STUDIA UNIVERSITATIS MOLDAVIAE
Revista științifică a Universității de Stat din Moldova, 2026, nr. 5(195)

CZU: 005.85:005.585:303.4(478) **https://doi.org/10.59295/sum5(195)2026_19**

STRENGTHENING EVALUATOR INDEPENDENCE IN PARTICIPATORY PROCESSES: INSIGHTS FOR EDUCATIONAL EVALUATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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The evaluator–client relationship in external project evaluations is often characterized by tensions that may affect the evaluator's professional independence. Vulnerability arises particularly when beneficiaries challenge interpretations or when the evaluation process is constrained by limited access to information and insufficiently defined terms of reference. This article examines how evaluator independence is managed in participatory evaluation processes in the Republic of Moldova, with particular relevance to the field of education. The research combines an analysis of the normative framework with empirical data collected through a survey conducted in 2022 among eleven independent evaluators. The findings highlight the presence of subtle forms of beneficiary influence on the evaluation process, with over 63% of respondents reporting pressure to reformulate critical findings. Evaluator independence thus emerges as a negotiated practice within institutional and relational contexts. The research underscores the need to strengthen the professional and institutional framework, which is essential in education for supporting decision-making, quality assurance and institutional development.

Keywords: *evaluator independence; participatory evaluation; evaluation process; educational evaluation; evaluator competency standards; quality of education; evidence-based decision-making.*

CONSOLIDAREA INDEPENDENȚEI EVALUATORULUI ÎN PROCESE PARTICIPATIVE: PERSPECTIVE PENTRU EVALUAREA EDUCAȚIONALĂ ÎN REPUBLICA MOLDOVA

Relația evaluator–client în evaluările externe de proiecte este adesea marcată de tensiuni care pot afecta independența profesională a evaluatorului. Vulnerabilitatea apare în special atunci când beneficiarii contestă interpretările sau când procesul de evaluare este limitat de acces restrâns la informații și de termeni de referință insuficient clarificați. Articolul analizează modul în care independența evaluatorului este gestionată în procesele de evaluare participativă în Republica Moldova, cu relevanță pentru domeniul educației. Cercetarea combină analiza cadrului normativ cu date empirice colectate printr-un sondaj realizat în 2022 în rândul a unsprezece evaluatori independenți. Rezultatele evidențiază influențe subtile ale beneficiarilor asupra procesului de evaluare, peste 63% dintre respondenți raportând presiuni de reformulare a constatărilor critice. Independența evaluatorului apare astfel ca o practică negociată în contexte instituționale și relaționale. Cercetarea subliniază necesitatea consolidării cadrului profesional și instituțional, esențial în educație pentru susținerea luării deciziilor, asigurarea calității și dezvoltarea instituțională.

Cuvinte-cheie: *independența evaluatorului, evaluare participativă, proces de evaluare, evaluare educațională, standardul de competență al evaluatorului, calitatea educației, luarea deciziilor bazată pe dovezi*.

Introduction

According to the OECD-DAC Quality Standard for Evaluation, the overall purpose of evaluation is to *„contribute to the improvement of a development policy, procedure or technique, to consider the continuation or discontinuation of a project or programme, to report to stakeholders and taxpayers on the results of public and development investments"* [13]. In this context, one of the evaluator's tasks is to note the challenges faced by the object being evaluated and analyse the consequences in order to make them transparent, even if this calls into question the implementation of current strategies or its subsequent funding. In such situations, the feedback received from clients on evaluation results may not always be constructive.

