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**The Role of Evaluation in Shaping the EU Regional Policy:  
Three EU Regions Compared**

*Preliminary Draft*

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## 1.1 Introduction

Evaluation represents a new experience for several EU Member States with few exceptions. In many cases, EU socio-economic cohesion policy introduced this practice as a mandatory requirement<sup>1</sup> of programme implementation, and in many of the EU member states evaluation represented a brand new practice. In some of them<sup>2</sup> it really supported the traditional policy-making process, in others entered in conflict with it. In other words, the introduction of the requirement to evaluate the implemented programmes produced different reactions as a result of “being assessed”. However, this is not the sole effect that followed the introduction of evaluation. The development of an expertise in this field is another important aspect to consider. In other words, in order to comply with this requirement, EU member states developed the evaluation capacity, that is to say the methodological skills necessary to undertake the evaluation.

This paper examines the experience of three EU regions randomly selected from three member states and attempts to assess their overall evaluation capacity, the impact of this requirement on their institutions and their policy learning experience. Evaluation capacity refers to the skills necessary to undertake an evaluation. These normally are methodological, such as the ability to carry out a socio-economic analysis and to collect the data. Policy learning is the capacity to learn from mistakes and from recommendations that evaluators formulate to improve the performance of programmes. As said earlier, sometimes the fact to be evaluated, especially for early comers, generated anxiety or a more general resistance to incorporate the findings into the revised programme. Although policy learning is defined separately, it cannot be separated from the concept of evaluation capacity.

Hence, the argument of this paper is that in order to assess the overall evaluation capacity, both the methodological aspect and the policy learning should be considered when analysing each single case study. The first part of the paper provides some key concepts, such as how the evidence of what works or does not work is produced, and which the conditions for policy learning are. The second part deals with the overall attitude of the three regions analysed – from Spain, Italy and Ireland – by taking into account those aspects which are the most relevant to the analysis (partnership principle, organisational learning and political inherency of evaluation).

The period of time considered is the last cycle of programming of EU Structural Funds – 2000-2006 – and in particular the mid-term evaluation. The choice of this period is limited by the fact that data on evaluations of the previous cycles of programming<sup>3</sup> are not available, such as previous evaluation reports and other studies on the case studies examined. The latter are Andalucia (Spain), Sardinia (Italy) and the Southern and Eastern Region (Ireland). Part of the findings comes from personal experience in the some of the regions, from the analysis of their mid-term evaluation report and from informal conversation with scholars from the countries considered.

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<sup>1</sup> This is said in articles 40-42 of EU Commission Regulation 1260/1999 for the cycle of programming 2000-2006. However, the requirement to assess the impact of programmes was introduced since the reform of cohesion policy in 1988 and previously with the Integrated Mediterranean Programmes (IMPs).

<sup>2</sup> In this paper EU member states refers only to the EU-15 only

<sup>3</sup> 1989-1993 and 1994-1999.

## **1.2. Evaluation methodologies**

This paragraph provides an overview of the way evaluation works in the EU. All the most common methodologies are presented in the online Evalsed Guide (2003) and ranges from data collection methods (surveys, interviews, focus groups and so on) to data analysis techniques (macroeconomic impact assessment, input-output analysis, etc.). Member states are not formally required to adopt the Evalsed Guide methods, but recommended to refer to this collection. Obviously, member states which developed their evaluation capacity outside EU cohesion policy will have already a longstanding methodological tradition, as in Northern Europe (Furubo at al., 2002). Member states which introduced evaluation only with EU cohesion policy had to build up their capacity over the years (Furubo at al., 2002).

Compared to the past, there have been significant improvements in the quality of the evaluation reports, as pointed out in the meta-evaluation report issues in November 2004 by the EU Commission: “The evaluations were of higher quality than those undertaken in the past, with some excellent examples. The Commission’s examination of the quality of the evaluations resulted in two thirds being rated as being of good or excellent quality” (EU Commission, 2004: 18; 56). Beside, this aspect refers only to the application of the correct methodologies and the presentation of reports (EU Commission, 2004: 18).

The three reports analysed concluded that in the first three years of operation of Operational Programmes (OPs) measuring of the first impacts was not easy since the implementation of programmes was delayed by institutional difficulties and by the fact that from the economic prospective not too much time had passed to allow for an assessment of the impacts not only of programmes, but also of the more general economic trends. This aspect is important to examine the second part of this investigation, that is to say the attitude shown towards evaluation. Beside, it with the quality of the reports is put in relation with the attitude towards the requirement to undertake the evaluation.

