EVALUATION AND PARTICIPATION: OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

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Government evaluations in South Africa serve a range of purposes, including to improve accountability and to generate knowledge and learning for improved performance. These key purposes do not always enjoy equal attention in the evaluation process, particularly as it relates to stakeholder involvement.

BOTH EVALUATION POLICIES in the South African government's National Evaluation System (NES) and the authors' first-hand experiences in conducting government evaluations in South Africa suggest that a greater emphasis has been placed on evaluation processes which support learning for performance improvement, than on traditional accountability purposes, and this has both potential benefits and costs.

With an increasing number of government evaluations being completed by PDG, applying NES policies and guidelines, we have an opportunity to reflect on the

implications for accountability of "standardising" and applying utilisation-guided approaches to evaluation as the norm. This paper explores the problem of how progress in the consolidation of evaluation practices, according to NES standards, risks privileging the participation of government officials to the detriment of citizen participation and broader accountability. Looking at the authors' experience in three evaluations, we conclude that collaborating closely with government in the evaluation of its programmes increases the usefulness of evaluations for government stakeholders, the buy-in to recommendations and the potential for learning in government. Strong collaboration with government, however, can also come at the expense of the opportunities for beneficiaries to use government evaluations to hold government to account.

This paper further argues that deepening the role that beneficiaries and their representatives play in evaluations can allow for greater usefulness of an evaluation for accountability of government to citizens, and still allow for learning and programme improvement.

METHODOLOGY
METHOD

This paper uses a basic qualitative methodological approach. Firstly, it re-examines some of the literature underpinning the methods used by the authors in conducting government evaluations and definitions of accountability and collaboration. This section is followed by the development of a simple analytical framework to assess levels of participation in evaluations conducted by the authors. The framework is used to look at three evaluation cases in brief descriptive case studies and sets out the degrees of participation of different role-players and what the implications of this participation prove to be in practice.

This framework is also used to draw conclusions about the implications of the respective levels of participation in evaluations by various role-players for their usefulness for accountability. The paper concludes with reflections from the authors on the implementation of the NES policies and guidelines in evaluations and their implications for accountability and collaboration.

LIMITATIONS

This paper does not offer a comprehensive analysis of evaluations undertaken under the NES, nor does it intend to ascribe any causality of loss of accountability usefulness of evaluations to the NES. Rather, the paper seeks to document the authors' experience of the NES in practice and the perceived results of establishing normative prescripts for evaluation approaches as it relates to accountability and learning, and as a useful tool for documenting levels of participation in evaluation.

LITERATURE REVIEW
GOVERNMENT EVALUATIONS

Evaluation is a growing and increasingly important practice in the South African public sector. The South African National Evaluation Policy Framework defines evaluation: 'The systematic collection and objective analysis of evidence on public policies, programmes, projects, functions and organisations to assess issues such as relevance, performance (effectiveness and efficiency), value for money, impact and sustainability and recommend ways forward' (Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation 2011: ii). This broad definition underpins the evaluation methods used in government evaluation under the NES and applies to all evaluation typologies used by government; it also defines evaluation in relation to accountability (performance and value for money) and learning (sustainability and recommendations).

Stakeholder participation in evaluations can also create a platform for holding each other accountable, but recent South African experience has shown that evaluations have greater or lesser potential for effective accountability depending on the power dynamics between different role players (Porter and Goldman, 2013).

The stated purposes of evaluation in government and the NES include improving accountability, generating knowledge (learning), improving performance and bettering decision-making (Department Performance Monitoring and Evaluation 2011). However, in practice, evaluation scholars acknowledge that these multiple goals can sometimes be in tension (Benjamin 2017), as the nature of stakeholder participation in the evaluation process can influence the achievement of these goals. For instance, if the primary goal of an evaluation is to hold programme implementers accountable for the results of their programme, then a conflict of interest may arise if they have undue influence on what data gets collected, or how to interpret the data (Stevenson, Mitchell and Florin 1996); the implementers may therefore participate only in a very limited way, or not at all. On the other extreme, empowerment evaluation (Fetterman 2002) lets stakeholders (including programme staff) set their own objectives for the programme and then assess themselves in terms of those objectives, engaging in dialogue and debate among themselves about how to interpret the performance data and judge results. Learning and capacity building become the primary goals, with the evaluator acting more as a "critical friend" or "coach". In between these extremes are many approaches that encourage at least some stakeholder participation in the evaluation process. Utilisation-focused evaluation is a well-established approach that argues that stakeholders' participation in evaluation is a fundamental contributor to their learning and

their buy-in to evaluation results (Patton 2008). Stakeholder participation in evaluations can also create a platform for holding each other accountable, but recent South African experience has shown that evaluations have greater or lesser potential for effective accountability depending on the power dynamics between different role players (Porter and Goldman, 2013).