Ensuring the independence of the evaluator in the participatory project evaluation process is fundamental to guarantee the objectivity and viability of the results obtained. A growing body of research (Morris and Clark, 2012; Pleger et al., 2016; Stockmann et al., 2011; Turner, 2003) demonstrates *„that evaluators in all countries face attempts by stakeholders in the evaluation process to influence them to distort their findings”* [17]. Such attempts may occur at all stages of the evaluation process and are often associated with actors involved in the implementation or commissioning of projects. In this context, it is very important on the one hand for evaluators to adopt a participatory approach in the evaluation process, and on the other hand to contribute to the development of state-wide standards that would help them. Carter and Williams (2009) stress *„the importance of involving stakeholders in the evaluation process, but not in the evaluator's decision-making process, to avoid inappropriate influence”*. By asking questions, applying methodology and addressing issues, the evaluator in the evaluation process could avoid subsequent problems and generate a commonly accepted end result. According to Ghauri and Grønhaug *„open and transparent communication with all stakeholders can help build trust and underline the evaluator's commitment to objectivity and independence”*. At the same time, national and international standards would help evaluators produce a credible report with valid and reliable results so that the evaluator has professional independence. This is why this requirement has been introduced in evaluators' standards worldwide. For example, the standard of competence for the external evaluator in the Republic of Moldova states that "*the evaluator, through the methodology applied, shall confirm the veracity of the findings in a fair, impartial and independent manner”* [11]. According to the occupational standard for project evaluators in Romania, *independence of decision is among the principles of professional conduct* [12]. In Germany, for example, the DeGEval standard of fairness states that *“the entire evaluation process as well as the evaluation reports should show the impartial position of the evaluators.”* [6]. The OECD-DAC Evaluation Quality Standard describes in detail the independence of evaluators from stakeholders, namely: *“the evaluation report indicates the degree of independence of the evaluators from the policies, measures and administration of the client, the implementers and the beneficiaries. The evaluation team must be able to work freely and without any interference.”* [14].

At the European Union level, there are at least four principles [13] to ensure the credibility of project evaluation, namely:

- *Impartiality and independence,* which implies that there is a complete separation between the evaluation function and the programming and implementation functions, and that the persons and units responsible for project preparation and/or implementation are not in the role of evaluators.
- *Credibility,* according to which competent, independent experts trained in project evaluation are to be involved in the evaluation process.
- *Stakeholder participation in the evaluation* to ensure that different perspectives are taken into account and reflected in the evaluation results. Obtaining agreement from those with a vested interest in the project evaluation - whether from beneficiaries, project managers, members of the target group, etc. - is a key step in giving a sense of 'ownership' over the evaluation results and recommendations.
- *Utility.* The conclusions and recommendations of an evaluation report must be useful and feasible.

Analysing the stages of an evaluation process applied in a project, attempts to influence evaluators can be systematised as follows in Table 1.

Table 1. Stages of the evaluation process and corresponding attempts to influence evaluators

Stages of an evaluation process	Attempts to influence evaluators
Planning stage	- During the preparation of an evaluation, the client defines the desired or less desired results. - Attempts are made to exclude certain questions from the outset, even if they are relevant. - Knowingly or unknowingly excluding certain participants from the evaluation process can disrupt the process of an evaluation. - Not following the participatory approach in the project evaluation process limits the evaluator from taking into account the views and perspectives of different target groups.

Implementation stage	- Attempts not to use certain data collection or analysis methods. - Requests to disclose the names of interviewees who were guaranteed anonymity by the evaluators.
Synthesis stage	- Attempts to present results in a more positive light, to underestimate or otherwise manipulate them. - Use of evaluation results by clients to punish certain stakeholders. - Attempting to deliberately hide evaluation results from donors or project beneficiaries. - Incorrect interpretation of project evaluation results by stakeholders.

In contexts where the number of evaluators is relatively small in relation to the number of potential clients, competitive pressures may increase the vulnerability of evaluators to such influences. Situations may arise in which evaluators are indirectly encouraged to adjust their conclusions, for example through expectations related to future contracts or financial conditions. In some cases, this may involve requests to rephrase critical findings or to present results in a more favourable manner. Such practices may raise concerns regarding both the quality of the evaluation and the professional integrity of the evaluator. From an analytical perspective, these forms of influence may be interpreted as potential sources of conflict of interest. In this context, examining evaluator independence becomes relevant not only from a methodological standpoint, but also in relation to professional practice.

In the field of education, evaluation is widely used as an analytical tool for examining programmes, institutional practices and policy implementation. According to international standards in educational evaluation, evaluation should be conducted in a systematic, ethical and independent manner in order to ensure the credibility and usefulness of its results [8]. In addition, OECD frameworks emphasize that evaluation plays an important role in supporting policy learning and informed decision-making, particularly when results are based on transparent and independent analysis [15]. In this context, maintaining evaluator independence contributes to ensuring that findings reflect the data collected and the analysis conducted. This, in turn, supports their consistent interpretation and use in institutional processes. Against this background, the present research aims to analyse how evaluator independence is experienced and managed in participatory evaluation processes in the Republic of Moldova, as well as to explore the implications of these dynamics for the use of evaluation results, including in contexts relevant to education.

