

Position Paper of the DeGEval Gesellschaft für Evaluation (Evaluation Society) Management Board

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Complexity is a characteristic feature of human action and behaviour. It is a particularly formative issue in modern societies: In most cases, the major and minor challenges and problems of human cooperation can only be resolved in a co-action process of diversely differentiated and specialised systems or persons. The ever-changing and developing interaction relationships are partly responsible for the efficiency of societies. However, they are also constitutive for their complexity. Overall it is true that complexity can increase problem-solving abilities and open opportunities for individual development potential – albeit at the cost of uncertainty and permanent coordination and attunement requirements. Thus evaluation, which inter alia attempts to trace causal influence conditions – i.e. activities and their desired or non-desired effects – faces very special challenges against this background. Therefore the *DeGEval-Gesellschaft für Evaluation* dealt with the issue “Complexity and Evaluation” at its Annual Conference 2013.

Evaluation supports comprehension

Action and behaviour in social contexts under the conditions of complexity is characterised by permanent and manifold correlations and interdependencies. Globalisation, acceleration, networking as well as technological innovations are drivers for these developments. This limits the possibilities to detect clear causalities. In order to be able to collect data on effect relationships, tailor-made designs, appropriate methods, a high data processing and analysis quality as well as a competent execution of evaluation processes depending on the respective subject and context of an evaluation are required. Non-linearity, emergence, but also different interpretations and assessments exacerbate the ascertainment of effect relationships. Evaluation can aid in comprehending and explaining how interactions take place, which changes occur, how they proceed, and which results they generate. Evaluation supports competent and evidence-based action and behaviour.

Evaluation means multiplicity of methods

Bearing in mind these circumstances, the methods that evaluation applies to approach its subject matter – e.g. a labour market programme – cannot just be of the quantitative kind. In particular, they cannot merely aim at gathering “hard” causality data such as in experimental control group designs. Both, control group approaches and quantitative methods in the broader sense, are indeed indispensable for the evaluation. However, evaluation will only be able to unfold its full achievement potential, if it applies and combines a more or less wide and context-specific range of methods according to the concrete subject matter and the precise problem in question. Qualitative methods, particularly those that are able to pick up diverging view points and assessments of participating stakeholders and to feed them into the evaluation, are absolutely crucial. Evaluation uses and combines a wide range of methods.

Evaluation is communication

When carrying out the evaluation of complex programmes specific challenges must be met. On the one hand, sufficient context knowledge and information, especially on the respective cultures, is indispensable in order to be able to capture complexity in an adequate manner. On the other hand, the evaluation process itself gains in significance. The incorporation of all the relevant stakeholders, their perceptions and assessments within the process is of vital importance for a really successful evaluation. Handling complexity comprises participation, negotiations, visualisations, comprehensibility

as well as co-management, and it outlines the challenges facing the evaluating bodies in practise. The DeGEval Standards for Evaluation can supply some helpful advice as to the successful execution of the evaluation process.

Evaluation requires adequate competencies and resources

It is of crucial importance that evaluations under complexity conditions must be carefully planned and carried out in a way that is appropriate to the subject matter and problem of the respective evaluation. Therefore the actual evaluating team as well as those who control and accompany an evaluation project must possess comprehensive competencies. They should comprise not only an understanding of the appropriate approaches as to planning and design, the selection and implementation of suitable methods and the ability to communicate during the evaluation process, but also an excellent knowledge of the respective area. It is the combination of this knowledge as well as all these skills and abilities that will develop the full potential of an evaluation project. Another requirement, however, is the allocation of sufficient resources. The availability of resources does not merely refer to financial aspects. It also includes the availability of qualified personnel on either side of the project, the evaluating team as well as the team that controls and accompanies the evaluation.

Evaluation creates orientation

Concepts of modern political and administrative process control and organisation management in general frequently rely on evidence-based orientation. In these approaches, procedures that gather and feed back information from the environment by means of a limited number of indicators and parameters often play an important role for management and control processes. In most cases, however, the concentration on few selected parameters cannot do justice to the complexity of social reality. Those who only or predominantly attempt to manage processes on the basis of indicators without continuously examining and adjusting the selected parameters are forgetting about complexity. This bears the risk of mismanagement and wasting resources. Evaluation is able to counteract such tendencies. It can help to comprehend complexity and possibly reduce it so that targeted actions in social contexts are made possible despite a certain level of precariousness that can never entirely be eliminated. This applies to politics as well as to decisions in individual organisations. Evaluation is able to increase transparency with regard to the changes as well as to the participating stakeholders and structures. Metaphorically speaking, evaluation can contribute to help political bodies and organisations navigate in their continuously confusing environment – without, however, ignoring too much of this environment.

Evaluation and complexity are tightly connected. To the extent that evaluation can manage to elucidate patterns and regularities in the social environment of organisations and policies, it can contribute significantly to handle complexity. Making use of evaluation in this sense also means to develop an understanding for the context. Evaluation helps the stakeholders in the political arena and in organisations to find orientation in their respective environment. To this effect evaluation helps to understand whether, and if so, how targeted interventions are at all feasible in a given setting. Thus it is not paramount that evaluation provides specific details or explicit recommendations for decisions. Evaluation has its strength in contributing towards the “enlightenment” of politicians and those in charge. If it is successful in this respect, it will have managed to make a contribution to the handling of complexity and to societal development in terms of aspired objectives.

Evaluation is the systematic analysis and study of the benefits or value of a certain subject matter. Such evaluation objects include e.g. programmes, projects, products, measures, achievements, organisations, political issues, technologies or research projects. Results, conclusions or recommendations must be comprehensible and documented according to DeGEval standards, and they must be based on empirical qualitative and/or quantitative data. Approximately 750 persons and institutions working in the evaluation sector, mainly from Germany and Austria, have joined forces to become the *DeGEval – Gesellschaft für Evaluation*. The objectives of the DeGEval comprise

information and exchange as to evaluation issues, the integration of different perspectives of evaluation as well as its professionalization. Apart from the work in 14 thematically structured working teams, the annual conferences are an important place for such an exchange. The topic for the Annual Conference 2013 was "Complexity and Evaluation". The Annual Conference 2014 will be jointly organised together with the Swiss evaluation society SEVAL. It takes place between 10th and 12th September in Zurich. The topic is "Professionalization in and for Evaluations".