THE NATIONAL EVALUATION SYSTEM

The National Evaluation System (NES) that has developed in South Africa has, in a short period of time since its inception, embedded a utilisation-focused approach to evaluation within its policies and guidelines. The Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation's Standards for Government Evaluations (DPME 2014) and various guidelines for evaluations reflect a normative bias towards participation, specifically for the purpose of promoting stakeholders' learning. This bias is evident, firstly, in the fact that the Standards conceptualise evaluations as consisting of four phases, of which the fourth is explicitly dedicated to 'follow-up, use and learning'. Secondly, it is reflected in two of the seven overarching considerations guiding all the evaluations. The following overarching considerations are geared towards utilisation and active stakeholder involvement in evaluation decision-making and implementation:

* Partnership approach: In order to increase ownership of the evaluation and maximise the likelihood of use, and build mutual accountability for results, a partnership approach to development evaluation is considered systematically early in the process.
* Coordination and alignment: To… improve co-ordination of evaluation and implementation of evaluation results, the evaluation process must take into account the roles of different

stakeholders, seeking to ensure those critical to the intervention are involved in the evaluation... (DPME 2014)

Quality appraisals of government evaluations completed under the NES have shown that these overarching considerations are widely observed (Leslie et al. 2015). However, the Standards have been critiqued for being vague on who should participate (Fraser and Rogers 2017). The standards related to learning either refer to government stakeholders' learning and capacity building, or omit reference to the subject (e.g. 'The evaluation study is of conceptual value in understanding what has happened and possibly in shaping future policy and practice' [DPME 2014]). The questions arise: whose participation? Whose learning is prioritised? Accountability to whom?
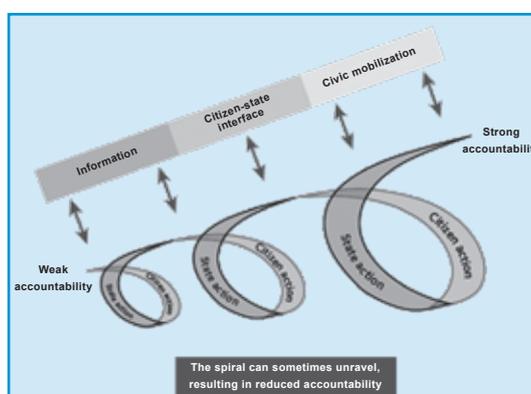
ACCOUNTABILITY

Bovens (2007: 450) defines accountability as a 'relationship between an actor and a forum, in which the actor has an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct, the forum can pose questions and pass judgement, and the actor may face consequences'. The actor can be an individual or an organisation such as an official or department. The accountability forum can be a specific person or an agency such as a minister or journalist, or parliament (Bovens, 2007). In terms of governance, forums fall into two broad groupings of individuals and bodies: the public, media and civic organisations (often referred to as social accountability); and parliament, the judiciary and public institutions (often referred to as legal accountability).

Legal accountability is where the forum has 'the formal authority to compel the actor to give account' (Bovens, 2007: 460) based on laws and regulations. In the context of South African evaluations, this aligns

closely to what this paper calls "accountability up" (Benjamin, 2017). "Accountability up" is accountability of the programme implementers of the programme under evaluation to senior management, programme designers, the executive and oversight bodies such as parliament.

Social accountability is about the accountability of the state to the citizens and is the 'extent and capability of citizens to hold the state accountable and responsive to their needs...[and involves] accountability enhancing actions that citizens can take beyond elections' (World Bank, 2012: 30-31). In this sense, the promotion of social accountability is part of community empowerment and reduction of social exclusion.

Figure 1: The iterative nature of social accountability

Source: Grandvoinnet, Aslam and Raka (2015: 47)

The above diagram above (Figure 1) shows the iterative nature of social accountability and is helpful for understanding what role social accountability initiatives play in addressing service-delivery challenges and the need to ensure citizen action and state action have complementary effects. The diagram shows that the flow of information is fundamental to effective social accountability. One role of evaluations is to provide this information. From this foundation, state action and citizen action

may build on each other and spiral up from mere information flow, to an effective citizen-state interface and ultimately to civic mobilisation (Granvoinnet, Aslam and Raha, 2015) – thus, evaluation enables social accountability and deeper democracy. The type of engagement may change over time, but as long as processes are iterative and reinforce each other, it should ultimately result in greater social accountability driven through a strong citizenry (PDG, unpublished). Social accountability is also referred to as "accountability down". "Accountability down", for the purposes of this paper, is accountability of government actors to communities and citizens, including the intended beneficiaries of the programme or intervention being evaluated (Benjamin, 2017).

The extent to which an evaluation fosters "accountability up" or "accountability down", or both, depends on factors such as the extent to which these different stakeholder groupings participate in the evaluation; the power dynamics at work within and between them; and the extent to which the results are communicated to them effectively.