This study contributes to the literature by conceptualising evaluator independence as a context-dependent and negotiated practice, with particular relevance for educational evaluation, where findings inform decision-making, quality assurance and institutional development.

Methodological framework

The research on evaluator independence in participatory evaluation processes was based on a mixed-methods approach, predominantly qualitative-analytical, complemented by descriptive quantitative elements. The study explored how standards of independence and impartiality are interpreted and applied in external project evaluations in the Republic of Moldova.

The research follows an exploratory, comparative design. A combination of analytical-deductive reasoning and comparative review of national and international evaluation norms was used to conceptually ground the principle of evaluator independence. Empirical data were collected in 2022 through an online survey administered via Microsoft Forms.

A purposive sample of 11 independent evaluators active in Moldova was selected. Participants were required to have: (a) experience evaluating at least two externally funded projects; (b) involvement in evaluations conducted within the last three years; and (c) experience with projects having budgets up to one million euros and durations of up to 30 months. The evaluated projects spanned multiple sectors—including education, social services, agriculture, environment, and IT—allowing for diverse perspectives. The survey included both closed-ended (5-point Likert scale) and open-ended items, capturing the perceived influence of beneficiaries on evaluators and the qualitative experiences of participants. Questions were organized around key stages of the evaluation process: planning, data collection, analysis, and reporting.

Data analysis combined descriptive statistics for quantitative items with thematic analysis of qualitative responses, enabling the identification of influence patterns, professional vulnerabilities, and evaluators' perceptions of independence limits.

Validity and limitations. Internal validity was ensured by linking empirical data to the normative framework, while credibility was strengthened through the inclusion of evaluators' first-hand experiences. However, the small, non-probabilistic sample limits generalizability, positioning findings primarily as exploratory and interpretive.

This methodological framework provides both conceptual and empirical insight into the tensions between formal standards of independence and actual practices in participatory evaluation contexts in the Republic of Moldova. The methodological approach is also relevant for the field of educational sciences, as it examines evaluation practices that are increasingly applied in the assessment of educational programmes and institutional processes. By combining normative analysis with empirical data derived from evaluators' experiences, the study contributes to understanding how principles such as independence and impartiality are interpreted in contexts where evaluation results may inform reflection and decision-making.

Content

This research employed a comparative and analytical-deductive method to examine the principle of evaluator independence in project evaluations, with a focus on the Republic of Moldova and a review of similar evaluation standards adopted in other European countries.

Republic of Moldova: The most significant national reference is the „*Methodological framework for evaluation of research and development projects and programmes in the Republic of Moldova*" published in 2014 by the Information Society Development Institute [7]. The methodological framework was developed as part of the InfoScientic project and provides practical guidance for evaluators, project implementers and financial authorities. The document supports decision-makers in the design of programmes and financial instruments, the selection of evaluators, the implementation of evaluation results and public communication. It also supports evaluators in carrying out the evaluation process, positioning themselves vis-à-vis other actors involved and establishing the information base for evaluations. In the project evaluation process, evaluators are encouraged to adhere to eight evaluation standards: *professionalism, ethics and integrity, clarity, judgement, confidentiality, independence, usefulness, reporting and use*. According to this document, the evaluator must be independent of the managing, funding and evaluation authorities and be selected through a competitive process. The findings should be formulated in an objective manner, without undue influence, while the evaluator's position must remain politically, religiously or otherwise neutral.

***Romania*:** The *Occupational Standard for Project Evaluators* adopted by the National Qualifications Authority in 2017 outlines a framework of professional and ethical expectations for evaluators [11]. This standard explicitly mentions the principle of independence, emphasizing that the evaluator must act autonomously, free from conflict of interest or external interference. It also promotes transparency in methodology and decision-making, requiring evaluators to base their conclusions on objective data.

Austria: The Austrian Platform for the Evaluation of Research and Technology Policy (fteval) published in 2019 the evaluation standards in research, technology and innovation policy. According to this document, the independence standard assumes that *„evaluation is produced using scientific methods and taking into account different opinions or positions. Evaluation is not influenced by politics, clients, programme management, stakeholders or even a possible bias of the evaluators themselves to influence or manipulate the content of the evaluation. „Courtesy analyses" or the like, particularly to possibly generate follow-up orders or to avoid disrupting the broader political context with critical points, are not a serious form of evaluation and clearly contradict the purpose of an evaluation."* The independence of evaluators is one of the evaluation principles included in the evaluation policy of the Austrian Development Cooperation document. Evaluators must have expertise. Credibility also includes the independence of evaluators from all operationally involved staff. The Austrian Development Cooperation policy complements these standards by mandating that evaluations be conducted by external, professionally certified experts who are not operationally involved in the evaluated activities [2].

