%
The evaluators were realistic in what they said they would and could do, such that their evaluation plan delivered what it said it would	10%	21%	69%
The evaluation was seen as a worthwhile investment (good value for money)	8%	23%	69%
The evaluation report accurately represented programme successes and challenges	10%	21%	69%
The evaluation achieved what it set out to do	10%	21%	69%
The evaluator involved all relevant parties in the evaluation process	5%	28%	67%
The evaluators delivered less than they promised	51%	23%	26%

It is notable that 26% of respondents felt that the evaluators delivered less then they promised, and 23% delivering a partial verdict on the evaluators delivering on what they promised; with only 51% saying that the evaluators did deliver on what they promised. This amounts to saying that evaluation processes offer good value for money even when they under-deliver – perhaps this is also related to "the evaluation achieved what it set out to do"?

It is interesting that the production of clear findings and recommendations as well as their relevance and appropriateness were rated higher than the overall quality of the evaluation report. Unfortunately, the survey did not probe these responses any further and it would be interesting to know in what sense the quality of the evaluations were deemed to be of less than good quality (28%).

Some light was thrown on this anomaly in the qualitative interviews, which produced evidence of poorly drafted reports which were often initially weak on understanding key elements of the programme such as relationships with stakeholders and work or economic sector dynamics and inadequate at the level of drawing insightful conclusions and making recommendations. Interestingly, correcting of misconceptions of the 'field' of study and vetting of recommendations was an important part of the evaluation process; although evaluand managers had not realized the extent to which this would be necessary. We expect that this dynamic as well as the finding 49% of respondents reported that evaluators at least partially delivered less than they promised, muted the rating the of report quality, compared to overall satisfaction ("worthwhile investment and good value for money").

It was also found in the qualitative data that statistical analyses were disappointing, partially due to challenges of gathering sufficient survey data, and particularly due to problems of accessing respondents. The latter was *inter alia*, due to challenges of obtaining contact details, poor response to requests to participate and costs associated with in-person interviewing.

It is also interesting that suggestions on how to improve evaluation quality strongly focused on increasing stakeholder involvement, noting that only 67% of survey respondents indicated a high degree of involvement of relevant stakeholders. Those interviewees that had involved stakeholders in evaluation steering/advisory committees found that this added significant value. This was especially useful in relation to provision of guidance to evaluators on how best to reach appropriate respondents and in broadening the relevance and usefulness of the evaluation to the range of parties with interests in the programme being evaluated. The survey shows that about one third of respondents had not put a significant effort into this.

4) Value added in the course of the evaluation process

The purpose of this group of questionnaire items was to test *whether* and *how* the process of evaluations has beneficial effects.

With reference to the last evaluation process they were involved with, respondents were asked to rate the extent to which the *evaluation process itself* added value to the programme or organisation being evaluated (i.e. prior to the delivery of a final evaluation report).

Figure 3: Extent to which particular aspects of the evaluation process added value to the programme or organisation being evaluated

	A little & Not at all	Moderately	Quite a lot & Very much
Our involvement in the evaluation gave us ownership of the evaluation process and findings	13%	13%	74%
It made the link between our programme goals and activities clearer (i.e. clarified our theory of change)	18%	18%	64%
Evaluation findings provided evidence to get management or political buy-in for the programme	16%	21%	63%
The internal project team members gained new skills and knowledge by participating in the evaluation process	13%	31%	56%
The evaluation generated interest in evaluation and learning within the organization	18%	28%	54%
The evaluation process was a turning point for the programme in significant ways	23%	26%	51%

A high proportion of respondents (74%) indicated that involvement in evaluation processes led to a sense of ownership of the evaluation process and findings. Far from being a procedural management activity, participating in the evaluation process led to a greater sense of owning an evaluation and its findings. We can extrapolate from this that it enhances use, certainly as compared to evaluation reports being delivered with little opportunity on the part of the evaluand to guide or advise on evaluation processes. The qualitative interviews strongly support this finding, showing that the extent to which interaction of evaluand and evaluator are necessary and valuable. Involvement in the evaluation process is not an inert or simply procedural management activity. It is often a dynamic and formative process which ultimately enhances the quality of the product and releases value through the evaluation process itself.

Interviewees as well as survey respondents also concurred on such involvement creating better internal understanding of their programmes; as evidenced in 64% of survey respondents saying that the evaluation process itself raised awareness of the 'theory of change' of the programme and the logic behind particular interventions.

