



## Changing bureaucracies: adapting to uncertainty, and how evaluation can help

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BOOK REVIEW

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**Changing bureaucracies: adapting to uncertainty, and how evaluation can help**, edited by Burt Perrin and Tony Tyrrell, Abingdon, UK & New York, NY, Routledge, 2021, 248 pp., US\$120.00 (hardcover), ISBN 9780367608040

There is hardly any question that has been more studied than how and to what extent evaluations contribute to bureaucracies, often with quite negative results. The two co-editors of this edited volume – Burt Perrin and Tony Tyrrell – *Changing Bureaucracies: Adapting to Uncertainty, and How Evaluation Can Help* – present an edited volume, which fully dedicates itself to the complex environment of bureaucracies and the role of evaluations within such systems. Bureaucracies are set in different stages and context, but the term is deliberately broadly defined in this book. The authors do not only address national and international public administration, but also public organizations. Even though this task is challenging in comparing such diverse systems, the book presents a richness of different insights. In doing so, the authors discuss whether contemporary bureaucracies are able to adapt to new societal developments and to fulfill growing demands of the public in the context of socio-economic change that is fostered by the fourth technological revolution. The chapters outline this context and highlight the importance of evaluations to develop organizational learning.

Both editors (but also the impressive list of authors which they have assembled) have an impressive experience as independent evaluators and probably faced many challenges discussed in this book. They identify these challenges for both public administrations and evaluators and offer them guidance on how to face organizational practices and culture that prevent learning. The book is divided into three parts: While the first section is dedicated to challenges of evaluations in different contexts of bureaucracy, the middle part tries to show the contribution of evaluation to solve these problems and the last part discusses obstacles of evaluation in administration. In the introduction, Tony Tyrrell presents a smart overview into the scope and objectives of this edited volumes, while Burt Perrin concludes the book by not only discussing the relevant findings, but also by illustrating implications for evaluators and senior leaders of public administrations.

In Chapter 2, Karol Olejniczak and Jakub Rok investigate the question of how government agencies learn by focusing on feedback mechanism. Moreover, they also examine what role evaluations have in the different administrative practices. Based on 71 interviews with senior public servants in four Polish ministries, the authors show that the vast majority of investigated public administrations still rely on typical feedback mechanism rooted in traditional bureaucratic paradigm. This form of learning is based on internal sources focusing on operational knowledge, which occur irregularly but in a structured way. In contrast, evaluations play a more marginal role and they are rather relevant for departments that deal with EU funds, where external accountability mechanisms are more prominent. The authors suggest that learning effects should be more institutionalized to make constant use of evaluations as feedback mechanism.

In Chapter 3, Jacques Toulemonde and Samer Hachem move the stage to the African continent. The study uses an extremely original approach by presenting the same case studies within the framework of development interventions of the African Development Bank and the Multilateral Organization Performance Assessment Network. The authors

discuss the case three times: While the first version focuses on mainstream evaluation approaches within the administration system, the other version changes the context of the interventions showing the disadvantages of standardization due to unpredictable events. The chapter concludes by telling the story a third time and explaining how these unfavorable conditions could have been avoided. This story of agility shows that the effectiveness of the program can be enhanced by adaptive management and accountability mechanism where evaluations play a crucial role.

In Chapter 4, Andrew Koleros' contribution focuses on independent evaluators and asks whether evaluation can overcome the difference between predictive and adaptive management. The author argues that administrations often rely on standardized tools for predictive management that often lack the flexibility of different approaches. Using the example of an evaluation in the framework of international development bureaucracies, the case study shows that the utilization of a logical frameworks matrix that visually present the program theory helps managers to be more adaptive. Moreover, the chapter makes an important contribution to the role of independent evaluators in the measurement of results of predictive and adaptive management tools.

In Chapter 5, Margaret Dalziel investigates whether bureaucracies are able to support innovation activities of private actors. In doing so, she shows that public administrations support private innovation, but that evaluations are rarely feasible in such projects, as their results often come too late to be published. However, she argues that that academic literature may be an important resource to design institutions or programs that support innovation. Even though evaluators have to face challenges, they are also rewarded by interesting opportunities.

In Chapter 6, Veronica Gaffey shares her own evaluation experience during her occupation within the public administration in Ireland and the European Union. She discusses evaluation capacity (ex-post) evaluations as well as the role of evaluation quality and how they inhibit the improvement of program learning. Moreover, she reflects on the advantages of evaluation networks with counterparts in the European Union member states that helped her to keep abreast of new development in evaluation.