COLLABORATION, PARTICIPATION AND EVALUATION

Learning through government evaluation is a collaborative process. Participants in evaluations where there is strong collaboration work closely together with the evaluator, for instance as the "critical friend" or "coach" described in empowerment evaluation above. However, stakeholder participation may take different forms with different evaluations, based on their purpose and intentions. Participation in an evaluation does not necessarily result in collaboration if participants serve a specific extractive function only (e.g. a data source). Participation is a prerequisite for collaboration. Where participation results in iterative dialogues and reciprocal dialogues between government and citizens, there is a strong

basis for collaboration outside of government and a deeper democracy (Fraser and Rogers, 2017).

PARTICIPANTS IN EVALUATION: AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Critical to our reflections on evaluations is the question, "who participates in the evaluation, and to what degree?" In a typical South African government evaluation, there are seven typical groupings of role-players: policy-makers and programme designers; evaluation managers; programme implementers; evaluators; other external stakeholders (including civil society); beneficiary/citizen representatives; and beneficiaries/citizens (see Figure 2).
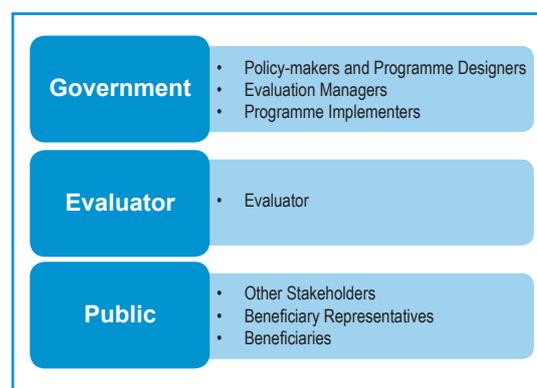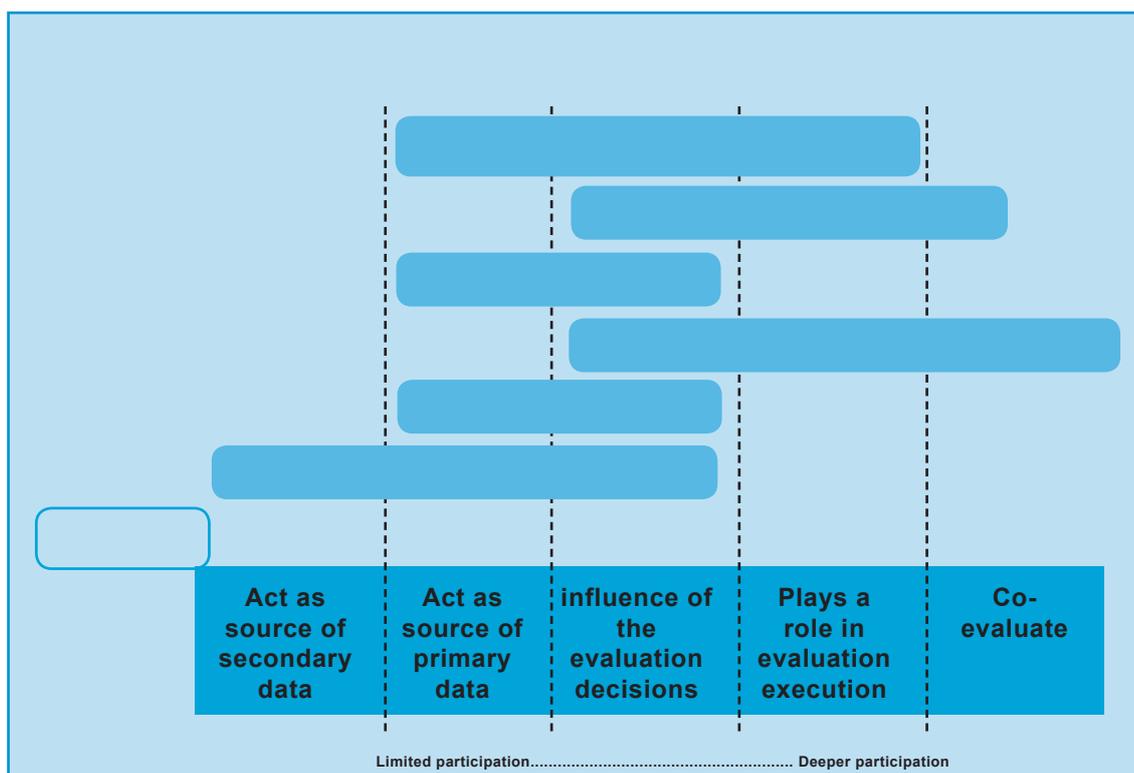

Source: PDG (2017)

Figure 2: Evaluation stakeholders

These groupings can of course overlap and are not mutually exclusive. Each group's participation can then also vary in terms of depth (Weaver and Cousins, 2007) – from simply acting as a source of data (e.g. participating in a focus group) to co-evaluating the programme (e.g. participating in the analysis of the collected data). Following Weaver and Cousins (2007), one can map the depth of participation for each group on an ordinal scale from "limited" to "deeper" participation (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Roles of participants in evaluation

