
The Interplay of Tangibles and Intangibles in Evaluation

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Background: This paper reflects on my long-standing collaboration with Ray C. Rist, which began in 1997 and has evolved through decades of shared work in evaluation. Grounded in international development and governance, our collaboration has explored both tangible and intangible dimensions of evaluation to enhance institutional learning and policymaking.

Purpose: The study examines key lessons from this collaboration, emphasizing the role of evaluation in organizational transformation, the interplay of measurable and relational factors, and the strategic use of evaluative knowledge in decision-making.

Setting: The paper draws on experiences from diverse global contexts, including international development initiatives, university–industry partnerships, and public sector reforms. It situates evaluation within broader theoretical debates on governance and knowledge production.

Intervention: Not applicable.

Research Design: Not applicable.

Data Collection and Analysis: The analysis is informed by direct involvement in evaluation projects, fieldwork across multiple regions, and scholarly contributions, including the Comparative Policy Evaluation series by Routledge. Insights are drawn from case studies, interviews, and a review of evaluation practices applied in different institutional settings.

Findings: The study identifies four critical lessons: (1) the necessity of grounding evaluations in local realities to ensure relevance, (2) the importance of recognizing both tangible and intangible dimensions in program success, (3) the role of evaluative knowledge in fostering reflection and policy change, and (4) the advancement of evaluation scholarship to bridge theory and practice. These findings reinforce the evolving role of evaluation as a tool for navigating complexity, strengthening institutional capacity, and fostering inclusive governance.

Keywords: *Tangibles & intangibles in evaluation; Evaluation as discipline and practice; Evaluation capacity-building; Evaluation scholarship; Evaluation for democratic governance and policymaking*

This paper reflects on my long-standing collaboration with Ray C. Rist, which began in 1997 during my professional experience within the international cooperation community and has evolved through decades of shared work in evaluation. From my early role at the World Bank Institute, where I partook in establishing an evaluation unit, to international development training and our ongoing collaborations with networks such as INTEVAL, Ray's mentorship has profoundly shaped my understanding of evaluation as both a discipline and a practice.

The narrative captures key moments in our professional journey, emphasizing the challenges and insights gained while evaluating programs across diverse global contexts. From conducting fieldwork in Latin America to presenting findings to senior stakeholders, I have come to appreciate the dynamic interplay of tangible and intangible factors that underpin effective evaluation. Situating our collaboration within broader debates on evaluation's role in governance, institutional development, and knowledge production for policymaking, this paper underscores the theoretical contribution and capacity building Ray Rist consistently brings to the field.

The discussion addresses four key lessons: (1) grounding evaluations in local realities, (2) recognizing the significance of tangible and intangible dimensions linked to programs and contexts, (3) leveraging evaluative knowledge for reflection and learning, and (4) advancing evaluation scholarship to strengthen theory and practice. A few concluding remarks are presented at the end.

Grounding Evaluations in Local Realities

A key theme of our collaboration has been the importance of grounding evaluation capacity-building efforts in local realities. Methodological frameworks must go beyond surface-level metrics to capture institutional and social complexities. At the World Bank Institute, in the process of assessing learning outcomes and institutional development stemming from training initiatives, our attention was devoted to aligning theory-based approaches with differentiated spatial and temporal contexts. As programs ranged from strengthening parliamentarians' roles in the Global South and building the organizational capacity of NGOs in Central America to promoting e-learning and combating corruption in Africa, conducting fieldwork was essential to reconstruct programs' implementation experiences. From Latin America

to Africa, crucial was to capture nuanced contextual factors to ensure the relevance and utility of evaluative findings. The challenge then was uncovering the theories underlying training initiatives and conducting extensive research notwithstanding the difficulties in gathering data. This hands-on evaluation approach was essential to examine vital issues for informing decision-making and organizational transformation, while building a reputation of integrity and independence recognized within the World Bank and throughout the world.

In these experiences, the importance of balancing expert knowledge and technical analysis with context-driven insights was necessary for formulating actionable recommendations and collaborative relationships with management. By grounding evaluations in local realities, I learned to contribute to evaluation designs that were able not only to assess program efficacy but also inform organizational learning, considering the complexity of non-standardizable interventions and heterogeneous contexts. And this lesson is even more relevant now as evaluators must learn to cope with the variation of programs across multiple sites, the ambiguity of their results, and the uncertainty of context evolution, while ensuring participatory involvement of stakeholders and users. In such circumstances, the methodological rigor needs to be balanced by policy-relevant questions that can provide a contribution to programming and implementation across different settings and under increasingly high uncertainty.

