



Wilton Park

Event outline

Revisiting independence, objectivity and the critically reflective role of evaluation for the SDG era

Wednesday 25 – Friday 27 April 2018 | WP1600

Context

Development organisations and donors have growing expectations of the role that evaluation can play in determining whether resources are being wisely spent and are having the expected development impacts. There are also mounting questions about the role that evaluation knowledge and expertise should play in determining whether development assistance ‘works’.

The evaluation function has both evolved within, and contributed to an organisational logic in which development projects and programmes are planned, implemented and appraised in a results and evidence-based management framework. This framework is ideally suited to serving an organisational imperative of accountability.

A cornerstone of the evaluation function in development agencies has been its organisational and behavioural independence from management. Independence is commonly understood as freedom of interference from possible biasing influences embedded in organisational norms. These influences range from formal processes, such as control of media messages or budget and staffing decisions, to less formally expressed motivations, such as management’s preference for evaluation delivering good fundraising arguments.

The 2030 Agenda, along with evolving understandings of the meaning of ‘development’, have given rise to a new set of questions for evaluation as an independent, objective, critically reflective and professional practice:

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development promotes a transformative, rights-based development agenda in which stakeholders are engaged and empowered and where review and evaluation are seen as being country-owned. How can evaluation offices of large international donor organisations uphold a credible independent voice while contributing to this agenda?

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Decisions about development do not follow from evidence and technical merit alone. Whilst flows of information – ranging from national data to big data – are increasing, it is clear that both political and technical dimensions are central to developmental outcomes. How can evaluation functions be rigorous whilst influencing the political processes that surround Agenda 2030?

Impartiality to individual agency interests is a crucial component of credibility when analysing the multiple causal factors and efforts of organisational actors that impinge upon development results. With increasing competition among development agencies for scarce resource, how can evaluators prepare to withstand pressures from organisational heads to use evaluation for their own purposes?

Does evaluation need to move outside the confines of addressing matters related to results and resources frameworks of individual organisations and discrete projects?

With few matters of development yielding to precise explanation by way of social science method, why do evaluators resist projecting their role as constituting professional judgement?

Discussion questions

The purpose of this invitation only roundtable dialogue is to enable a high-level, practical but informal debate, addressing conceptual and practical issues arising from the intersections of accountability, independence, objectivity and the critical voice of evaluation. The event will bring together leading evaluation specialists and a select group of experts who can bring experience and expertise from outside the development evaluation community to discuss:

- The relationship between independence, objectivity, impartiality and authority;
- Separation of attestation and advisory roles;
- Evidence-based policy-making or policy-based evidence-making;
- The relationship between evaluators' independent voices and obligations for stakeholder engagement and empowerment; and
- The role of evaluation within overall organisational governance designs that cater to learning and innovation as well as checks and balance and restraints on authority.