	Act as source of secondary data	Act as source of primary data	influence of the evaluation decisions	Plays a role in evaluation execution	Co-evaluate

Limited participation.. Deeper participation

In order to reflect on the extent of collaboration and the usefulness of South African government's evaluations for accountability, it is useful to plot the depth of participation of each group of stakeholders against other stakeholders in the same evaluation. Using the framework in Figure 4, stakeholders will be shown in their various roles in an evaluation, in comparison to the roles of others. Where participation is deeper, and where multiple stakeholders have deeper levels of participation, shared platforms for collaboration are strongest. Where public participants (beneficiaries, beneficiary representatives, and other stakeholders like civil society groups) have deeper levels of participation, potential for "accountability down" is also strongest.

Figure 4: Framework for levels of participation
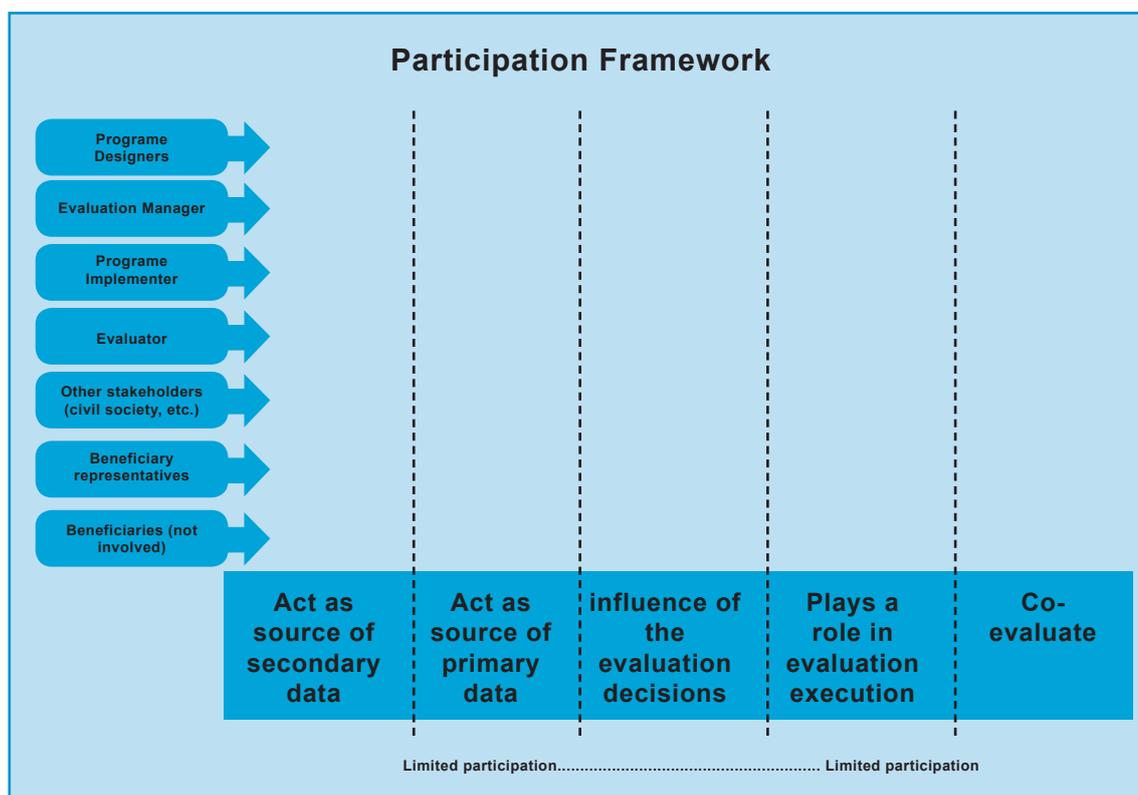
EVALUATION CASES

URBAN SETTLEMENTS DEVELOPMENT GRANT

The Design and Implementation Evaluation of the Urban Settlements Development Grant (PDG, 2015b; Amisi and Vawda, 2017) was the first formative evaluation PDG undertaken within the NES, subject to the Standards for Government Evaluation (DPME, 2014). The purpose of the evaluation was to assess the design of the Urban Settlements Development Grant (USDG) and derive lessons from its implementation for improvement. The evaluation was jointly commissioned by the Department of Human Settlements (DHS) and the DPME. Applying the conceptual framework for participation, Figure 5 shows the distribution of these key role-players

over the participation spectrum. These role-players included: the programme designers (staff from DHS and the DPME outcome manager); the evaluation manager from DPME; the evaluation team from PDG; programme implementers from DHS; other stakeholders such as parastatals, civil society representatives and some academics involved via the extended steering committee; and beneficiary representatives from the metros and civil society groups.

