

WHY THE CONTEXT OF EVALUATION MATTERS

“Context: A Framework for its Influence on Evaluation Practice”, eds. Debra J. Rog, Jody L. Fitzpatrick, and Ross F. Conner, *New Directions for Evaluation* 135 (2012), ISBN: 978-1-118-46328-4, 120 pp.

Andreea PARAPUF*

The journal *New Directions for Evaluation* dedicated in the Fall 2012 a special issue to the role of context in evaluation, a rather unexplored topic in this field that deserves much more attention. The goal was to challenge the method-focused evaluation models and to demonstrate that context determines to a large extent the quality of evaluation. Most evaluators struggle to see the potential of understanding the context in which a policy is implemented and how this impacts on the evaluation results.

The 2012 special issue of *New Directions for Evaluation* entitled *The Role of Context in Evaluation* sets two ambitious goals: first, to develop a theoretical framework – called context-sensitive evaluation – and concrete tools that maps those aspects of the context that play a crucial part in the success of policy implementation and evaluation; and secondly, to put the framework at test and demonstrate its feasibility in various policy domains.

The journal issue contains six articles – a historical overview, a theoretical framework, three case studies and a critical retrospective – that are based on papers delivered at the 2009 American Evaluation Association conference. This shows that the effort to think about the context of evaluation is not an individual one, but a need of the entire American evaluation community. Chapters 2 and 5 are particularly good in showing the importance of context for evaluation.

In chapter 1, “An Introduction to Context and Its Role in Evaluation Practice,” Jody L. Fitzpatrick offers a comprehensive historical account of how context has been viewed in the field of evaluation. Context is often reduced to mean the *culture* of the participants in the program or intervention. Fitzpatrick rightly argues that the context of a policy implementation is far broader than the cultural background of the participants. Other dimensions she considers relevant are the timing of a policy implementation, the political and social climate, the economic conditions in which a policy is implemented, the differences between the goals set at the national level and the local conditions which can heavily vary, and the organizational context in which the results of the evaluation are received. All of these have huge impact on the success of the policy and can explain why the same policy is successful in certain circumstances and fails to achieve its goals in other circumstances. On a more positive note, Fitzpatrick notices a tendency of evaluators

* Radboud University Nijmegen, Comeniuslaan 4, 6525 HP Nijmegen, Netherlands, e-mail: andreea.parapuf@gmail.com

in the last decennia to renounce the apparently neutral stance that derives from method-focused evaluation models. Differences in the values, preferences and interests of participants should not be secondary concerns for evaluators, but crucial aspects to which evaluators should truly commit themselves.

The second article, “When background becomes foreground: Toward context-sensitive evaluation practice” proposes to replace the method-orientated evaluation models with a context-sensitive evaluation model. Evaluations should start with understanding context and only then decide which evaluation model, design or approach fits the context the best. With this goal in mind, Rog develops a framework meant to make the slippery issue of context graspable for evaluators. The framework is composed of five dimensions: “the context of the problem or the phenomenon being addressed, the context of the intervention being examined, the broad environment or setting in which the intervention is being studied, the parameters of the evaluation itself, and the broad decision-making context” (p. 27). Each of the five context areas should be examined from different perspectives: physical, organizational, social, cultural, traditional, political, and historical. Rog illustrates with examples from her rich experience as evaluator why and how the five areas of context are of crucial importance for a performing a good evaluation.

The first dimension of the context-sensitive framework is the *context in which the problem arises*. Many evaluations encounter difficulties in clearly stating whether the outcomes of the policy have been achieved or not. The context in which the problem arises explains to a large degree why this happens. Many policies are the result of an emergency or crisis that urgently calls for a solution. Consequently, one often does not afford to map the context in which the problem arises.

The second dimension is the *nature of the intervention*. This refers to the stage in which the implemented policy or program is at the time of evaluation, as well as to the policy complexity. Other elements to be taken into account regarding the intervention are the diversity of stakeholders, the conflicting interests and values.

The third dimension is the *broad setting* of the policy implementation. The setting is usually multilayered, such as in the case of educational policies. These are implemented in classrooms, but the area affected by the policy is much broader including the school, the school district, the community as such, the parent, the educators etc. Rog rightly points out that the broad setting has a moderating effect on the capacity of the policy to achieve its intended outcomes.

The fourth dimension refers to the *context of the evaluation*. Factors that play a role are among other budget, time and data available for evaluation, but also accountability pressure from the legislative power in Western countries to draw rigorous and clear conclusions regarding the success or failure of the interventions. An evaluation that is done in less than ideal circumstances that cannot draw final conclusions regarding the intended outcomes, may very well provide rich and relevant information, such as tracking the implementation of the intervention, collecting data about the target group, even when the question whether the intended outcomes have been achieved, cannot be answered.