Recognizing the Significance of Tangible and Intangible Factors

One of the most enduring lessons I learned from Ray is the critical importance of intangible factors that have been explored by multiple theoretical traditions and research streams. While current innovation economics primarily considers intangible capital as assets of production within firms—such as software, algorithms, key talent, organizational capital, and technical advances that are difficult for external parties to assess—other longstanding streams of socioeconomic research extend this notion to broader fields of inquiry, including organizational theory, labor markets, social policy, migration, economic development, and decision-making. Across these diverse domains, intangibles encompass emotions, aspirations, imagination, beliefs, and values, as well as trust, communication, symbolic meanings, power dynamics, informal networks, and shared leadership (Hirschman, 1967, 1984; Granovetter,

1985; Doringuer & Piore, 1985; Crouzet et al., 2022; Hagen-Zanker et al., 2023). In cooperative initiatives within local governance or participatory policymaking, intangible factors are just as critical as tangible, measurable inputs and outputs—such as physical capital, revenue generation, cost and risk sharing, organizational capacity, and technological endowments. And often, tangible and intangible factors are deeply intertwined, creating mutually reinforcing dynamics (Hirschman, 1984; Granovetter, 1985).

I learned this lesson in my work in Brazil, evaluating knowledge-based partnerships between the World Bank and the University of São Paulo – within training initiatives addressing central bank representatives and government officials. That work experience showed me that building trust and assuring an equitable distribution of risk generate cumulative effects that become prerequisites for program success (Colinet & Marra, 2000; Marra, 2004). As effectively put by Albert O. Hirschman (1984) in the following quote:

Intangible benefits (trust, pride, self-confidence, feeling of liberation, etc.) enhance the purely monetary benefits of the coop, but they do not make up for the monetary losses for the simple reason that they do not survive such losses. Once the coop falters, the intangible benefits turn into losses and the demoralization over the various hopes that have gone sour will induce disloyalty among the members along with, perhaps, corrupt behavior among the staff. (Hirschman, 1984, p. 45)

The cumulative effects stemming from the interplay of tangibles and intangibles – as Hirschman points out – can lead to either effective or disappointing cooperation, perhaps even more so than private enterprises (Hirschman, 1984). These considerations have significant implications for evaluation, which often maintains a narrow focus on tangible (and measurable) dimensions, overlooking concerns for perceived equity, political commitment, organizational beliefs, emotional reactions, and trust. Ray's emphasis on the “unmeasurable” aspects of cooperation significantly shaped my understanding of evaluation as a discipline that integrates technical expertise with value-based considerations, contextual sensitivity, and situational responsiveness (Patton, 2005).

Today, this insight continues to shape my teaching and research, particularly in the fields of university–industry partnerships and innovation policy. In these contexts, the growth of an innovation ecosystem depends on more than just

traditional investments in research and development—it also requires talent, an entrepreneurial mindset, knowledge open-ended exploration, trust, and a shared commitment among stakeholders. Evidence from innovation policy evaluation highlights that fostering environments where stakeholders can collaborate and build trust helps strengthen state and organizational capacity, diffused leadership, and the entrepreneurial character of innovation ecosystems, while promoting inclusivity, networking, and cooperation. Integrating these intangible dimensions into evaluation practices enhances the understanding of what drives innovation and empowers stakeholders to engage in transformative change (Guzman et al., 2024).

Whether in public sector reform, territorial governance, or innovation policy, the rationale for exploring the interplay between the “measurable” and the “unmeasurable” lies in its profound impact on the success and sustainability of cooperation. Technical metrics undoubtedly provide benchmarks for assessing the performance of collaboration, but accounting for the relational, interdependent, and contextual dynamics enables evaluators to gauge its adaptability and change-making capacity. This dual focus on measurable results and the relational underpinning of collaboration ensures that evaluators master complexity and sustainability dimensions more competently.

Leveraging Evaluative Knowledge for Reflection and Change

A hallmark of Ray's mentorship has been the shared emphasis on the democratic nature of evaluative knowledge. For instance, presenting findings to senior management at the World Bank taught me the significance of “speaking truth to power”—delivering insights that challenge entrenched hierarchies, promote transparency, and enable evidence-informed decision-making, all while navigating the nuanced cultural and political dynamics of organizational contexts.

In assignments such as analyzing the use of anti-corruption evaluation findings from Tanzania and Uganda, I delved into how evaluative information can serve multiple purposes—instrumental, enlightenment-based, or political—depending on its audience. By using the metaphor of concentric circles, I began to identify diverse stakeholders ranging from direct program managers to broader organizational and societal actors (Marra, 2000). This approach underscored the critical need to engage stakeholders throughout

the evaluation process, to establish a dialogue and gain a mutual understanding from the outset of evaluation design till the dissemination of findings.

My PhD research built on this theme, examining how evaluative information was – or wasn't – used in the formulation of international development policies. This investigation revealed that evaluation use often unfolds incrementally, influenced by a combination of political, organizational, and cognitive factors. While contemporary neuroscience now offers insights into why individuals resist challenging information, my early work with Ray foreshadowed key shifts in knowledge management toward continuous, iterative learning (Marra, 2005; Rist & Stame, 2005). The relevance of this issue remains profound today in a data economy context, where building a data infrastructure – including machine learning and AI – promises to revolutionize how decisions are made. In a complex and rapidly evolving world, characterized by increasing datafication and post-truth phenomena, the ability to leverage evaluative information can foster timely and evidence-informed decision-making, while ensuring fact-checking and results-accountability.