In this particular case, there was deep participation from the role-players within government; they collaborated extensively with the evaluators and were active in shaping and undertaking the evaluation. This depth of participation created opportunities for shared decision-making and

evaluation execution amongst the role-players in the centre of government. The evaluation steering committee, comprising staff from DHS and DPME, served as a platform for managing the evaluation and a nucleus from which extended steering committee meetings involved a broader range of state actors. The presence of two engaged departments and an 'extended' pool of stakeholders at key stages in the evaluation process resulted in 'lively discussions [which] often resulted in more informed stakeholders, and sometimes included agreement among different government departments' (Amisi & Vawda 2017). Although not originally intended, the emergent evaluation process resulted in a particularly hands-

on role played by the Evaluation Manager and the Programme Designer equivalent, unintentionally transcending into that of co-evaluator at times.

The object of the evaluation (a programme of intergovernmental fiscal transfer) combined with the strong collaborative emphasis at the centre of government meant that participation amongst beneficiary representatives was limited and beneficiaries themselves did not participate as sources of data directly. Beneficiary representatives were involved in meetings and presentations of interim deliverables but their ability to influence the evaluation decisions was limited.

Figure 5: Participants in Urban Settlements Development Grant Evaluation
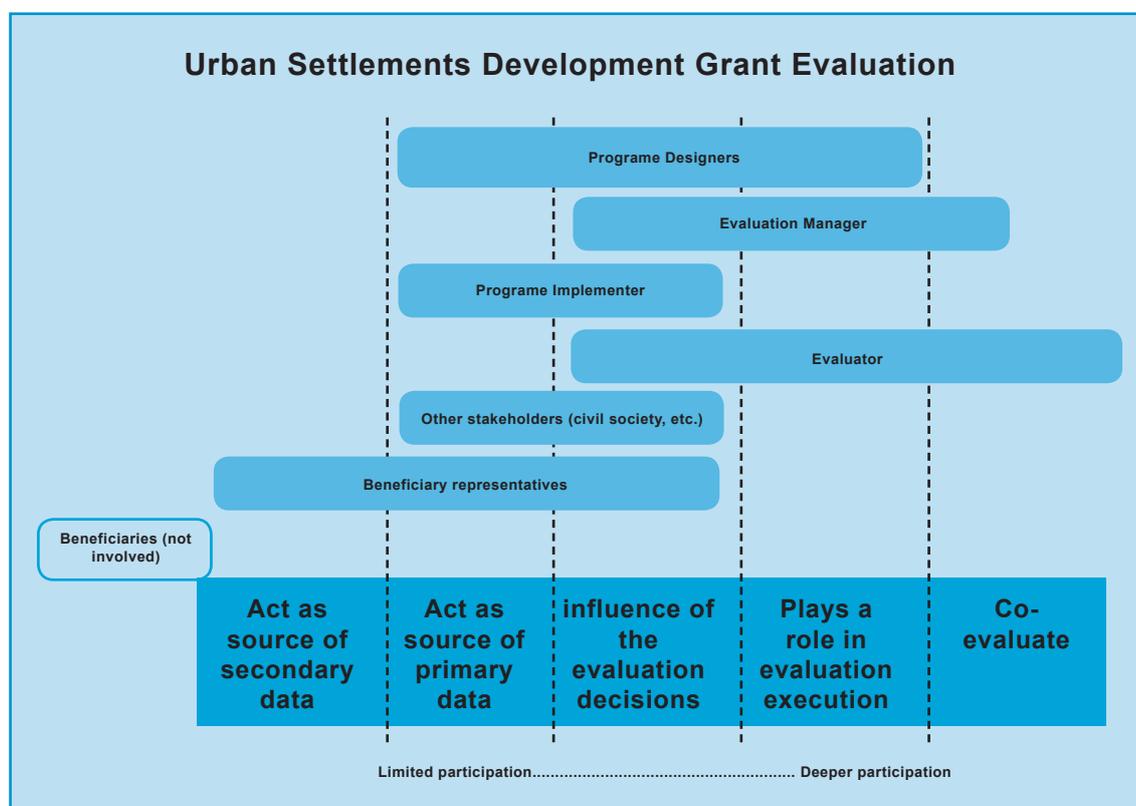
This involvement was in contrast to the role-players in government, who bought-in, participated and collaborated in the evaluation process via the steering committee, workshops, team meetings and detailed feedback and draft report commentary. This participation occurred to such an extent that Amisi and Vawda (2017) reference this particular evaluation process as being central to improving the design of the USDG and to informing a new human settlements draft green paper. Thus, the location and nature of the collaboration between these role-players in government and the evaluators supported their learning about the grant, and contributed to the use of the evaluation results to improve it and the policy framework in which it is situated. However, the limited beneficiary participation and the use of proxy representatives via the metropolitan municipalities and civil society stakeholders resulted in low levels of collaboration from key stakeholders external to government. These low levels of participation at the beneficiary end of the spectrum has undermined notions of "accountability down" from government to citizens. However, within and between those deeply engaged role-players within DHS and DPME, the evaluation has certainly fostered upward accountability for improvement to the design and implementation of the USDG, as evidenced by Amisi and Vawda (2017).

