

## **Why is the VEPR Initiative grounded in a capabilities approach?**

***Robert Picciotto***

Performance assessment through examination of products and behaviours appeals to common sense. Aspiration to evaluation excellence is broad based and legitimate. This is why competencies have long dominated a long standing debate about evaluation professionalization. As demand for evaluative services has grown widespread commissioners' dissatisfaction with the uneven quality of evaluations has given a fillip to the adoption of competency standards and measurement.

Competence is the ability to produce good work validated through observation and assessment against good practice standards. The concept of competencies promises rigor, simplicity and transparency. It is hard to dispute the notion that performance is the acid test of professionalism: no one condones incompetence.

In practice however the notion of testing evaluators' competencies has generated a fierce and inconclusive debate. Ultimately this is because objective testing through standard measurement of the attributes needed to produce quality evaluations faces many obstacles:

- Judging what a person is able to do merely by checking outcomes and examining products is problematic. The evaluator is not fully in control of the evaluation process: evaluation use and evaluation outcomes depend crucially on the role played by commissioners and evaluation managers
- Performance expectations vary widely depending on the type of evaluation, the setting, the circumstances and stakeholders' requirements
- The admixtures of knowledge, skills and dispositions needed to operate effectively as an evaluator are not the same from situation to situation
- Different competencies are associated with the numerous and distinctive evaluation approaches and models on offer, e.g. the basic knowledge and skills of an experimental impact evaluator are quite different from the competencies required of an empowerment or democratic evaluator.

Indeed adaptability to different governance configurations and cultural contexts is a crucial attribute of the experienced evaluation practitioner. While reaching broad based agreement on a core set of knowledge, skills and attitudes required to minimum quality requirements across contexts and sectors is conceivable it is well nigh impossible to discriminate precisely among diverse levels of evaluative expertise given the multiplicity of attributes associated with best evaluation practice and the bewildering diversity of cultural, thematic and sector contexts. Only peers' situational judgments of performance based on concrete examples of practice are credible and legitimate.

All evaluators can improve their performance. Whereas the definition of fixed competency thresholds for various levels of mastery is bound to be divisive and controversial a

capabilities approach focused on self examination evinces no serious opposition. When facilitated by voluntary peer review it can provide precious insights and generate pertinent feedback. It is a tailor made response to the limitations inherent in standard based assessments. It aims at professional development and seeks to expand evaluators' abilities to function and produce valuable work in diverse contexts. A focus on capabilities helps to trigger motivation, to probe unexplored domains of practice and to identify knowledge acquisition pathways most likely to expand an evaluator's professional capacity and range.

The logic of a capability focus is that a rational reflection about alternative learning and experience options with the help of well selected peers can foster professional growth. As a result of such a process evaluators are likely to make better choices regarding their preferred career path. Through self examination informed by critical feedback and fulsome engagement with other practitioners evaluators are better equipped to develop their professional assets

At the heart of the capability approach is the notion that individuals are endowed with reason and that they are free to explore their own conception of enhanced professionalism. This in a nutshell is the inherent rationale of the voluntary evaluator peer review system. To be sure evaluators have diverse aspirations, needs and interests. But they all share guiding principles of ethical behaviour and they are all accountable to the profession. Being duty bound to protect the values embedded in the discipline they are open to help one another practice better evaluation in the public interest.

