# NIGERIAN JOURNAL OF RESEARCH AND PRODUCTION

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## A PRESCRIPTIVE APPROACH TO POLICY EVALUATION IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

#### Patrick Osatohanmwen Oviasuyi and Mrs. Rosemary I.O. Edobor

#### Abstract

This article presents a simple and straightforward prescriptive/theoretical approach to the understanding of elements and politics of evaluation of social, economic and political policies in the public sector. Policy evaluation is a concept which bureaucrats, policy makers and policy implementers do not spend time to study and understand as they merely undertake only the impressionist evaluation of their policies to mislead the populace about what evaluation really is.

Therefore, this article looks at evaluation of public policies from both theoretical and prescriptive dimensions with the sole objective of creating understanding and acceptance in the minds of our bureaucrats, policy makers, policy implementers, and the general public.

#### Introduction

In research methodology, public policy evaluation refers to the use of scientific research methods to plan intervention programmes, to monitor the implementation of new programmes and the operation of existing ones, and to determine how effectively programmes achieve their goals. Although public policy research has been around for many years, it has risen to considerable prominence over the past three decades as the amount of public and private funds channeled into public programmes has grown. As funding has increased, those providing the funds have sought valid and reliable evidence or data regarding whether policies achieve their goals, how efficiently they do so, and whether they produce any unintended or latent consequences.

Although evaluation had its origin many years ago in governmental activities such as education and health, it only became an area of interest to administrators, researchers, scholars, legislators and citizens recently. A major contributory factor to the interest in evaluation has been the skyrocketing cost of providing public service such as health care, education, crime prevention, housing, welfare and community development. As congress woman Florence Dwyer (Republican, New Jersey) puts it in her report to the people:

It is becoming increasingly clear that much of our investment in such areas as education, health, poverty, jobs, housing, urban development, transportation and others is not returning adequate dividends in terms of results. Without for a moment lessening our commitment to provide for these

pressing human needs, one of congress major, though off-delayed, challenges must be to re-assess our multitude of social programmes, concentrate (indeed, expand) resources on programmes that work where the needs are greatest and reduce or eliminate the remainder. We no longer have the time nor the money to fritter away on non-essentials which won't produce the needed visible impact on problems. (Iyoha, 2000:3)

Beyond the cost of policies is the fact that at all levels of governance, evaluation increases the rationality of decision making. It leads to the planning of better policies, and so serves policy participants in more relevant, more beneficial, and more efficient ways. The production of objective evidence is seen as a way to reduce the politicking, the self-serving maneuvers and the log-rolling that commonly attend decision making at every level. With the benefit of evaluation, data replaces political negotiations and favours in order to reach the most rational decision.

The realization that policies may have undesirable harmful effects on the society or on the expected beneficiaries has further strengthened the utility of evaluation as a method of forestalling such consequences. Furthermore, evaluation is now being built into administrative structures and functions because national governments, parliaments, National Assemblies and congress demand it in the developed nations of the world. The United States congress now makes money available for the purpose of evaluating authorised policies.

Therefore, policy evaluation research is a mechanism for gathering and analyzing evidence or data regarding public polices. Unfortunately, this is an activity that has been in neglect in the making of public policies in Nigeria.

This article is purely a prescriptive approach to policy evaluation in the public sector. Policy, according to W.I. Jerkins is a salient choice made by an individual, or group of individuals that explains, justifies, guides or outlines a certain course of action, real or contemplated. (Oronsaye, 1998:1) Also, Carl Fredrich sees policy as a proposed course of action of a person, group, or government within a given environment providing obstacles and opportunities with which the policy was proposed to utilise and overcome in an effort to reach a goal or realise an objective or a purpose. (Oronsaye, 1998:2) while James Anderson sees policy as a purposive course of action followed by an actor or a s set of actors in dealing with a problem or matter of concern (Anderson, 1975).

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English define evaluation as finding out, deciding the amount or value of something (Hornby, 1974:297). Generally speaking, evaluation is concerned with the estimation, assessment or appraisal of a phenomenon, including its content, implementation and effects. As a functional activity, policy evaluation can and does occur throughout the policy process and not simply as its last stage. For instance, an attempt is usually made to determine, that is, estimate the consequences of

various policy alternatives for dealing with a problem prior to the adoption of one of them. Thus, evaluational activity may restart the policy process (problem, formulation and so on) in order to continue, modify or terminate existing policy. Evaluation provides "feed back" for the policy-makers.

#### Policy Evaluation: What Does It Mean?

Evaluation is a very broad and elastic term, which may cover many decisions or judgments. Thus, we can talk of evaluating the sales potential of a new computer software, evaluation of a worker's performance or evaluation of social political and economic programmes of government. The common denominator of all evaluation is the idea of judgment of the relative worth, value or utility of something (Iyoha, 2000:1).

Policy evaluation involves finding out the consequences or impact of policies on the beneficiaries of the policies. In recent times, social policies or programmes have experienced tremendous expansion. In some cases, they represent a lengthening of the existing efforts, while some may depart radically from known to new terrain. In all cases, policy administrators and governmental decision makers need to know or find answers to such questions as: "Did government policy achieve its stated objective?" "Did it attain stated goal?" "Should the policy be continued, modified, abandoned or expanded?" Policy evaluation is aimed at finding answers to questions like the ones above.