EVALUATION OF THE CITIZEN-BASED MONITORING PILOT

PDG undertook an Implementation Evaluation of the Citizen-Based Monitoring (CBM) model piloted by DPME between 2013-2015 (PDG, 2015a). The CBM pilot was aimed at strengthening citizens' involvement in monitoring service delivery, and using their feedback to drive service delivery improvement. The pilot was implemented in nine communities – one in each province. Local citizens (typically Community

Works Programme participants or local unemployed youth) were trained and then conducted surveys of service users as they left local service delivery sites (police stations, community health centres, South African Security Agency [SASSA] offices, and local offices of the provincial Department of Social Development). The survey results were then used as the basis for an intensive process of facilitated problem-solving between local civil servants (e.g. nurses), citizen representatives (e.g. clinic committee members) and middle and regional management of the public service sites. The process would culminate in a community meeting where those who had participated would present a jointly developed improvement plan (for more information, see PDG, 2015a).

In terms of the role-players in the evaluation (Figure 6), DPME staff had designed the CBM pilot, implemented it (with a service provider), and now managed its evaluation. The staff were therefore relatively familiar with each other and with evaluation practice; this probably contributed to the fact that they participated comfortably in the evaluation's decision-making and execution. The implementers also participated as sources of primary data in interviews. Collecting primary data directly from beneficiary representatives was more feasible in this evaluation than in the USDG evaluation since the CBM pilot had been undertaken at local community scale and had, by its very nature, involved various local role players in a collaborative process. The survey teams (who were all local residents) participated in evaluation focus groups, providing a proxy of their communities' views on the CBM process. Focus groups were also held with the community representatives who had participated in the intensive problem-solving process.

This evaluation also deliberately sought to involve beneficiary representatives as more than sources of data, and provide platforms for their

collaboration in the evaluation process. In this case, civil society stakeholders were active participants in evaluation workshops (such as draft evaluation findings and recommendations sessions). This level of participation supported a collaborative dynamic for the evaluation that reinforced "accountability down" from government role-players, to stakeholders external, to the state.

Figure 6: Participants in Citizen Based Monitoring Evaluation
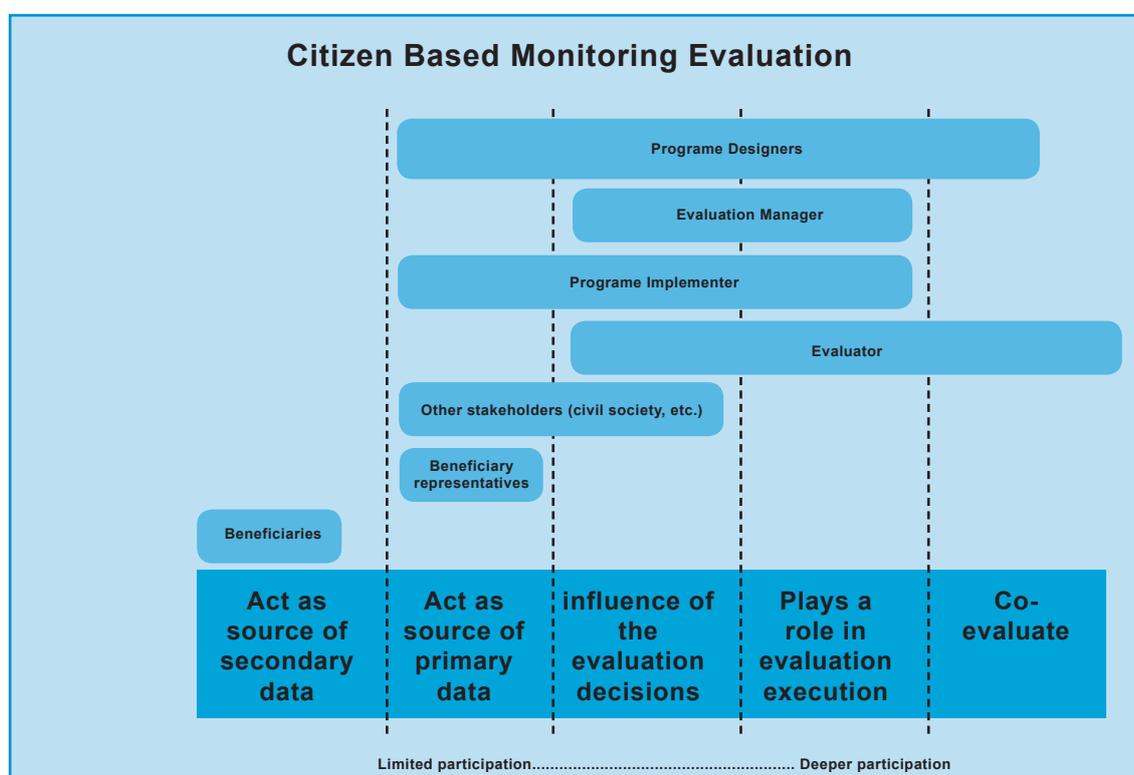
Contrasted with the USDG evaluation, the CBM pilot evaluation was more collaborative in terms of the active participation of all types of stakeholders on shared platforms, from beneficiary level, up to the level of programme designers. This engagement in the evaluation process, particularly by those external to the state, supported "accountability down" between government role-players and citizens. However, this evaluation did not ultimately provide for the revisiting of data collection sites and the dissemination of the evaluation results as part of the evaluation process, thereby limiting its potential for accountability to citizens.