***France*:** In 1999, in France, the French Evaluation Society was founded to help improve the evaluation process and promote its use in public and private organisations. *One of the principles of evaluation in France refers to distancing and states that "evaluation is carried out impartially. The persons involved in the evaluation process are professionals. The evaluation process is carried out independently of management and decision-making processes. This autonomy preserves the freedom of choice of public decision-makers"* [21].

***Germany*:** In Germany there is the German Evaluation Society - DeGEval. Since the publication of the first version in 2002, *DeGEval's evaluation standards define usefulness, feasibility, fairness and accuracy* as the four general principles that characterise good evaluations. The whole evaluation process as well as the evaluation reports should highlight the impartial position of the evaluator. As stated in the guidelines of the Federal Ministry for Economic Development and Cooperation (BMZ) in the evaluation policy of German cooperation, the key features of GIZ evaluations are *usefulness, credibility and independence*. Credibility can only be achieved if evaluation results and assessments are generated independently [6].

Switzerland: In September 2016, the Swiss Evaluation Society adopted the Evaluation Standards (SEVAL). Their purpose and scope contribute to the professionalisation of evaluation activities in Switzerland. According to these standards, *an evaluation is designed as an open process that ensures an impartial evaluation* [19].

***Sweden*:** Established in January 2003, the Swedish Evaluation Society (SVUF) promotes professional evaluation by facilitating an ongoing dialogue on the role of evaluation and evaluators in society. Evaluators are normally *independent from the subject of the evaluation and the activities evaluated and have no interest in the outcome of the evaluation* [20].

Across these national contexts, independence is consistently defined as a key condition for credible evaluation. Although institutional arrangements differ, a common expectation can be identified: evaluators are required to operate autonomously, apply transparent methodologies and ensure that conclusions are grounded in evidence rather than shaped by stakeholder expectations. According to the OECD/DAC Principles for the Evaluation of Development Assistance [13], the requirement for impartiality and independence applies to all stages of the evaluation process, including planning, the formulation of terms of reference and the selection of evaluation teams. Similar principles are also reflected in educational evaluation standards, which emphasize the importance of independence, transparency and ethical conduct in ensuring credible and usable results [16]. Evaluation standards thus define not only procedural aspects, but also the conditions under which evaluation results can be considered credible and usable. From an analytical standpoint, the comparative review highlights the convergence of national and international frameworks around the principle of evaluator independence, while also illustrating the role of institutional and professional mechanisms in supporting its implementation. The consistency of these standards suggests that the credibility and interpretability of evaluation results are closely linked to the extent to which independence is maintained in practice.

Results of the evaluation survey – Republic of Moldova

Despite the presence of well-established normative frameworks, the practical implementation of evaluator independence in Moldova often reveals critical tensions. To gain insight into these dynamics, a survey was conducted in 2022 involving eleven independent evaluators who had each assessed at least one development project in the past three years. The projects evaluated spanned diverse sectors, including education, healthcare, environment, agriculture and information technology and were geographically situated mainly in the central and northern regions of the Republic of Moldova. The survey was administered using Microsoft Forms and included both multiple-choice and open-ended questions. It utilized a five-point Likert scale to evaluate the frequency and perceived severity of client influence throughout the stages of the evaluation process: planning, data collection, analysis and reporting. Notably, 63% of respondents admitted to having complied at least once with client requests to modify the wording or tone of evaluation findings. Some evaluators reported that such requests were framed as efforts to improve clarity or prevent misinterpretation by external stakeholders such as donors or implementing partners. However, this practice raised ethical

