Governing uncertainty: strengthening democracy through responsible public administration

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Abstract: Around the world, governments declare commitment to "evidence-based policymaking," yet many operate policy systems that fundamentally misunderstand what evidence means. The systematic confusion between monitoring activities and evaluating outcomes represents more than technical failure: it creates governance disorder that undermines democratic accountability, perpetuates ineffective policies, and impairs collective capacity to address transnational challenges.

This papr examines how flawed monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems create governance disorder at multiple levels, from local policy failures to regional coordination breakdowns to global cooperation challenges. When systems confuse tracking activities with assessing outcomes, they produce a dangerous illusion: the appearance of evidence-based governance without its substance. Officials implement sophisticated frameworks without the tools to determine whether policies actually work, not from lack of capacity, but because the systems themselves misconceive what evaluation means.

Drawing on research across the South Caucasus, where modern policy planning systems established through recent governance reforms falter at every stage of the policy cycle, the paper traces how methodological and capacity weaknesses accumulate into systemic dysfunction. Situation analyses are conducted without actual research, implementation tracks activities rather than results, and evaluation is formally defined as aggregating data on completed activities, a monitoring function, with no mandate to assess outcomes or impact. Concepts such as effectiveness, value for money, and causal attribution remain absent from policy discourse, leaving decisions driven by assumption.

Crucially, this dysfunction is institutionalized rather than incidental. Original research into public administration education across Georgia and Armenia, finds the same confusion reproduced in academic training: only a handful of programs teach evaluation as a distinct discipline, most substitute Regulatory Impact Assessment as a proxy for evaluation literacy, the national handbook functions as the only standing reference even where evaluation literature appears on syllabi, and faculty trained in planning or law, rather than evaluation, leave no one to broker between academic and practitioner communities. Evaluation is assessed as compliance with the government's own quality-assurance instrument rather than as evaluative judgment. The result is a knowledge vacuum that travels from government practice into the classroom, and back again, reinforcing the illusion across an entire professional ecosystem.

Addressing this requires treating M&E as democratic infrastructure rather than compliance mechanism, built on three interconnected dimensions: methodological clarity distinguishing monitoring from evaluation; professional capacity building for evaluation-literate administrators; and communication strategies bridging the gap between credible evidence and policy influence. By examining the Caucasus experience alongside broader comparative insights, this paper offers frameworks for strengthening evidence systems across the policy cycle, with relevance for any government navigating evidence-based governance amid uncertainty.