WESTERN CAPE WARD COMMITTEE AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION DIAGNOSTIC EVALUATION

PDG undertook a third evaluation, outside of the NES, in the form of a diagnostic evaluation of the Western Cape Ward Committee and Public Participation system in five local municipalities in the Western Cape. The evaluation was commissioned by the Western Cape Department of Local Government and looked at the functionality and effectiveness of the ward committee system based on a sample of ward residents, ward committees, municipal staff and ward councillors in the five municipalities.

Participants in the evaluation were the officials responsible for the programme at the Western Cape Department of Local Government as the programme designers, with one manager in the department operating as the evaluation manager. Programmes implementers were provincial and municipal officials undertaking the day-to-day implementation of the public participation system in municipalities in the province. PDG was the evaluator, while other stakeholders comprised primarily of the municipal councils, other municipal officials and ward councillors of the sampled wards in the municipalities. Beneficiary representatives were the sampled ward committees, and the beneficiaries were residents of the municipal wards.

Figure 7: Participants in Western Cape Ward Diagnostic Evaluation
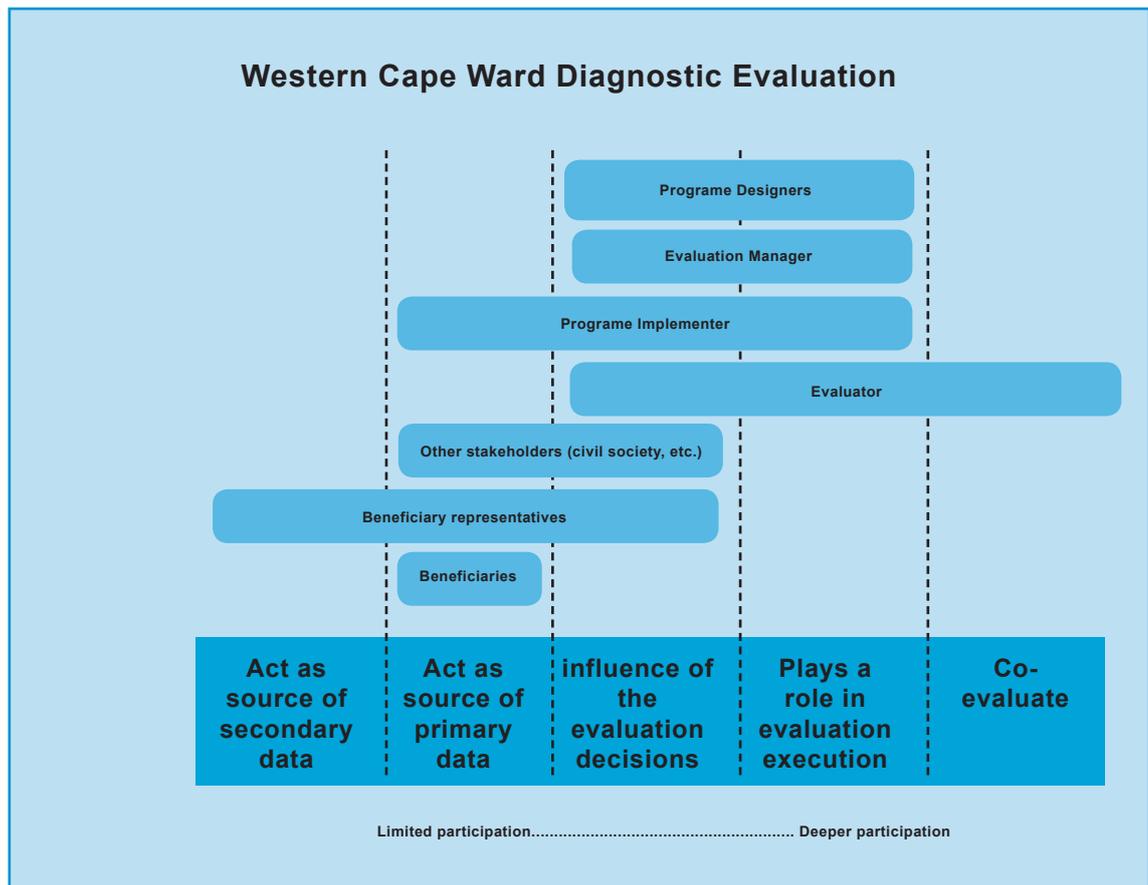
In terms of stakeholder participation (Figure 7), this evaluation had the greatest level of beneficiary involvement, with a survey of beneficiaries (residents of municipal wards) included as one of the key sources of primary data, along with semi-structured interviews and focus groups with beneficiary representatives (ward committee members) and programme implementers (municipal and provincial staff). The role of beneficiaries remained limited to being a source of data through a direct survey of their experience of the public participation system, rather than playing a decision-making role in the evaluation.

