

Participation in evaluation

Position paper 04 of the DeGEval – Gesellschaft für Evaluation¹ (Society for Evaluation)

Participation – nothing extraordinary

Today participation is a central component of many evaluations. Quite frequently an active participation in evaluation processes is important for the success of the evaluation. The participation in evaluations, i.e. the persons concerned and the participants, have an influence on the questions of an evaluation, on criteria used, on the interpretation of results as well as on the development of assessments and recommended subsequent actions, will result in a higher acceptance level and thus in a better utilisation of evaluation results, which significantly improves the quality of evaluations.

What does participation mean?

Participation means that clients and the persons concerned are actively involved in the realisation of the evaluation. It might, however, also include all groups with a legitimate interest. The evaluation process of a participative evaluation can be decisively controlled by the evaluating body or, alternatively, the persons concerned can have a high influence on the process and procedure. It ranges from an adequate consideration of the participants' point of view to cooperation as to the interpretation of results. A classic distinction of participative evaluations aims at their claim to cause changes. Participative evaluations can serve the purpose to provide better foundations for decisions that are to be made for the assessment and the continuation of projects and programmes. However, participative evaluations might also be guided by the idea to initiate social changes by incorporating the persons concerned.

Why participation?

¹ Position papers are brief and generally understandable statements and comments with regard to current evaluation topics. They are developed by the board of the 'Gesellschaft für Evaluation' (Society for Evaluation).

Participation is based on a basically democratic and democracy-enhancing understanding of evaluation. Systematic and valuating assessments can only be made adequately within the respective context of the people participating in the processes. For example, the evaluation of labour market programmes is relatively useless without considering the perspective of job seekers. The same applies to the evaluation of university teaching without taking the students' perspectives into consideration.

Furthermore, participation can also be an important foundation of practical evaluation processes. The crucial standards of utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy will only be achieved by respective procedures of participation. Participative procedures make it possible to come to professionally grounded and useful evaluation results.

Participation – how?

If we understand participation as a crucial component of evaluation processes, an early and comprehensible participation is important. Prior to commencing, all persons concerned and all participants must be identified. Only then is it possible to express all problems and questions adequately and avoid 'blind spots' and lopsided allocations.

A diplomatic approach as well as a sure instinct are vital. On the one hand, this refers to the cooperation with the clients that ordered the evaluation. On the other hand, the integrative, fair, and transparent cooperation with the persons that are, directly or indirectly, affected by the evaluation results is equally important. There are numerous procedures to ensure this and they depend on the respective objectives and processes.

It is of crucial importance to incorporate and illustrate the different perspectives of participants and persons concerned with regard to the evaluation. Taking into account the various points of view increases the precision of evaluation results. A multitude of perspectives as to objectives as well as evaluation criteria is absolutely positive for carrying out programmes since their long-term success does not only depend on the opinion of experts. For example, in case of a programme to evaluate urban redevelopment, the assessment of the local inhabitants is of vital importance. After all, they decide what 'catches on'.

Moreover, an early incorporation of different participants ensures mutual learning and a step-by-step further development of knowledge and skills. It is not only programmes and their evaluation that benefit from participation. By processes of change that are initiated, evaluated, reflected and further developed mutually, all participants and people concerned are able to

expand their competencies. In the area of education a new level of quality for schools and universities can be gradually developed that will result in a new learning culture.

Challenges with participation

As a matter of course, there are always basic and evaluation-related problems as far as participation is concerned. The crucial question is: Who is allowed to participate, why is someone allowed to participate, and what is the scope of someone's participation? And who will make the final decision in case of doubts?

For evaluations, in particular, there is always the question if basic principles like e.g. the foundation in empirical research methods are questioned. In how far is comprehensive participation compatible with scientific quality criteria which ensure that evaluation means more than just a mere feedback or an interest-based expression of one's opinion? In what way are handling criteria and efficiency still manageable with such a number of participants? There are definitely no simple answers. The methodological questions can only be answered in respect of the objective of the evaluation. However, a certain amount of participation seems to be vital.

Permanent quality assurance

The decisive fact for a participative evaluation is a start of the evolution process, which has been mutually agreed upon. Together, possibilities and necessities must be determined and negotiated. Apart from a basic understanding as to possibilities, limits and costs of participation on all sides, methodical competences and skills regarding the process organisation of evaluators are of utmost importance. Their quality is the most important factor. Accordingly, that means that these competencies and skills must be established with all the participants in an evaluation and efforts must be made that they are permanently ensured.

In order to support professional and relevant evaluations, the ***DeGEval – Gesellschaft für Evaluation e.V.*** (Society for Evaluation) has published standards for evaluation, for further training and qualification with regard to evaluations as well as recommendations for potential clients that also include information on participation.