Interactions with evaluators were reported by interviewees as sometimes frustrating, with the two parties not always concurring on interpretations and conclusions and the evaluators perceived as not "getting" how the programme works. In one instance it was very evident that the dialogue on interpretation of results bore some of the best fruits of the evaluation, laying the ground for acceptance on the part of the evaluand of inadequacies in their own theory of change and understanding of the programme dynamics at play. To this extent the evaluation bore its fruit prior to the final report, in the form of recognition and acceptance that there were problems that needed to be encountered. Moreover, since progress meetings with the evaluators were attended by key programme personnel, understanding of the evaluation findings and knowledge of their limits was developed, which created a good foundation for developing management and implementation responses.

This is in keeping with the finding above about evaluation creating management or political buy-in for the programme. The fact of investment in a programme's evaluation and finding was seen as important in the sense of r being external evidence for the programme an evaluation having been done was perceived by government interviewees as important in recognizing the programme as worthy of being evaluated, and as creating a pretext for man

A fairly high proportion of respondents (64%) felt that the evaluation process helped them to understand their programme and its theory of change, while 63% of respondent reported that the evaluation had symbolic or justificatory use. The fact that only 51% of respondents indicated that the evaluation was a turning point for their programme may reflect something of the purpose of the evaluation as opposed to a less than satisfactory outcome of the evaluation. The purpose may have not been to make major programmatic decisions. Nonetheless it does indicate that instrumental use of evaluation was limited in the programmes represented in the study.

Only 56% of respondents felt that the project team had acquired new skills and knowledge through the evaluation process while 54% felt that the evaluation had generated interest in evaluation and learning within the organisation. It might have been expected that a successful evaluation led to increased interest in evaluation and its role in promoting organisational learning, but it may mean that external evaluations have a muted impact beyond the findings of the evaluation report. Interestingly, some respondents in the qualitative interviews strongly endorsed evaluation as an internal process, requiring development of critical and self-reflective processes on the part of programme implementers as an alternative to external evaluation processes. External evaluation may well be limited in terms of promotion of learning processes beyond the specific technical function of evaluation.

An issue that was raised in the interviews but unfortunately was not included in the survey, concerned the instrumental use of evaluation to justify actions that may otherwise have seemed controversial. Evaluations are sometimes used to bring about changes in a programme, in this instance changes in an implementing agent. The evaluation was used to provide evidence to support the envisaged change, and to justify a decision about which there was already little doubt in the mind of the programme management. This was one of the primary programmatic outcomes of the evaluation, and was perceived

by some as “doing the unpleasant business of terminating contracts when the client is unable or unwilling to do so themselves”.

5) Perceptions regarding of how evaluation processes could be improved

Respondents were requested to note down any regrets or thoughts about how the evaluation process referred to in the survey could have managed or engaged with differently, to yield better value. Most improvements suggested were related to strengthening stakeholder (staff, community, donor, local government) engagement by the evaluator and improving the evaluation management processes, particularly in terms of clarifying the terms of reference for the evaluation and time and data management. Only in one case was a lack of support from organization leadership cited as a difficulty in carrying out the evaluation (78% of respondents indicated that there was strong interest by leadership).

Twenty-four respondents provided comments regarding how programme processes could be improved in two main areas.

i) Evaluation commissioning and management processes

- Timeframes for evaluations were perceived as being too short; and time frames in one government department were seen as perennially over-run.
- Planning needs to recognise that turn-around times for the evaluand (e.g. reviewing protocols and draft reports, providing feedback) need to be added to terms of reference and planning time-frames. The qualitative interviews showed that evaluations more often than not were not completed in time, sometimes almost doubling the expected completion period. In some instances this created planning problems as time taken overshot planning windows of opportunity in relation to financial years and government planning schedules.
- Two commissioners recognized the need for improved capacity to develop clear terms of reference and planning protocols for evaluations, pointing to a lack of expertise in these areas on the part of some evaluands. (Notwithstanding the Government sector which has developed detailed and high quality guidance for all stages of evaluation process).
- The need for policies which require programme staff to be more helpful and available in the supporting evaluation processes was seen by one respondent to be necessary. This points to the need expressed in interviews, regarding preparation of programme staff for the roles that are thrust on them, often unexpectedly. In some cases, this caused much frustration and tension within organisations, the brunt of which is sometimes borne by the evaluand evaluation manager who was often not knowledgeable about evaluation management or well prepared for the task. To some extent this was mitigated by training, but the problem of demand for involvement in evaluation processes was vexing to all, and not least to the evaluators. They were reported as having expressed frustration and having been stone-walled, not realising that staff they were wanting to engage had not been adequately pre-warned about the demand for their time; for example in collating date in ways required by evaluators. These issues undeniably slowed evaluation processes and impacted on the quality of information obtained, ultimately impacting on the quality of findings and confidence with respect to utilisation.
- Oversight over data quality was noted as a challenge by evaluands, with evaluators returning data more limited data sets than was planned. Evaluands tend to leave the evaluators to their own devices at this point, with oversight of data collection and quality, sometimes reaching a point where it was too late to address problems of sampling and access to respondents. This was an area that evaluands are not always in a position to monitor at a technical level, without the necessary skills or time available to become more intricately involved in monitoring the work of evaluators. It was noted as a limitation in the evaluation management process, and it is arguably the weakest link in the value chain leading to useful evaluation.

