



Organisational analytical capacity: Policy evaluation in Belgium[☆]

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Abstract

Checklists for evaluation capacity builders include a wide range of building blocks for supporting evaluation activity. Yet, the relative importance of each building block is not clear. The purpose of this article is to identify the capacity related factors that are *necessary*, but not necessarily sufficient, for organisations that wish to institutionalise high quality policy evaluations. To retrieve these factors, we rely on the necessity function in qualitative comparative analysis. We present a study of twenty-seven organisations of the Flemish public sector (Belgium), in which the introduction of policy evaluations is relatively recent. Our case analysis thus sheds an interesting light upon how policy evaluation, and the underlying capacity to evaluate is given shape. Our findings point at evaluation demand as the most necessary prerequisite for fostering evaluation activity, more so than supply related factors.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, evaluation has been given a prominent position in government modernisation reforms worldwide (Brans & Vancoppenolle, 2005) as an essential analytical tool for professional policy-making. Yet, despite a general consensus on the intrinsic value of policy evaluations for good government, there is a large variety in the extent to which organisations are active in evaluation. Checklists for evaluation capacity builders typically include a wide range of building blocks that are assumed to contribute to evaluation activity. At present, however, it is not clear which of the capacity building conditions are strictly necessary. How then, should governments know where to prioritise efforts, should they seek to promote evaluation activity? This is the question we attempt to answer in this article. We rely on the necessity function in qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) (Ragin, 1987, 2000, 2008) to investigate which capacity related conditions enable the presence or absence of evaluation activity. We agree with Ragin (2003: 179) that “Necessary conditions are central to social theory, research design and more generally, the process of coaxing generalizations from empirical evidence”.

We distinguish between three dimensions of evaluation activity: conduct of evaluations; regularity of evaluations; and quality of evaluations. For each of these dimensions, we conduct a necessity analysis. Twenty-seven organisations

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of the Flemish public sector (Belgium) constitute our cases. Internationally compared, Flanders belongs to the second wave of countries (regions) where policy evaluation was gradually introduced only by the start of the new millennium (Varone, Jacob, & De Winter, 2005; Pattyn, 2014a). In Flanders, policy evaluations typically acquired a place on the agenda along with the introduction of a broader modernisation reform agenda. In 2006, the Flemish administration implemented large-scale NPM inspired changes, coined as *Beter Bestuurlijk Beleid* (Vlaams Parlement, 2003). For evaluation, this meant that departments were officially put in charge of evaluating implemented policies (instruments used, outputs and outcome), while the implementing agencies were to provide the input for evaluations. With policy evaluations only recently introduced in the Flemish public sector, our cases shed an interesting light upon how policy evaluation, and the underlying capacity to evaluate is given shape. We trust our findings offer a source of inspiration for governments who seek to strengthen their evaluation capacity.

In a first section of the article, we discuss the relevance of the study, and present the capacity building blocks included in the research. Next, we discuss the research strategy and explain the potential and characteristics of the analysis of necessity. In a third section, we address the actual puzzle of the article and present the necessary conditions for each of the three dimensions of evaluation activity: incidence of evaluation, regularity of evaluations, and quality of evaluations. We conclude the article with a recapitulation and discussion of the policy implications of our findings.

2. Evaluation capacity for evaluation activity

2.1. Relevance

For our analysis, we rely on one of the most cited definitions of policy evaluation: “Policy evaluation is a scientific analysis of a certain policy (or part of a policy), aimed at determining its merit or worth on the basis of certain criteria” (Scriven, 1991: 139). We distinguish policy evaluation from monitoring. Admittedly, monitoring systems can be useful in answering descriptive evaluation questions (i.e. What-questions). But they will fall short when it comes to Why- and How-questions. The latter are particularly the type of questions that constitute the largest share of policy evaluations. We also draw upon Painter and Pierre (2005: 5) who denoted evaluation as a supporting system for policy capacity, particularly when evaluation helps further values of coherence, public regardness, credibility, decisiveness, and resoluteness. Although policy evaluation is pivotal in supporting policy capacity, it is also relevant for two of the other governing capacities: administrative capacity and state capacity. Indeed, to the extent that policy evaluations take into account criteria as economy, efficiency, responsibility, probity or equity, they contribute to administrative capacity. Policy evaluations possibly support state capacity too, when they are called to assess the legitimacy, accountability, compliance or consent of a policy.

Our comprehensive notion of evaluation activity makes a distinction between (a) the mere incidence of evaluation activity, (b) the regularity of evaluation activity and (c) the quality of evaluation activity. These three dimensions return as key indicators for the success of evaluation capacity building (ECB). As highlighted by one of the most well-known ECB definitions: “ECB is a context-dependent, intentional action system of guided processes and practices for bringing about and sustaining a state of affairs in which quality program evaluation and its appropriate uses are ordinary and ongoing practices (. . .) (Stockdill, Baizerman, & Compton, 2002: 8). Ultimately, ECB strives for regular and high quality evaluation activity.

2.2. Evaluation capacity: building blocks

In this contribution, we aim to identify the necessary conditions for evaluation activity, with its three dimensions. Rather than generating one list of potentially necessary conditions per dimension, we composed one single list for all dimensions together. We combined two sources. A first source was the ECB literature. We conducted a wide literature screening of top journals in the evaluation field (examples: *Evaluation*, *New Directions of Evaluation*), books/chapters in books of renowned evaluation scholars, reports from international institutions with well-known evaluation units (European Commission; World Bank; United States General Accounting Office), and evaluation checklists (examples: Stufflebeam, 2002; Volkov and King, 2007). Substantial input for our list of conditions was provided by an earlier exercise in which we attempted to identify the building blocks behind the constructs of evaluation capacity and evaluation culture (De Peuter & Pattyn, 2009). Given the conceptual complexities associated with an analysis of evaluation capacity and evaluation activity, other related constructs, such as evaluation maturity or evaluation culture, were also taken into

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