

# Reviews

**Sergio Martinic**

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The book is an original and significant contribution to the field of the evaluation of social programmes and projects.

In the first chapter, the editors provide an introduction that places the field of Participatory Evaluation in its historical and conceptual context. In Latin America, the field of evaluation and of the approaches used to address it has grown. The reforms implemented in social services and policies confer a new status on the evaluation of their processes and results. The New Public Management movement has influenced the development of the evaluation field, in which an instrumental, quantitative approach associated with the efficiency and impacts of projects predominates.

In the Latin American tradition, evaluation has been understood as a tool for those who decide on, implement or fund projects and, in order to demonstrate their results and impacts, it is mainly quantitative indicators that are evaluated. Despite the contributions and importance of such evaluations, the indicators used tend to simplify more complex realities and are insufficient to capture the psychosocial and cultural dimensions related to the contexts, processes and results of projects. These evaluations are communicated in a specialised language that is remote from much of the project implementing

community and from the citizens who turn out to be their beneficiaries. The consolidation of democracy in our countries and the empowerment of the population create a favourable setting for this kind of evaluative practice, which seeks to ensure that the non-evaluator stakeholders—that is, the interested parties and those whom the evaluation concerns, especially local managers and a programme's target population—become meaningfully involved in the process of carrying out the evaluation.

In the first chapter, the book's editors put forward robust arguments concerning the development and importance of this type of evaluation in the current Latin American context. They understand evaluation as a social practice in which its definitions, methods and uses are themselves the outcomes of the interactions and forms of knowledge that are co constructed through dialogue within working contexts.

The subsequent chapters present various case studies carried out in Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Chile and Mexico. They gather important empirical experiences that contribute to the development of the field of participatory evaluation. The case study chapters are well crafted and have a similar structure. Their objects are varied and of differing kinds: evaluative studies of projects that promote the autonomy of people with intellectual disabilities (Costa Rica); participatory experiences in working class neighbourhoods of Santiago (Chile); interventions that create Community Peace Centres within the peace process in Colombia; the evaluation of the inclusive, holistic development

of children (Brazil); and a study of the Mi Pasaje programme, which provides free public transport tickets to students, older adults and people with some form of disability (Mexico). Despite the differences in context and scale, it is possible to discern a certain common structure in the participatory evaluation processes presented. In all of them, broad participation is promoted among the various actors who intervene in the projects, whether as designers, implementers or direct and indirect beneficiaries; particular training processes are carried out to share knowledge and criteria in the evaluation; evaluation questions, criteria and indicators are defined; instruments are designed and applied; and the results are reported, together with the processes for communicating them.

The experiences gathered in this book reflect different ways and methods of organising these processes. Lessons and insights are identified, highlighting the achievements, the limitations and the problems that participatory evaluation must resolve.

Among the achievements, community empowerment stands out, along with the improvement of policies and the promotion of transparency and accountability, among others. Through different methodologies, the evaluative processes acknowledge local knowledge and voices, fostering a deeper and more sensitive understanding of the realities that are the object of the evaluated projects' intervention.

As for the problems to be resolved, notable among them are the information asymmetry and the power relations that are reproduced, explicitly or implicitly, among the participants in these processes; the relationship between expert knowledge and local knowledge; the definition of indicators and methods which, in some cases, are led by teams of professionals as a way of guaranteeing validity and rigour; the analytical procedures; and the influence these experiences have on public deliberation and on the design of social policies with a greater role for citizens.

A more in-depth reflection on the relationship with traditional approaches and with quantitative methods of evaluation remains a pending challenge. Also needed is a reflection on its contribution to public deliberation and to the field of discussion and decision making at the different levels of the public sphere.

The book undoubtedly succeeds in conveying this new perspective on evaluation, carrying out a critical review of the experiences as a contribution to its development within the field of policy evaluation. It appropriately combines the presentation of experiences with the conceptual and methodological reflection that must accompany all evaluative practice. It will be essential reading for those who wish to gain a deeper understanding of this perspective, or for those who, through their professional work, decide to commit themselves to innovative designs of social intervention and evaluation.

## **Paula Nazarena Amaya**

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This work brings together a series of experiences in the field of participatory evaluation in different Latin American countries—a practice that must be promoted if genuine improvements are to be achieved in public policies and, consequently, in the quality of life of communities—.

It highlights the diversity of backgrounds, methodologies, cultures, actors and strategies, which underscores the need to keep working on strengthening and sharing experiences of participatory evaluation.