The fifth dimension affecting the evaluation is the *context of the decision-making*. Rog argues that the type of information that an evaluation provide should take into

account the need and expectations of the decision-makers. This last dimension of the framework is in my view also the most problematic. In order to maintain their objectivity, evaluators should maintain a certain distance from the requirements and the pressure imposed by the decision-makers. It is thus not clear to me why an evaluation that could achieve a high quality in terms of design and method choice should choose a less than ideal design simply because the decision-maker does not require a rigorous evaluation. It may very well be that the decision-maker is satisfied with the present situation and views a rigorous evaluation as a threat and thus has no interest in promoting an evaluation of high quality. It can a dangerous step in my view to encourage the evaluators to adapt their goals to the expectations of the decision-maker. On the contrary, evaluations should counterbalance the political will by daring to draw conclusions that may not be in line with the expectations of the decision-makers.

Chapter 3, 4 and 5 of the volume apply the framework developed by Rog to three case studies in order to show its feasibility and to learn about possible improvements of the framework. As a common trait, they all show the advantages of a framework that focusses on context rather than methods.

In chapter 3, "The Social Context of Water Quality Improvement Evaluation," L. Thurston, Ch. Smith, K. Genskow, L. Stalker Prokopy and W. Hargrove show that the context is all the more relevant in complex interventions. Such an example of complex policy interventions are the environmental interventions. Three main factors make the evaluation of environmental policies particularly complex: "the diversity of stakeholder groups, the complexity of identifying and measuring outcomes, and the evaluation ethos" (p. 41). These factors fall under what Rog identified as the first and the third dimension of context, namely the problem and the setting contexts. The authors argue in favor of making room in evaluation for taking into account the human and sociopolitical factors that impact on the success of the interventions. The difficulty of reaching agreement on how environmental policies should be evaluated can be explained by the fact that stakeholders hold different beliefs, values and views on water ownership and use, and their attitude about sharing resources and collaboration. Other contextual factors adding to the complexity of the evaluation are physical and the social aspects of environment and the strength of the community.

In Chapter 4, "Culture writes the script: On the centrality of context in indigenous evaluation," J. LaFrance, R. Nichols and K. Kirkhart discuss the advantages of one particular context-sensitive evaluation model, the indigenous evaluation framework. IEF was developed as a response to the challenges posed to evaluators by cultural differences between the participants from non-Western communities and the Western evaluation models. When applied to a non-Western context, the assumptions at work in the Western evaluation models are often challenged or invalidated. They participants often disagree with the evaluator on "what counts as evidence, how knowledge was gained and what approach will benefit the community" (p. 60). IEF shows according to LaFrance et al. the strengths of Rog's model while at the same time aiming to bring it further by proposing to view context and culture as the most defining elements that in fact determine what counts

as rigorous methods in an evaluation. The bottom line of IEF is that order to draw valid conclusion about whatever is evaluated, one needs to genuinely understand the community and the lived experience of the participants. Yet, it is yet not visible to me how IEF improves Rog's framework. IEF is rather a particular form of context-sensitive evaluation that focusses on one particular context – i.e. the culture of the participants –, and on one particular community – i.e. the indigenous communities.

In chapter 5, “Political culture as Context for Evaluation,” P. Dahler-Larsen and Th. Schwandt take a surprising route to demonstrate context and evaluation are “interactive and mutually constitutive” (p. 84). Which type of evaluation is chosen depends on how the one requesting and the one performing the evaluation view the context and in how they able to engage with and understand the context. And reciprocally, the evaluation (re-)constructs the context. In a storytelling fashion the authors outline two parallel scenarios of the Danish political culture, one emphasizing the homogeneity and harmony of opinions, the other one showing the conflictual aspects within the society. By outlining parallel scenarios, they show that contexts are not given or fixed, but “complex, dynamic, and interpretable” (p. 86) and that, by choosing one or the other scenario, the evaluator actively gives meaning and co-constructs the reality. Beside this fascinating idea, another strong contribution of this article is in my view the fact that it remains critical of the possibility to perfectly match a certain context with a certain type of evaluation, an element that I absent from all other articles, even from Rog's framework.

In the sixth and final chapter the editors R. Corner, J. Fitzpatrick and D. Rog address the strengths and the limitations of the theoretical framework presented in chapter 2 and makes suggestions for enhancing the use of the framework in the daily evaluation practice.

The article introduces a tool called context assessment (CA), the goal of which is to provide concrete indicators for daily evaluation practice on how to identify which context-related factors are relevant in which situation. The authors compose three lists of question for each of the three evaluation phases. The list of question is divided according to the five dimensions of context elucidated by Rog. The list of questions provides a valuable instrument that evaluators can use a guide for identifying which contextual aspects are the most relevant in each evaluation.

This special issue illustrates the need and the benefits to engage with the issue of context in the evaluation practice. It is a valuable contribution both to raising awareness to the importance of understanding the impact of context (in its various forms) on evaluation, as well as to the evaluation practice by providing evaluators with a concrete guiding tool for identifying the role of context in evaluation.