concerns, with 36% of respondents considering these modifications a clear compromise of their professional independence. Several evaluators shared qualitative remarks highlighting the challenges they face. For instance, one respondent noted, “*I had to rephrase an entire section of my report because the client believed it reflected poorly on their coordination efforts, even though the data supported my original analysis*.” Another evaluator recounted being asked to omit critical remarks concerning project sustainability because the client feared negative repercussions on future funding. Moreover, some respondents described indirect pressures, such as delays in contract payments or vague threats about exclusion from future calls for evaluators, which influenced their willingness to resist interference. These tactics, although not always overt, contribute to an environment in which evaluators feel compelled to prioritize professional relationships over full disclosure of findings. Interestingly, a few respondents emphasized that client feedback can enhance the clarity and relevance of an evaluation report. They advocated for evaluators to distinguish between constructive editorial suggestions and coercive attempts to shape findings. Yet, the survey data indicate that this distinction is not always easy to maintain in practice. The findings underline broader issues related to role ambiguity and inconsistent enforcement of evaluation ethics in Moldova. The limited pool of evaluation opportunities intensifies competition among evaluators, creating forms of dependency on clients that may undermine professional independence. These dynamics suggest the need for institutional mechanisms that protect evaluator autonomy and support the consistent application of evaluation standards.

From an analytical perspective, the findings indicate that evaluator independence is contingent not only on formal standards, but also on the institutional and contractual contexts in which evaluations are conducted. The reported adjustments to findings suggest that interactions with commissioning actors may shape how evidence is interpreted and presented, with implications for the robustness and consistency of evaluation outputs. These dynamics are particularly relevant in contexts where evaluation results inform programme development and organisational decision-making. In such cases, the framing of findings may influence not only immediate implementation choices, but also longer-term processes related to planning, quality assurance and institutional learning. Consequently, the credibility and utility of evaluation depend not only on methodological soundness, but also on the ability of evaluators to maintain independence throughout the evaluation process.

Participatory evaluation, which ideally incorporates the perspectives of diverse stakeholders—including beneficiaries, implementers and funders—often places evaluators in complex and sensitive environments. Even when evaluation methodologies are rigorous and inclusive, findings that do not align with institutional narratives or funder expectations may generate resistance, including attempts to reinterpret or discredit conclusions. In some cases, evaluators may face pressures such as the risk of losing future contracts, delays in payments or reputational constraints. In this context, professionalism alone does not fully protect evaluators from external influence. Participatory evaluation requires not only methodological expertise, but also a broader set of competencies. In addition to analytical and technical skills, evaluators need strong communication and negotiation abilities in order to manage stakeholder expectations and maintain analytical clarity throughout the evaluation process. Furthermore, effective evaluation practice depends on organisational and contextual competencies. Evaluators must be able to plan and manage evaluation processes, understand institutional and policy environments and adapt their methodological approaches to specific conditions. In contexts characterised by cultural or institutional diversity, additional competencies—such as contextual awareness and domain-specific knowledge—become particularly relevant. Where such competencies are not available within a single evaluator, the use of multidisciplinary teams represents a practical solution. Combining methodological expertise with sectoral and contextual knowledge allows for a more balanced and robust evaluation process, particularly in complex participatory settings.

According to the national standard of competencies for external evaluators adopted in the Republic of Moldova [8], there are six core domains guiding evaluator qualification and conduct:

- *Basic skills:* Demonstrating ethical conduct and personal integrity, aligned with codes of ethics and related regulatory documents.

- *Professional practice:* Distinguishing the evaluator’s role from that of other professionals in education and development by applying specific evaluation logic and accountability.

- *Interpersonal communication:* Ensuring effective interaction with various stakeholders during all evaluation phases – pre-evaluation, on-site data collection, synthesis, and post-evaluation dissemination.

- *Evaluation methodology:* Applying evidence-based tools and methods to ensure reliability and validity in findings.

- *Leadership and management:* Planning, monitoring, and coordinating resources and activities to achieve a structured and transparent evaluation process.

- *Contextual understanding:* Recognizing the diverse social, institutional, and cultural environments where evaluations take place and integrating stakeholder expectations in a balanced manner.

These standards serve as an important framework for ensuring evaluator integrity and quality assurance. However, empirical findings indicate that, even in the presence of clear guidelines, professional independence remains vulnerable in contexts where expectations from donors, implementers or political stakeholders are not fully aligned with objective findings. Evaluators are often required to respond to complex and sometimes competing expectations, which places additional demands on their professional competencies. Evaluation competence therefore extends beyond methodological expertise and includes a combination of knowledge, skills and professional judgement that enable evaluators to conduct high-quality assessments adapted to specific contexts.

