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*CORRESPONDENCE
Marco Faytong-Haro
✉ mfaytong@uees.edu.ec

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Ecuador's evaluation ecosystem: an opinion article on building evidence-based governance

Marco Faytong-Haro*

School of International Studies, Universidad Espíritu Santo, Samborondón, Ecuador

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Introduction

Policy evaluation is a cornerstone of evidence-based governance, offering insights into what public policies work, for whom, and why (OECD, 2025). By assessing policy outcomes, governments can improve transparency, accountability, and decision-making. Yet integrating rigorous evaluation into the policy cycle remains a challenge in many countries (OECD, 2025), and Ecuador is no exception. Ecuador's evaluation culture is weak and underdeveloped (Lascano Castro, 2021). This opinion article examines the state of Ecuador's policy evaluation ecosystem and argues that targeted reforms—guided by international best practices and lessons from local evaluations—can strengthen evaluation use across sectors.

Diagnostic: institutional gaps in Ecuador's evaluation framework

A useful lens for diagnosing Ecuador's evaluation ecosystem is the framework of an evaluation cycle or maturity model, which highlights three pillars: a clear institutional mandate for evaluation, the capacity to implement quality evaluations, and the effective use of findings (OECD, 2025). On each of these fronts, Ecuador faces significant gaps.

Mandate and institutionalization

In Ecuador, efforts to institutionalize policy evaluation have been uneven. A Department of Public Policy Evaluation was established in 2014 under the National Secretariat of Planning and Development (SENPLADES), a step toward formalizing evaluation in government (Lascano Castro, 2021). However, an overarching national evaluation policy failed to take root. By the late 2010s, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) mechanisms were only partially implemented: a 2008 assessment found only about half of ministries had M&E procedures in place, and no unified accountability framework existed (Lascano Castro, 2021). Some legal provisions do assign evaluation roles—for example, Planifica Ecuador (the national planning secretariat) has an evaluation mandate—but a coherent national evaluation system is not yet fully in place. Responsibilities for evaluation are spread across agencies, leading to gaps, overlaps, and a lack of enforceable standards.

Implementation capacity

The capacity to conduct and use evaluations in the public sector remains limited. Many ministries and local governments lack dedicated evaluation units or trained personnel. Limited training and high staff turnover hampered the development of evaluation expertise within government (Lascano Castro, 2021). Other challenges include poor-quality administrative data and weak coordination for sharing findings. Analysts note a need to professionalize the evaluator workforce and establish evaluation quality standards (Guerrero Salgado and Velasco Sánchez, 2014). International partners such as UNDP have supported training and technical assistance since the late 2000s, but these efforts have often been short-lived or dependent on the administration in power. In short, the human and technical capacity to carry out rigorous evaluations at scale is still maturing.

Use of findings

Perhaps the most critical gap lies in the use of evaluation results to inform policy. Even when evaluations are conducted, their findings have rarely been integrated into decision-making. A meta-evaluation by SENPLADES found that many impact evaluations carried out in Ecuador were not incorporated into planning or budgeting processes (Lascano Castro, 2021). Indeed, a U.N. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean review concluded that information produced by the nascent M&E system was not used in budgeting or to improve programs (CEPAL, 2014). This points to a persistent disconnect between evaluation activities and policy formulation. Demand for evaluative evidence among senior officials has been sporadic, and there are few formal requirements to respond to evaluation findings. Culturally, evaluation has sometimes been seen as a box-checking exercise or an external imposition rather than a tool for learning. Until ministries are both mandated and incentivized not only to carry out evaluations but also to act on the results, the impact of any evaluation will remain limited.

Exemplars of good practice: evaluation case studies in Ecuador

Despite these systemic weaknesses, there are notable examples of rigorous policy evaluations in Ecuador that demonstrate the value of evidence and offer lessons for broader uptake. Three cases—from the social protection, environmental, and education sectors—illustrate how careful evaluation design can yield actionable insights, and the extent to which those insights have influenced policy.

Cash transfers—Bono de Desarrollo Humano

Ecuador's flagship anti-poverty program, the Bono de Desarrollo Humano (BDH) cash transfer, has been the

subject of rigorous evaluation. Economists implemented a randomized controlled trial to assess the BDH's effects on human capital accumulation. The study found modest but significant improvements in young children's cognitive development among the poorest beneficiary households, with no measurable gains for slightly better-off groups (Paxson and Schady, 2007; Schady, 2011). These findings underscored the program's effectiveness for the most vulnerable and informed debates on how to better target social assistance. On the strength of this evidence, policymakers largely maintained the BDH as a cornerstone of Ecuador's social policy, and the program's design was adjusted over time to reinforce its focus on the poorest families and on children's development outcomes.

Conservation incentives—Socio Bosque

In the environmental realm, Ecuador's Socio Bosque program provides a positive example of evaluation and policy feedback. Launched in 2008, Socio Bosque is a government-led payments for ecosystems initiative that offers annual monetary incentives to indigenous communities and private landowners who commit to conserving native forests. The program aims to reduce deforestation while alleviating rural poverty. Its impacts have been evaluated using quasi-experimental methods that compare deforestation on enrolled lands with similar unenrolled areas. Research found that participants in Socio Bosque experienced significantly lower deforestation rates—approximately a 0.4–0.5 percentage point reduction in annual forest loss, which equated to a 56–70% decrease in deforestation relative to control areas (Jones et al., 2017). This evidence demonstrated that incentive-based conservation can yield substantial environmental benefits. Policy uptake of these findings has been evident in the government's continued support and expansion of Socio Bosque. By the mid-2010s, the program had enrolled over a million hectares of forest land under conservation agreements, and it has been recognized as a pillar of Ecuador's climate change mitigation strategy. The success of Socio Bosque's model has also encouraged exploration of similar incentive programs in other natural resource sectors.