- It was also noted that evaluand programme managers sometimes have their management efforts derailed through planning, contracting and payment departments/services which are "not user friendly". Bureaucracy was in some instances a major impediment to efficient evaluation processes, creating delays and significant problems when evaluators begun to be distracted by other commitments. Thus the prospects of evaluations flowing seamlessly into utilisation of findings are sometimes impeded by factors in evaluand organisations which are not in control of the officials responsible for evaluation processes.

2) Stakeholder participation/involvement

- The involvement of evaluand programme staff in evaluations was considered important although leadership guidance was in some instances limited.
- Some key stakeholders were not engaged at the outset and their inclusion would have led to better shaping of the focus of the evaluation. Facilitation of involvement of key participants was a challenge and is not necessarily embraced as an expected responsibility of management. It was noted by one respondent that thorough consultation with relevant stakeholders on the local level (e.g. the municipality) would have yielded interesting and fruitful results for future evaluations and impact studies, but this opportunity was not pursued.
- Qualitative interview findings suggested that achieving stakeholder participation was the most burdensome and unexpected component of the evaluation process for the evaluands.

To summarise, the realities of interaction of evaluator and evaluand are time-consuming and unexpected. This is largely due to preconceptions on the part of both parties which often do not prepare them for the extent of back-and-forth communication, greater than expected demands, and the need to achieve consensus at many levels, and develop a robust dialogical relationship. It seems the demands of this relationship often come as a surprise and were experienced by the evaluand as a source of frustration; yet they are inevitable. As has been seen above they are in some senses a valuable and ineliminable component of what is essentially an opportunity to use the objectivity, conceptual and technical expertise of the evaluator to infuse reflective and critical functions (distanciation) into the everyday understanding of the programme on the part of the evaluand.

Conclusions

The study has endorsed a perspective on evaluation that was to some extent predicated by the findings of literature review and was thoroughly borne out in the qualitative and survey findings. Setting aside the various conceptions of internal and developmental evaluation, recent literature on evaluation has spoken of evaluation processes in relational terms (Valovrita, 2002; Ledermann, 2012). We have found that the conception of a programme being externally evaluated by an organisation contracted to independently address questions that funders and organisations ask, overlooks some central dynamics of evaluation process. We have seen fit to reframe the context of evaluation through an appreciation of the centrality and perhaps inevitability of a significant dialectical engagement between the evaluand and the evaluator.

Interviews with commissioners and programme managers, who have had programmes evaluated, have revealed a perspective of evaluation processes being far more interactive than they anticipated. The concept of a linear process involving independent commissioning and evaluation processes leading to delivery of objective reports and followed by use of evaluation findings is in many respects misleading.

Based on parameters defined by the evaluand, the evaluator proposes the method and takes responsibility for the evaluation processes and recommendations. But this two-stage formulation is misleading. Evaluations are inevitably shaped by commissioners and evaluand programme managers through the entire evaluation process, including: considerations leading to the decision to have a programme evaluated; setting of the purpose and scope of the evaluation; the framing of evaluation questions and prescription of methodological frameworks; selection of service providers; oversight of the evaluation process; providing contextual understanding and details of appropriate respondents or clients; collating databases for use by the evaluators; reviews of and approval of evaluation reports; engagement with evaluation findings; development of management responses to recommendations and strategising to implement the same.

Nonetheless, there is a separation of the actual conduct of the evaluation from the activities of the evaluand. The independence at both poles of this relationship is not contested, and evaluation relationships can be clearly separated out at the level of the contractor and contracted having certain distinct responsibilities. Yet in many respects their functions are in service of each other, and often they have to solve problems together; for example, sorting out confusing databases, recruitment of difficult-to-reach respondents, clarifying expectations around hazy parts of the evaluation terms of reference or mismatch in the understanding of deliverables.