Based on information provided by the evaluators who participated in the 2022 questionnaire, a number of typical patterns of criticism in the evaluation process were identified:

- *Principle of an inappropriate methodology*. Evaluators may face challenges regarding the appropriateness of their methodological approach, particularly in contexts with limited resources. In such situations, clearly defined terms of reference and inception reports can help reduce misunderstandings. At the same time, the evaluator remains responsible for ensuring that the evaluation meets professional standards, including methodological rigor, transparency and adequacy of design, as emphasized in educational evaluation standards [10] and in frameworks for evidence-based educational policy [15].

- *Principle of refusal*. Stakeholders may reject findings that challenge existing assumptions or institutional narratives. In educational contexts, this may occur when evaluation results question established practices, teaching approaches or performance perceptions. In such cases, conclusions must be clearly supported by evidence and transparently communicated, in line with standards emphasizing accuracy, utility and propriety in educational evaluation [10]; [3].

- *Principle of details*. Criticism may focus on minor issues such as formatting or language, potentially diverting attention from substantive findings. Such observations should be addressed without affecting the analytical integrity of the report. This reflects broader concerns in evaluation practice regarding the distinction between technical feedback and attempts to undermine substantive conclusions, particularly in complex institutional environments such as education systems [15].

- *Principle of knowledge*. Stakeholders may argue that evaluation findings are already known. However, even in educational settings where practitioners are aware of existing challenges, evaluation plays a critical role in providing empirical validation and structured analysis that can support informed decision-making, policy learning and improvement of teaching and learning processes [15]; [5].

- *Principle of lack*. Constraints related to access to data, availability of respondents or institutional support may affect the evaluation process. In such cases, limitations should be clearly documented and communicated, as transparency regarding constraints is a key requirement for ensuring credibility and proper interpretation of results, particularly in educational evaluations where data quality and context are essential [8].

It should be noted that "*not every suggestion for change constitutes an attempt to influence*" [16]. In principle, it can be assumed that the clients of an evaluation, who provide the financial, organisational and logistical resources for its implementation, are interested in the results and may seek to use even critical findings constructively for the further development of projects, programmes or policies.

The results of an evaluation can serve as a basis for organisational learning. This is particularly evident in educational institutions where reflective practice, feedback and evidence-informed decision-making are central to improving teaching quality and institutional performance [5]. In organisations where a learning-oriented culture is present, evaluation findings are more likely to be accepted and recommen-

dations more likely to be implemented. On the one hand, evaluators argue “that evaluation should have consequences” [11], while on the other hand, donors and policy-makers expect evaluation processes to generate useful and actionable results. The acceptance and use of evaluation results depend significantly on the organisational context. In environments that support reflection and open dialogue—such as learning-oriented educational systems—critical findings are more likely to be integrated into decision-making processes. In this sense, evaluation functions not only as a mechanism for accountability, but also as a tool for institutional learning, provided that it is conducted under conditions of professional independence.

Recommendations

The best way for evaluators to be protected against criticism is through a professionally grounded and ethically consistent approach to their work. Central to this is the adoption of a comprehensive communication strategy that ensures transparency and a clear flow of information among all parties engaged in the participatory evaluation process. This open dialogue contributes to clarifying expectations, reducing potential misinterpretations, and building trust among stakeholders. At the same time, it supports the management of divergent interests, which is particularly relevant in participatory evaluations where findings may be contested. Equally important is the proper planning of available resources at all stages of the evaluation. This includes a realistic allocation of time, human capacity and financial support. A lack of adequate resources can compromise the quality and depth of the evaluation process and may increase the vulnerability of evaluators to external influence. Therefore, early and thorough planning is essential not only for ensuring feasibility, but also for safeguarding evaluator independence and the credibility of results. Developing an appropriate evaluation strategy is another key recommendation. This strategy should clearly define the scope, goals, methodology and tools used in a way that aligns with the purpose of the evaluation and the specific research questions. A well-defined strategy supports methodological rigor and provides a clear analytical framework that can be used to justify evaluation decisions in situations where findings are questioned or challenged. The use of an evaluation methodology that is consistent with the objectives of the evaluation is essential. This involves selecting data collection and analysis tools that are not only technically valid but also contextually appropriate. Evaluators must be guided by evidence and maintain professional detachment from influences that seek to steer results in a particular direction. In this respect, adherence to recognised evaluation standards contributes to strengthening both the credibility and the usability of evaluation outcomes.