Education reform—Higher Education Law

In the education sector, a major reform was rigorously evaluated with noteworthy results. The 2010 *Ley Orgánica de Educación Superior* (Higher Education Law) introduced sweeping changes aimed at improving university quality and research output in Ecuador. A recent impact evaluation used a synthetic control methodology to isolate the reform's effects by comparing Ecuador's outcomes with a constructed counterfactual scenario without the law. The analysis found that the reform led to a surge in academic research productivity: within several years, Ecuador's annual scientific publication output rose dramatically, far outpacing the growth that would have been expected otherwise (Álvarez-Munoz et al., 2024). This evaluation provided clear evidence that ambitious policy changes in higher education can quickly translate into measurable gains in scholarly output and human capital

development. In terms of policy uptake, the findings have been cited by national authorities to justify sustained investment in higher education and to support continued enforcement of quality standards for universities. The success of the reform, demonstrated by the evaluation, helped build public and political support for its implementation.

These case studies—spanning social protection, environmental conservation, and education—highlight the potential of well-designed evaluations to generate learning. They also reveal a common challenge: even when rigorous evidence is available, its influence on broader policy and institutional practice can be uneven. Outside these and other few examples, relatively few policy evaluations are carried out in Ecuador, and many of those that exist are driven by actors like NGOs and universities. The challenge is to move from such isolated successes toward a systematic culture of evidence-informed policymaking.

Strategic roadmap: strengthening Ecuador's evaluation ecosystem

Building a stronger policy evaluation ecosystem in Ecuador will require strategic action on multiple fronts. Based on the diagnostic gaps and the lessons from the above examples, several priority steps emerge for cultivating a more robust, institutionalized practice of evaluation.

First, evaluation should be institutionalized through mandates and integration. The government should enact clear requirements for ministries to conduct or commission evaluations of major programs and policies, and to publicly release the results. Adopting a national evaluation policy or law could solidify this mandate. Just as importantly, mechanisms must link evaluations to core government processes. Integrating evaluation findings into the annual budget cycle would help close the loop between evidence and decision-making: programs that demonstrate positive impact can be sustained or scaled up, while those that underperform are reformed or phased out. Additionally, establishing a central evaluation unit or an inter-ministerial evaluation council could improve coordination and set standards, drawing on models like Chile's government evaluation system or Mexico's independent evaluation council (CONEVAL). Such bodies can ensure that evaluations are not isolated exercises but part of a continuous accountability loop.

Second, investments in capacity and incentives for high-quality evaluation should be pushed. Technical skills and a supportive environment are necessary to produce and use evidence. International partners can continue to assist with training and pilot studies, but domestic capacity must be built for the long term. This includes strengthening academic programs in public policy and evaluation within Ecuador to train a new generation of evaluators and public managers. Creating evaluation networks or communities of practice that connect government analysts, academics, and civil society could facilitate knowledge exchange and peer learning. Building technical capacity goes hand in hand with fostering demand: government leaders and citizens should see evaluations not as bureaucratic formalities but as useful tools for learning and improvement. Encouraging a constructive approach—using evaluation findings for program

improvement rather than to assign blame—can also reduce agencies' resistance to being evaluated. Aligning incentives, for instance by recognizing ministries that actively apply evaluative evidence, would further promote an evaluation-oriented mindset in the public sector.

Finally, the scope of evaluation across all sectors should be broadened. Thus far, some policy domains in Ecuador (such as health, environmental management, and municipal services) have seen only sporadic evaluation. Making evaluation a routine aspect of all major initiatives would greatly expand the evidence base for policymaking. For example, major health reforms or public health campaigns could undergo regular impact evaluations to identify which strategies truly improve outcomes, and in education, evaluations of teacher training or curriculum reforms could guide improvements in learning. Likewise, environmental initiatives (such as conservation programs or climate action plans) and social protection programs should include independent evaluations to gauge progress toward their goals and long-term impacts. By embedding evaluation practices across policy areas, Ecuador can ensure that evidence-based learning becomes the norm rather than the exception.

Next steps

The essential building blocks of an effective evaluation ecosystem in Ecuador are beginning to emerge: there is growing political acknowledgment of evaluation's importance, some institutional infrastructure (a planning ministry mandate and nascent M&E system), a cadre of local and international experts generating evidence, and clear international guidelines to draw upon. The task now is to weave these elements into a cohesive whole. As immediate next steps, policymakers could formalize a national evaluation strategy, empower a high-level body to oversee evaluation quality and uptake, and allocate dedicated resources for evaluations in the government budget. By learning from international experiences and investing in its own evaluation institutions, Ecuador can move toward a more accountable, learning-oriented model of governance—one in which evaluations are routinely conducted across government and their insights used to benefit all sectors of society.

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