The study has shown that while evaluands often believe that the work of the evaluation processes is handed to the evaluator, this is a short-lived reality. Interviews revealed that evaluands often experienced frustrations with the ability of the evaluators to "get on with the job", contact and communicate with respondents independently, draw conclusions that were on point with emerging strategies in the relevant department and policy environment, and so on. The reality is that the evaluand is often drawn into the evaluation process in unanticipated ways, and the problem is not that they are drawn in so much as they did not conceive or accept their role in the evaluation process; and the value that accrues from it.

Interviews showed that the structures and dynamics within organisations being evaluated appeared to influence the nature of relationships developed with the evaluators. For example, government evaluands were much more constrained by bureaucratic processes than civil society organisations, which tended to have more flexibility in how they engaged with evaluation processes. On the other hand, for civil society organisations project evaluations are sometimes driven by donor funding and requirements, resulting in a lack of engagement of programme managers in evaluation processes such as developing evaluation questions and terms of reference. This seems to limit the ownership and ultimately the internal utilisation of evaluation findings. Where donors were more open to allowing organisations and evaluators to shape the evaluation together, evaluands could engage more actively and productively with evaluators, which the literature shows is more likely to result in use.

The South African Government guidelines prescribe the management processes involved in each stage of the evaluation process through to responding programmatically to the recommendations of evaluation. Moreover they provide specific guidance on engagement on the part of the evaluand in evaluation management, at all stages of an evaluation. The evaluand has specific roles it was noted that relationships with evaluators change and develop over time. In one case the relationship between the Programme staff and the evaluators was characterized by frustration and a sense of disappointment around the failure of the evaluators to "get it"; exemplified by conflicts of understanding of the roles and positions of different community stakeholders. This was eventually worked out after much frustration was experienced, bordering on despondency about the evaluators' apparent inability to understand the programme. The conflict of interpretations eventually yielded to a consensus and this required learning on both sides. The

result was new and more nuanced understanding of stakeholder dynamics, which developed as a result of the interaction.

Efforts to strengthen evaluation use have been focused on evaluator competencies, and there has been very little work done to conceptualise organisational evaluation capacity requirements (Morkel et al, 2017). It is arguable that these kinds of initiatives focus on strengthening evaluation quality but not the process of engagement in an evaluation relationship, or the capacity of organisations to manage evaluations. Government guidelines in this area are well developed and cover the entire value chain from identifying programmes that need to be evaluated to monitoring the implementation of management plans derived from evaluation recommendations. Yet it is clear from survey responses that some of the expected processes and functions are not adhered to.

Significantly more needs to be done to strengthen organisational evaluation capacity, particularly in light of study findings which show evaluand involvement in evaluation processes is often greater than they expected. Whereas there is much work going on to build the capacity of evaluators in South Africa, there is some conceptual ambiguity around the evaluation capacity of evaluands (Nielsen, 2011). There are a number of tools developed for building evaluation capacity of organisations, for example, the Capacity and Organizational Readiness for Evaluation (CORE) tool (Morariu, Reed & Brennan 2011) and the checklist Building Organisational Evaluation Capacity (Volkov & King 2007). These need to be brought to the fore and more attention to the development of evaluand competencies is required.

Our survey findings indicated that evaluands felt that the quality of evaluations delivered was not always optimal, indicates that there is still work to be done in strengthening evaluator capacities. Strengthening evaluand capacity to critically and sensitively engage with the process and findings of evaluations will also require evaluators to deliver higher quality evaluations which are more likely to be useful; and some sensitization of evaluators on how best to engage in the relationship with evaluands is needed.

Evaluators and evaluands work closely together at all stages of the evaluation process, leading finally to an accepted evaluation report including findings and recommendations. Interestingly when it comes to the point of utilisation through programme management decision making and planning, the evaluator has left the scene and responses to their recommendations are left to the discretion of the evaluand. At this point use becomes subject to other influences (political, policy and financial environments; leadership and donor acceptance of findings; capacity to implement recommendations and changes; and so on).

In South African government evaluation guidelines there are safeguards to discounting or disregarding of evaluation findings, where decisions not to accept or implement recommendations are required to be justified. It is quite often the case, especially when there are other strategic considerations and developments to be taken into account, for example in the context of emerging broader departmental or provincial government priorities.