Harry, Winnie and Fisk (1973) defined evaluation as "the systematic examination of specific government activities to provide information on full range of the programme or policy's short and long term effects on citizens". In the Glossary of Administrative Terms in Public Health, the American Public Health Association defined policy evaluation as "the process of determining the value or amount of success in achieving a predetermined objective. It includes at least the following steps: formulation of the objective, identification of the proper criteria to be used in measuring success, determination and explanation of the degree of success, recommendations for further policy activity (Iyoha, 2000:2). Wholly (1970:16) defined policy evaluation as "the assessment of the overall effectiveness of a national programme in meeting its objectives, or assessment of the relative effectiveness of two or more programmes in meeting common objectives".

Policies formulated can have anticipated and unanticipated consequences, and as a result the definition of policy evaluation should not be restricted to finding out the amount of success in achieving stated objectives. Hence, Riecken (1952:3) defined policy evaluation as "the measurement of desirable and undesirable consequences of an action that has been taken in order to forward some goals that we value".

Thus, an evaluation is aimed at studying some activities, which can have both positive and negative consequences on the beneficiaries. The consequence of a programme or policy therefore, is its total effects on the real world, (Iyoha, 2000:2).

In Thomas Dye's words this includes:

- (1) Its impact on the target situation or group;
- (2) Its impact on situation or groups other than the target (spillover effects);
- (3) Its impact on future as well as immediate conditions;
- (4) Its direct costs, in terms of resources devoted to the policy; and
- (5) Its indirect costs, including loss of opportunities to do other things, (Iyoha, 2000:2-3).

#### The Purpose/Need for Policy Evaluation

Bigman (1961) presented the following six purposes of policy evaluation:

- (1) To discover whether and how well objectives are being fulfilled;
- (2) To determine the reasons for specific success and failure;
- (3) To uncover the principles underlying a successful policy;
- (4) To direct the course of experiments with techniques for increasing effectiveness;
- (5) To lay the basis for further research on the reasons for the relative success of the alternative techniques, and
- (6) To redefine the means to be used to attaining objectives, and even to redefine sub-goals in the light of research findings.

However, according to Rossi and Freeman (1982), policy evaluation is conducted for three main reasons: First, it can be conducted for administrative purposes, such as to fulfill an evaluation requirement usually demanded by a funding body (e.g. the government), to improve service to clients, or to increase efficiency of policy delivery. Evaluation done for administrative reasons tend to focus on assessing the daily operations of a policy or programme rather than its overall impact and the goal is typically to find the most efficient means of running a public policy or programme.

Secondly, policy evaluation may be conducted to assess the impact of a public policy or programme. Impact assessment examines the effects, if any, a public policy is producing. Typically, the goals of the policy are identified and the policy is measured in terms of how well it achieves those goals. The results of the impact assessment are then used to make policy decisions regarding whether to expand, change, or curtail a policy.

Thirdly, policy evaluation may be conducted to test hypotheses. A hypothesis is an empirically testable statements of the relationship between two or more variables (a variable refers to a measurable concept that takes on two or more values, either for any unit at different periods of time or from one unit to the next, e.g. sex, marital status, age, occupation, social class, ethnic background, etc.). For example, the Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP) of President Olusegun Obasanjo could be evaluated by testing the hypothesis: Proper implementation of the Poverty Alleviation Programme will crush poverty ravaging the masses by reducing the level of unemployment.

#### Recommendation of How Governments Should Evaluate Their Own Policies

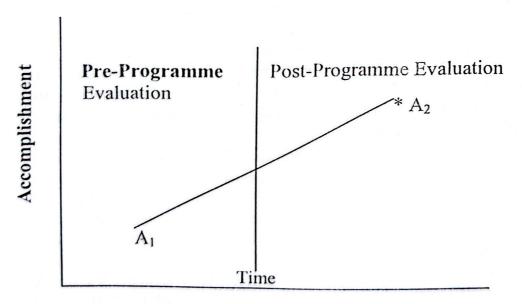
In order to determine the real impact of governmental policies on the society, more expensive methods of policy evaluation are needed. Therefore, governments need to use any of the following methods in their policies evaluation.

- Before versus after comparisons;
- Project-trend-line versus post-programme comparisons;
- · Comparisons between jurisdictions with and without programme; and
- ♦ Comparisons between Control and Experimental groups before and after programme implementation.

#### **Before Versus After Comparisons**

The before and after study is the commonest method of policy evaluation. This method involves comparing the results in a jurisdiction at two different times. The first study is done before the policy and the second after the implementation of the policy. The method is designed to measure the impact of a policy, but it is difficult to determine whether the change was as a result of the policy or other factors in the environment.

Fig 1: Before Versus After Comparisons



•  $A_2 - A_1 = Estimated Programme Effect.$ 

Source: F.E. Iyoha (2000) Programme Evaluation in the Public Sector, Benin City, Imprint Service, p. 31.