Professional, technical and ethical standards must be actively upheld throughout the evaluation process in order to ensure its usefulness, feasibility and fairness. These standards provide an essential reference framework for evaluators, particularly in contexts where multiple stakeholders are involved and expectations may not be fully aligned. At the same time, it is necessary to take into account the diversity of stakeholder interests and perspectives. A participatory evaluation that incorporates multiple viewpoints is more likely to produce balanced and credible results; however, such inclusivity must be carefully managed in order to preserve analytical independence.

Results should be interpreted systemically, meaning that they must be situated within broader institutional and societal contexts. This form of analysis increases the relevance of findings and allows recommendations to be framed with an awareness of interdependencies and structural conditions. This is particularly important in the field of education, where evaluation results are used to inform programme design, institutional development and policy implementation. In such contexts, the way in which findings are interpreted and communicated can influence both decision-making processes and the use of evidence in practice.

Recommendations must logically follow from the findings and data presented in the report. They should be practical, implementable and clearly linked to the evidence. In addition, recommendations should be formulated in a way that facilitates their use by decision-makers, including in educational and policy contexts where evaluation results are expected to inform improvement processes. When recommendations are transparent, evidence-based and context-sensitive, they are more likely to be accepted and translated into action. Taken together, these recommendations support the development of a culture of evaluation that

values independence, competence and accountability. In the context of the Republic of Moldova, such an approach contributes not only to strengthening a professional evaluation ecosystem, but also to supporting evidence-informed decision-making and institutional learning processes, particularly in sectors such as education.

Conclusion

Evaluator independence stands at the heart of credible and meaningful participatory project evaluation. Without this independence, the evaluation process risks becoming a procedural formality rather than a reliable instrument for learning, accountability and improvement. Independence ensures that evaluation findings are not shaped by expectations, but are grounded in empirical evidence and guided by principles of fairness, transparency and professional integrity.

In the context of the Republic of Moldova, where evaluation practices are evolving and institutional mechanisms are still consolidating, the findings of this study point to a persistent tension between formal standards and practical constraints. Evaluators, although professionally trained and guided by ethical norms, may remain vulnerable to both explicit and implicit forms of influence. These range from direct interventions in reporting to more subtle conditioning of future professional opportunities. In this sense, independence is not an abstract principle, but one reflected in concrete professional behaviours and decisions, including the ability to:

- reject undue influence on findings or methodological choices;
- ensure the inclusion of diverse perspectives, including critical or underrepresented voices;
- avoid conflicts of interest, whether financial, relational or institutional;
- interpret and report data exclusively on the basis of evidence, even when findings contradict stakeholder expectations.

Maintaining evaluator independence also requires continuous professional development. Competencies such as methodological literacy, contextual understanding, ethical judgement and stakeholder management are essential and must be continuously strengthened through training, professional exchange and engagement in evaluation networks. Although Moldova's competency framework for evaluators provides a solid foundation, its consistent application depends on institutional support and the development of a professional culture that values critical reflection over formal compliance. Another important finding concerns the design and governance of the evaluation process itself. Terms of reference should clearly define the scope, objectives and limitations of the evaluation, ensure realistic timelines and resources, and explicitly safeguard the evaluator's right to independent judgement. Similarly, evaluation contracts should include provisions that protect evaluators from retaliatory actions or the suppression of findings. In parallel, institutions commissioning evaluations—including those in the education sector—need to develop the capacity to distinguish between constructive feedback and inappropriate interference.

Taken together, these findings point to the need for a stronger alignment between formal evaluation standards and the practical conditions under which evaluations are conducted. Strengthening evaluator independence therefore requires more than the existence of regulatory frameworks; it depends on the development of institutional safeguards, clearer contractual provisions and organisational practices that support transparency and accountability. The relevance of these issues is particularly evident in the field of education, where evaluation results are expected to inform programme design, institutional development and policy-making processes. In such contexts, the credibility of evaluation outcomes directly influences their capacity to support improvement, quality assurance and evidence-informed decision-making.

Overall, the research suggests that ensuring evaluator independence requires a systemic perspective that integrates professional standards, institutional arrangements and cultural factors. In the case of the Republic of Moldova, advancing this agenda involves not only strengthening formal frameworks, but also fostering an environment in which critical reflection is valued and evaluation is recognised as a tool for learning rather than validation. By addressing these dimensions, evaluation can better fulfil its role as a mechanism for generating credible knowledge, supporting institutional development and contributing to more transparent and accountable governance, including in education systems.

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Presented: 27.03.2026
Reviewed: 30.04.2026
Accepted for publication: 20.05.2026