

Innovating for quality in bureaucratic organisation. The challenge of change in public health systems. A 'Realistic Evaluation' of quality projects in Africa

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Objectives:

For nearly two decades in Africa, quality management projects emphasize participatory approaches, local problem solving and change, challenging traditional managerial practices. At short term, evaluation shows improvement in programs and activities output. However did quality projects contribute to the genuine adoption of a quality management culture by public health systems? This is the question we address in this study.

Method:

We follow the '*realistic evaluation*' methodology conceptualized by Pawson and Tilley (1), which focuses on the interaction between an intervention mechanism and its context in order to understand '*what works, for whom, in what circumstances and how?*' and the test programme's underlying theories.

Between 2001 and 2004, we conducted seven subsequent case studies in various contexts in Niger, Guinea, Morocco and Zimbabwe, reviewing quality management trends and quality management projects run in districts health systems between 1988 and 2004.

Each case study builds on several sources of information: (i) project documentation review; (ii) qualitative analysis of interviews of key informants, stakeholders and project participants; (iii) participant observation; (iii) and action research in project settings.

We then proceed with a '*realistic synthesis*' of these studies to build a middle range theory that explains organizational behaviour towards quality management and innovation.

Results:

- Case study 1 compares European and African systems and shows the role of health care organizational configuration (professional type or bureaucratic type) in resisting to the introduction of quality assurance.
- Case studies 2,3,4 in Niger, Guinea and Zimbabwe reveal the tension between the traditional command and control approach and the quality assurance innovative approach promoting teamwork, problem solving, and change.
- Case study 5 in Morocco shows how an external yet legitimate scientific guidance reconciles the need for innovation, experimentation and change and the requirement to conform to national standards and procedures.
- Case study 6 in Zimbabwe explains why and how local improvement teams loose themselves in all kind of coping strategies to overcome bureaucratic constraints to change.
- Case study 7 shows in Morocco how command and control hierarchical organizations allowed innovation, creativity, local initiative and non-hierarchical relationships as long as they remain nested in projects, but later discouraged initiative.

The realistic synthesis of these 7 case studies builds a middle range theory, which explains how the culture shift expected from quality projects emphasizing change did not permeate routine management practices and failed to transform the bureaucracy.

Conclusions:

In terms of method, the application of the realistic evaluation paradigm, a methodological breakthrough for studying interventions in complex systems, is an innovation in itself and yields promising perspective. In terms of results, quality projects alone fail to transform a bureaucratic organizational culture, which in turn undermines their sustainability.

Therefore alternative strategies must be sought to promote a quality culture of change and innovation and the relevant organizational transformation. Health systems reforms and providers regulation frameworks are pivotal. We acknowledge the limitation of decentralization and new public management, and suggest a balance between three ideal-types described by Freidson (2): The bureaucratic ideal-type, however challenged by local coping strategies, the market ideal-type, high on today's agenda in developing countries, which promote initiative and entrepreneurship, and the professional ideal-type, challenged in northern countries, emerging and potentially promising, yet still embryonic in Africa.

References:

- 1 Pawson R & Tilley N 1997 Realistic Evaluation. Sage Publication: London
- 2 Freidson E 2001 Professionalism: The third logic University of Chicago Press: Chicago