#### Projected-Trend-Line Versus Post-Programme Comparisons

This method provides a better evaluation or appraisal of what would have happened in the absence of the policy by projecting past (Pre-policy) trends into the post-programme time period. At the end of implementation the

projections can be compared with what really happened or the changes that took place in the society. The policy effect is, therefore, the differences between the pre-policy projections and the real post-policy changes. It is imperative to note that in order to establish a trend line, data on target groups or conditions must be gathered for several time periods before initiating the policy or programme. This method, although, demands more energy from policy evaluators, is better than the Before and After design.

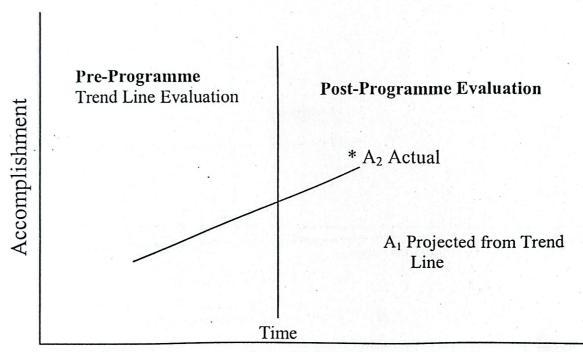


Fig 2: Projected Trend Line Versus Post-Programme Comparisons

•  $A_2 - A_1 = Estimated Programme Effect.$ 

Source: F.E. Iyoha (2000) Programme Evaluation in the Public Sector, Benin City, Imprint Services, p. 31.

#### Comparisons Between Jurisdictions With and Without Programmes

Another method of evaluation is to compare State, Local governments or cities that have participated in a programme with those which have not. For example, in Edo State, we can compare the cleanliness of towns and cities that have Sanitation Task Forces with those that do not have.

Observing both jurisdictions before and after initiation of the policy can check problems with this approach. This helps us to evaluate variations between jurisdictions before policy effects are studied.

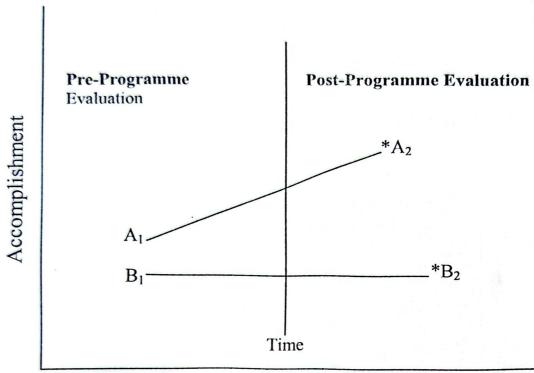


Fig. 3: Comparisons Between Jurisdictions With and Without Programme

\*A has programme, B does not.

Therefore, 
$$(A_2 - A_1) - (B_2 - B_1) = Estimated Programme Effects$$

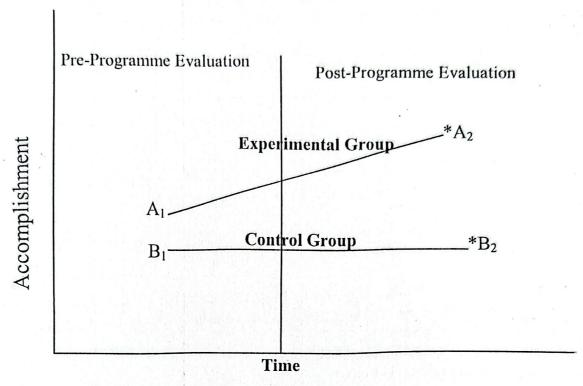
Source:

F.E. Iyoha (2000) Programme Evaluation in the Public Sector, Benin City Imprint Services, p. 31.

# Comparisons Between Control and Experimental Groups Before and After Policy Implementation

This method reflects the "classic" research design in which experimental and control groups with similar characteristics are selected. The policy is applied to the experimental Group only, and the changes in this group are compared with the Control Group. The performance level of the two groups must be measured and found to be the same before initiating the policy. At the end of the policy implementation, the differences between the Experimental and Control groups must be carefully measured (Iyoha, 2000:29-30).

Fig. 4:Comparisons Between Control and Experimental Groups Before and After Policy Implementation



\*A has programme, B does not.

 $A_2 - B_2 =$  Estimated Programme Effect.

Source:

F.E. Iyoha (2000) Programme Evaluation in the Public Sector, Benin City, Imprint Services, p. 31.

#### Conclusion

Evaluation is an indispensable tool in the efficient and effective management of public policies, and in fact, it is the bedrock upon which the success or failure of any public policy can be hinged on. As important as evaluation is to policy implementation, it is unfortunate that public administrators, policy implementers, bureaucrats and others involved in policy matters are still perceiving same to be a concept that is functionally useless, hence they pay less attention to it.

Therefore, evaluation must be carried out in every policy to ascertain its impact, and the conduct of evaluative studies at every stage of the policy helps to provide the required check on intermediate outcomes and measurement of progress towards the final and long-range ultimate objectives of the policy or policies.

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