Other stakeholders did provide a support role in the management of the evaluation around

how fieldwork was conducted in the participating municipalities, for instance, local municipal officials and ward councillors recommended fieldworkers to conduct surveys in their wards. In terms of government role-players, the evaluation steering committee consisted solely of provincial officials, but there was a conscious effort to ensure that other stakeholders participated in ways that would encourage the uptake of the recommendations arising from the evaluation. This uptake was ensured through the evaluation process requiring that a presentation of municipal evaluation results and integrated recommendations be presented provided to each municipality, and that summary versions of the final evaluation report be made available in English, isiXhosa and Afrikaans. Findings and recommendations for each municipality were also reviewed in discussions with municipal officials, to ensure that they resonated with the experience of the officials involved and could be used effectively by them.

It is worth noting that in terms of levels of participation throughout the evaluation process, this was the only evaluation that required a presentation of the evaluation results to a cross-section of role-players at the sites of data collection themselves (per municipality) and specifically commissioned evaluation reporting intended for distribution down to beneficiary level. This resulted in a platform for participation involving a cross-section of stakeholders at the conclusion of the evaluation process, thereby providing the strongest grounds for both "accountability down" to citizens, and "accountability up" to the programme designers. This had the observed effect of strengthening the accountability outcome at the level of beneficiary representatives in the ward committees, where ward committee members in possession of the evaluation results can hold the programme implementers to recommended improvements.

IMPLICATIONS OF COLLABORATION FOR THE USE OF EVALUATION

PDG's experience in evaluation highlights several implications for participation and how collaboration actually does or does not occur in evaluation. Firstly, functional collaboration between the evaluator, evaluation manager and programme managers and implementers does tend to increase the buy-in of programme managers and implementers and increases the likelihood of use of the evaluation results. This kind of collaboration supports "accountability up", and in instances like the USDG evaluation, has the potential to have serious policy implications as testament to use.

Secondly, there are practical challenges of involving the beneficiaries of large scale government programmes in evaluations beyond using them as a source of data. The scale of programmes and the degree of removal of the beneficiaries from the programme managers mean that, at best, platforms for collaboration in the process, such as steering committees, can be created between beneficiary representatives and other stakeholders, but rarely involve collaboration with the actual beneficiaries. This structure makes it difficult for citizens to demand "accountability down" in the evaluation process, which means that it is critical that beneficiary representatives and other stakeholders representing beneficiary interest on steering committees are not participating once-off, but actively participate for extractive data gathering.

Thirdly, evaluations can preference the participation of implementers over citizens, thereby limiting platforms for collaboration outside of government. The evaluations featured close collaboration between evaluators and programme managers and implementers, in comparison to a relatively limited participation of beneficiaries and

their representatives, particularly in the cases of the USDG evaluation and the CBM evaluation. The Western Cape ward diagnostic evaluation had greater levels of beneficiary participation through the direct survey of beneficiaries, but participation was still limited to data collection. Evaluations with close collaboration with programme managers, but limited participation of beneficiaries, are evaluations preferred by programme designers and implementers, and evaluation managers for learning (and programme change), but limits the deeper participation of beneficiaries and their representatives via collaborative platforms. This approach limits the potential for accountability arising from the evaluations, and dilutes their potential for empowering beneficiaries and their representatives.

CONCLUSION

Evaluations can both improve government's work as a tool for accountability (down to citizens or up to top government) and be used as a tool for learning, for programme managers and implementers. Our experience is that the latter tends to be more prevalent in the evaluations we have undertaken. It has been argued that getting government stakeholders to embrace evaluation as a tool for learning is a necessary first step (Goldman, 2017), and this can still result in programme improvements, but the risk is to entrench a government-centred approach to evaluations in which citizens' voices are muted, and the potential for their participation is limited. Government evaluation policy and guidelines need to be clearer about what constitutes good practice for the participation of stakeholders outside government. Evaluators should also explore means of overcoming common barriers, including the degrees of separation between programme managers and citizens, as well as time and resource implications of widening collaboration and creating more and regular platforms for participation and engagement.

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