In addition, recognizing that the use of evaluation evolves over time underscores the need for strategic dissemination practices. Political contexts, organizational cultures, and individual cognitive biases continually influence how evaluative insights are received and applied. The growing focus on continuous, iterative learning aligns with contemporary approaches like developmental evaluation designs and adaptive management, which emphasize flexibility and responsiveness over rigid planning structures (Patton, 2011; Forss et al., 2011).

By examining these dynamics, the lessons I have learned—and continue to share—highlight the critical importance of integrating evaluative information within a broader data environment and knowledge management system to ensure that this information is processed, while insights remain both relevant and actionable. Particularly in public administration and local governance, where social norms and routines are deeply entrenched, and legal regulation is weak or difficult to enforce, enabling organizations to adapt to emerging challenges by leveraging evaluative knowledge is crucial. In these contexts, effective evaluative mechanisms can foster an ethical organizational culture, counteracting biases and homologation pressures, which might otherwise perpetuate de facto discrimination and resistance to change. By challenging ingrained assumptions and promoting a culture of reflective learning, organizations can

navigate complexities and drive meaningful, equitable transformation.

Advancing Evaluation Scholarship to Strengthen Practice and Learning

As my collaboration with Ray evolved over time, I became increasingly aware of the field's evolution toward a more inclusive and reflective scholarship. Through initiatives like the INTEVAL network supporting the Comparative Policy Evaluation series by Routledge, coordinated by Ray and involving a network of scholars and practitioners throughout North America and Europe, I have contributed to fostering a richer understanding of evaluation as both an intellectual and ethical endeavor. This initiative has contributed to the field's transition from a narrow methodological focus to a more theoretical understanding of the complex realities of governance and policymaking.

The Comparative Policy Evaluation series has been particularly instrumental in bridging theory and practice. These volumes emphasize the critical role of evaluative knowledge in democratic governance and public sector reform. The diverse case studies featured in these works shed light on how different institutional settings shape the creation of evaluative knowledge and its cognitive dimensions and organizational logics. This acquisition has contributed to increasingly questioning the rational view of evaluation, highlighting the potentially biased effects of the evaluation enterprise (Marra, 2019, 2021; Furubo & Stame, 2019). The prolonged gestation processes behind these books testify to how initial ideas mature over time, spurring innovative debates in evaluation while drawing on the insights of contributors, coming from different backgrounds at the intersection of theory and practice.

Three critical lessons emerge from the experience of this international intellectual endeavor as emphasized in the 2024 volume I coedited with Karol Olejniczak and Arne Paulson for the Comparative Policy Evaluation series by Routledge (Marra, 2024). Firstly, evaluation practice benefits from embracing diversity rather than adhering to a single "best approach." In this respect, INTEVAL books explore this diversity, enabling evaluators to grasp the multifaceted knowledge production processes that inform policymaking across different settings.

Secondly, INTEVAL volumes have focused on situational dimensions of contexts where evaluators uncover and address intangible yet pivotal factors, including rationality agendas, power dynamics, culturally diverse traditions,

ethical considerations, and hidden tensions among stakeholders. These elements constitute the tacit dimension of knowledge that operates beneath formal structures, yet forges program outcomes (Polanyi, 1966). Understanding such nuances requires evaluators to move beyond technical metrics, promoting collective intelligence, and co-producing knowledge relevant to policy problems and critical of (and for) policy solutions. By blending technical expertise with tacit knowledge, evaluators can help stakeholders in the political and organizational spheres recognize diversity, enhance pluralism, build trust, and mitigate the risks of information manipulation and post-truth.

Finally, the ability to observe and interpret social environments is essential for fostering pluralism and inclusive participation. Evaluators must navigate diverse perspectives, competing interests, and hierarchical social structures to ensure that marginalized voices are heard and respected. This capacity to engage with contextual heterogeneity enhances the democratic legitimacy of evaluation processes and strengthens the practical and political relevance of recommendations. By fully acknowledging and addressing the diversity of contexts in which policies and programs operate, evaluators can create spaces of reflexivity, learning, and experimentation to face problems. This emphasis on the diverse, the inclusive, the tacit or intangible provides a foundation for evaluations that, while being methodologically robust, aim to democratically inform policymaking and institutional working.

Conclusion

Reflecting on my collaboration with Ray, I am struck by the enduring relevance of his vision for evaluation. Ray has demonstrated that evaluation is not merely a technical exercise but a human-centered process that bridges theory and practice to generate actionable insights and organizational learning.

Through our work, I have learned that the true value of evaluation lies in connecting intangible dimensions—trust, collaborative relationships, and cultural understanding—with tangible goals like institutional effectiveness, efficiency, and social progress. As evaluators, our task consists of illuminating pathways for change, empowering organizations and individuals to navigate complexity and uncertainty.

While the Comparative Policy Evaluation series published by Routledge, a cornerstone of Ray's contributions, continues to inspire evaluators

worldwide, the ability to foster collaboration, mentor new generations, and advocate for evaluative knowledge as a tool for democratic governance remains a guiding principle in the field. It has been a privilege to work alongside Ray, and I am deeply grateful for the insights and opportunities this collaboration has afforded.

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