In Chapter 7, Kevin Williams bases his chapter on personal experiences that he gained as head of the international evaluation function at the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) between 2005 and 2019. He examines recent developments of evaluation in the OECD and how it contributes to organizational learning. In general, the OECD is a relative latecomer for evaluation, even though it has a high monitoring activity and frequently evaluates the member states' policies. He shows that often recommendations are not implemented, but the practice has improved since evaluators have been integrated as facilitators into the implementation process. Moreover, the authors demonstrate that evaluation quality and the participation of member states in the evaluation committee has led to an increased instrumental use of evaluations.

In Chapter 8, Richard Boyle and Tony Tyrrell present an overview of exchanges with senior public servants who manage evaluation units. In doing so, the authors present an interesting pre-summary of the previous chapters' findings and discuss them with nine key informants of international and national administrations. The chapter present similarities at the organizational and strategic level of the organization. On the hand, bureaucracies do not necessarily have a negative attitude toward evaluations and they can even support evaluation activities. However, it is important to clarify evaluation policies and guidelines in order to increase the evaluation function. On the other hand,

bureaucratic (strategic) behavior can influence evaluation activity by selecting the evaluation approach. In addition, evaluator-initiated behavior can be both positive and negative. If evaluators just want to be loved, they will rather be captured by the administration than have an influential voice for organizational learning.

In Chapter 9, Estelle Raimondo and Frans L. Leeuw ask whether evaluation can contribute to improving the public administrations' accountability toward the citizens by focusing on evaluation systems. In the first section, the authors review contemporary concepts of evaluation institutionalization such as 'evaluation systems.' Subsequently, they discuss how these evaluation systems can solve the problem of bureaucratic failure. Finally, they discuss how administrations capture evaluation systems and how the same mechanisms lead to the phenomena of evaluation failure. The authors suggest solving this problem by applying strict evaluation criteria, focusing more on soft information, and avoiding mandatory requirements. In doing so, they outline important pathways that can help evaluators improve behavioral and institutional learning.

In Chapter 10, Kim Forss and Alison Pollard discuss how bureaucratic organizations tackle problem-solving and how they overcome low-quality evaluations. They investigate how administrative structures and practices influence the utilization of evaluations. Using the example of bilateral and multilateral international development agencies, they show that administrations respond to low-quality evaluations by building voice strategies. However, these voices are formed under the conditions of the administration that inhibit the effectiveness of evaluations. As a response, organizations should support the voice strategies that are deployed more effectively within the structure and dynamics of bureaucracies.

In Chapter 11, Francesco Mazzeo Rinaldi analyzes how public management reforms have impacted monitoring systems and indicators that focus on program outcomes. Empirically, he investigates the European Cohesion Policy, in which monitoring and evaluation have played an important role. However, the author argues that even though an evaluation system has been developed, there remain many doubts about the effectiveness of the program. The main problem lies in the lack of evaluation capacity and missing resources. Moreover, the Cohesion Policy was not able to focus on results, but rather stayed output-oriented. He concludes the chapter by arguing that policy-makers should more often integrate monitoring and evaluation activities.

The book offers both leaders in national and international organizations, evaluators, and public administration and evaluation scholars a great overview of the role of evaluation in bureaucracies, since it contributes to the understanding of bureaucratic complexity that both public administration and evaluators have to face. It is also impressive how this volume brings together all the relevant research on each topic and underlines it with empirical material on evaluations. This book really stands out due to the many empirical examples of conducted evaluations, which is hardly surprising as the authors consist of a fine group of evaluation scholars. The book's biggest contribution is its plea for a change in the understanding of evaluation as an instrument of organizational learning in bureaucracies. The editors managed – despite dealing themselves with a great uncertainty due to the COVID-19 pandemic – to provide an exceptional contribution to how evaluations can help change public administrations. The authors do not only illustrate what goes wrong, but actively show the institutional scope that public managers and evaluators possess.

The book leaves only a few wishes unfulfilled. On the one hand, it is very strongly focused on the policy sector of international development, but incorporating many other policy

domains would probably have been beyond the scope of the book. In addition, the individual chapters sometimes focus strongly on anecdotal evidence. However, the two editors can skillfully integrate these findings into the findings of the other chapters. Furthermore, the book mostly ignores new contemporary developments in bureaucracies (digital transformation and politicization of administration) and rarely discusses the interaction of other actors (politics, media, and civil society) with the public administrations and how this affects the role of evaluation. Nevertheless, this book is a must-read for anyone seriously interested in the study of public administration and evaluation.

### Notes on contributor

*Pirmin Bundi* is an Assistant Professor of Public Policy and Evaluation at the Swiss Graduate School of Public Administration (IDHEAP) of the University of Lausanne. His research interests include policy evaluation, comparative public policy, and political elites, and have been published in the *American Journal of Evaluation*, *European Journal of Political Research, Governance, and Political Science Research and Methods*, among others. His latest book ‘*Milizarbeit in der Schweiz*,’ coauthored with Markus Freitag and Martina Flitz Witzig, was published in 2019 in *NZZ Libro*.

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