**Why Policies Should Guide Evaluation and Monitoring**

A historical retrospect of the evolution of policies would convince one of their fragmented and less than coherent emergence. A concerted attempt to ascertain their public utility by evaluation is fairly new. Thus, policy design seems to have had a logical priority over evaluation while the latter may serve a useful adjunctive function, provided that certain conditions obtain.

Before one proceeds, it is important to distinguish between policy design and implementation. Owing to its general character and political considerations, the former is all too often guided by expediency or an obvious public need. This may be far from being ideal, but one would have to take political reality into consideration were one to make a worthwhile contribution to public well-being.

When a policy say food and agricultural policy is to be formulated, evaluation could provide some useful guidance as to its appropriateness with reference to the following criteria:

* Competence of its formulators and proposed implementers; this ranges from the national, regional and at the local field levels.
* Cost of procurement, operation and maintenance of the tools and other materials required for its implementation.
* Its effects on the environment, national employment figures and the equitability of its results.
* Its implications on local culture, public health etc.

The perceptive reader would have noticed at once that the evaluation of those four criteria could only be undertaken with reference to a specific policy, hence, its logical priority over evaluation. Here, evaluation faces two major challenges:

* Degree of political devolution in a country; for instance, in Canada, the provinces have a great deal of political autonomy, thus the regional policies ought to be dovetailed into their national counterparts. In Scandinavia, local authorities have a great deal of autonomy, hence, in those countries, policy design applicable to the area is carried out locally. In such cases, policy evaluation has to be very flexible because what food each area may successfully produce can vary significantly.
* Differences in the type of data on which an evaluation could justifiably be based vary considerably. While policies and their implementation strategies are concerned with overall national benefit, that at the local or field level one has to pay attention to what contribution a plan/project may make first to the well-being of an area and then to the country as a whole.

When a previous policy to achieve comparable objectives has been implemented, the actual public utility of its results would provide the evaluator some very useful guidelines on what recommendations would be most useful to the designers and implementers of the next policy on the same subject. The utility of such recommendations depends on the willingness and ability of the political leaders and their policy makers to learn better ways of doing things.

Next, one encounters the problem of identifying the data on which an adequate evaluation may be based. Obviously, what ought to be monitored depends on the level at which an evaluation is carried out. For instance, an evaluation of a policy and its implementation strategy will require the pertinent information relative to the four criteria described earlier. It will be noted that at regional and local levels, the relevant data will also vary according to the political powers vested in them.

Finally at the plan/project level one needs clearly to distinguish between monitoring the ‘objective facts that may indicate its successful completion, and the actual benefits it offers the target group. A multi-million Dollar motor way hardly used by vehicular traffic had been quoted in this forum as an example of the former.

This sketch of multi-layered evaluation required at national, regional and local levels provides one a glimpse of the way forward. It has two dimensions:

* National decision-makers have neither the time or inclination to peruse evaluations of plans/projects; what they need to know are the achievable goals of national importance like a better food production and how to go about it. The policy and implementation strategies needed here are general in character. One might say that those provide a framework aimed at a general goal while successful plans/projects can be seen as the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, and if the general goal is attained, then those pieces would fit snugly into the picture of success.
* The four criteria discussed earlier will guide those pieces of the jigsaw puzzle as to their place in the whole, their suitability with reference to national nutrition, etc. Therefore, the challenge one faces in incorporating evaluation as an adjunct to national planning is how to make the decision-makers understand its usefulness and persuade them to use it appropriately.

Lal Manavado.