Saunders (2012) has suggested that evaluation practices should promote 'boundary crossing' and that evaluation material or artifacts should provide resources for new practices. The key word here is 'resources'. In the course of this study we have seen that the evaluation *process* is a strong part of the product. The value of an evaluation begins to accrue when an evaluation is conceived as necessary. From conception of the need for an evaluation, development of terms of reference, selection of a service providers, conduct of the evaluation, review of findings and development of responses to evaluation, there is incremental accrual of understanding and fresh thinking (conceptual use) leading to decision making about programme theories of change, programme focus and strategy, implementation models, partnership management, resourcing and so on.

From the idea that an evaluation should be conducted to decision-making in consideration of the results of an evaluation, there is an 'other' involved, in the form of the evaluator. The relationship with this other is critical. When this relationship is not understood and invested in, or when the evaluator is expected to 'deliver' a product with little input from the evaluand, evaluation processes are at risk of derailment. This may take different forms, from framing questions inappropriately to not reaching certain categories of relevant stakeholders and producing inappropriate and unviable recommendations in the context of government policy, for example.

Having said this, it is notable that the survey findings showed that most evaluation processes were perceived as 'successful', producing useful reports and mostly appropriate recommendations. Our interviews found that even when the evaluand struggled to find an appropriately experienced service provider (usually in terms of knowledge of the programme domain of work), with an engaged relationship between evaluand and evaluator, evaluators were usually able to get to know and understand the programme context. The point is that this required the evaluand to be much more active in the evaluation process than was anticipated. It was also notable that inexperienced evaluands had much steeper learning curves, and they had not bargained for the levels of involvement required, or set aside time and human resources for what became necessary following development of the terms of reference. In some instances, management of the evaluation process became frustrating and overbearing. They had not anticipated the need to prepare their constituencies, to have to review protocols, to comment on the viability of recommendations and so forth.

Our argument is that such activity is an ineluctable part of the process of being an evaluand. At the same time the evaluators clearly had their own learning trajectory to navigate. In one of the evaluation processes there were at least four iterations of the evaluation report before a satisfactory product was attained. The relationship between evaluator and evaluand was contestorial at times. Both parties were reportedly frustrated that they were not being "met". Our point is that some degree of this is not only common but it should come as no surprise. It would be of value to study the evaluation relationship in more detail and to consider how the surprise and frustration sometimes experienced by both parties might be mitigated to some extent.

It is clearly the case that some evaluators are better able to rapidly pick up the pulse of the programme, due to greater experience and familiarity with the type of programme. In South Africa evaluation is a relatively new field of practice, and where there are many new entrants to the field. Similarly, evaluands are often rookies to evaluation, and do not have the programme staff to deploy in evaluation management duties. It is notable in this regard that 20% of the organisations involved in the survey have '1-10' employees, and it seems improbable that such small organisations would have someone skilled and experienced enough to effectively manage evaluation practitioners and processes. Moreover, interviews showed that even in large-budget government programmes there was often not the management capacity and know-how to chart the programme through the multiple challenges involved in the evaluation process.

The South African government has invested in development of a national evaluation policy and system (Goldman et al, 2015). As part of this initiative, a set of evaluation standards and guidelines (Leslie et al, 2014) and list of evaluator competencies (Podems, 2014) have been developed for use in the government sector. However, no such frameworks exist for civil society organisations and it seems likely that programme managers could benefit from greater understanding of evaluation management demands and standards.

Very few studies have acknowledged the negotiated and dialogical aspects of evaluation processes and the processes by which organisations respond to and utilise evaluation outputs or findings. Based on case studies of Finnish government agencies, Valovirta (2002) argues that evaluation information is open to interpretation and debate and that different meanings can be attributed to evaluations and used to make different claims (i.e. judgements of value or claims of fact) or arguments that persuade, legitimise, criticise or defend particular actions or points of view. 'Argumentation' is a social interaction that shapes decision-making as new understandings or forms of consensus emerge through debate. He further argues that the negotiations around evaluations are shaped by organizational context, and they are the result of the interaction of two dimensions: pressure for change and the relationship between conflict and consensus in the organization.

This all points to the need for greater appreciation and understanding of the evaluation relationship. This this needs to be built into the education of evaluators and evaluation guidelines for evaluands. This should be done in the interest of averting unhelpful conflicts around roles, responsibilities and prerogatives in evaluation relationships; and in the process enhancing the utilisation dividend through more productive collaboration between evaluator and evaluand.

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