## **1.3 General framework on policy learning**

Along with a sound methodology, the evaluation capacity is best assessed if organisations using evaluation are aware of the importance of this activity, which – and this is the second condition – must also be as tailored as possible to the needs of the commissioning administration. In this respect, communication and interaction between administrators and evaluators play an important role. From this point of view, again the EU meta-evaluation report highlights that significant steps ahead have been taken in understanding its role: “Managing Authorities allocated more resources to the evaluation than had been the case in previous evaluation exercises” (EU Commission, 2004: 18). This may suggest that evaluation capacity has increased. However, a more careful insight into the interaction reveals that the effectiveness of the evaluation findings, that is to say the incorporation of them into the policy-making and the revision of the programme, still needs to meet some conditions, or at least must be seen within a framework in order to understand to which extent evaluation findings are incorporated into a revised programme.

The first of these conditions is the *political inherency* of evaluation. Palumbo and Weiss (1987) identify two meanings for this concept. Evaluation is political as it is a part of the political decision-making process that envelops the programme evaluated, and by expressing a judgment on the latter, evaluation takes a position on its working, however neutral it can be (Palumbo, 1987: 12; Weiss, 1987: 48). Findings of evaluation must be political since the failure or the success of a programme could be grabbed by the opponents and lead to the end of it, and also to the loss of credibility for the coalition that adopted the programme and their political choices (Weiss, 1987: 49). In the case of EU Structural Funds, negative judgment will not lead to the interruption of a programme, but to the loss of credibility, especially when beneficiaries see that funds are returned for under spending reasons and evaluators highlight several flaws in the management and the performance of the programme so that some of the objectives were not achieved. Given this framework, an administration may be afraid of negative findings.

The second condition is the *partnership principle*, as defined in art. 8 of the Regulation 1260/1999: “Community actions shall complement or contribute to corresponding national operations. They shall be drawn up in close consultation, hereinafter referred to as the partnership’, between the Commission and the Member State, together with the authorities and bodies designated by the Member State within the framework of its national rules and current practices, namely: the regional and local authorities and other competent public authorities, the economic and social partners, any other relevant competent bodies within this framework”. In the case of evaluation and the EU Structural Funds this translates into the participation of the administration involved in the specification of the evaluation questions and the cooperation with the independent assessor in order to make reports more responsive to their needs. The EU meta-evaluation report welcomes this principle, as enhancing the evaluation capacity (EU Commission, 2004: 26), but warned that in some respects, this may negatively affect the content of the evaluation reports. It may happen that the commissioner tries to steer the evaluation findings towards certain conclusions, more favourable to the reputation of the organisation.

The third condition is the *willingness of an organisation to learn from mistakes* and to internalise suggestions arising from reports. The approach that best describes this concept is that brought forward by Rist (1994: 199-203), called Governmental Decision-Making Process, focusing on who provides the information and who receive them (Rist et al. 1994: 193). One condition out of those listed well applies to this analysis: that organisations are more receptive of internally produced information than of those externally supplied. In other words, if an external evaluation is provided, there must be a section of the administration specifically created to deal with that and to liaise with the rest of the organisation involved in the evaluation. In the overview of the EU cohesion policy this resulted in the creation of ad hoc evaluation units, with the specific task to deal with the evaluation of socio-economic development and the EU-funded programmes.

#### **1.4 Three regions compared**

The three regions analysed as a case study are all drawn from EU member states which received external pressure to the development of the evaluation culture. They all are Objective 1 regions, that is to say they receive EU funds because their GDP per capita in the cycle of

programming 2000-2006 was below the 75 percent of the EU average. Objective 1 was chosen since less developed regions are allocated the greater part of the funds available since the inception of cohesion policy, and because their backwardness is a major issue in the progress of the integration process in the EU.

### 1.4.1 Andalucia (Spain)

The first case study is Andalucia. The analysis of their mid term evaluation report, and in particular the chapter 7, reveals that two methods were used to assess the effectiveness of the programme. In the first part of the chapter, the perceived impacts of the programme were evaluated through some in-depth interviews with civil servants and other public officials. Interviewees felt that the programme after three years was fully implemented and that all the areas of intervention were covered. The third part of the report evaluates the first macroeconomic impacts of the programme. Spanish evaluators used the Hermin methodology, a type of econometric modelling that allows measuring the impact of a programme also when no large series of data are available<sup>4</sup>.

The Spanish experience seems to be obscure. At the present, there are very few studies on the possible problems that the fact to being evaluated creates to an administration or a government. Therefore is not easy to say whether or not the findings are perceived as a danger undermining the political credibility of the government. An interesting contribution from Ramos and Martinez (2005) offers some useful remarks. They highlight the existence of an ethical problem for the administrations involved in the evaluation process, and the necessity for evaluators to stay in the market (Ramos and Martinez 2005: 4). The former simply denies that what is being undertaken is an evaluation of the programme to preserve their political commitments and what Ramos and Martinez called *institutional marketing*, their image to citizens. Although they do not deepen this point, it is clear that it is the political inherency what they describe. As a matter of fact, the simulation adopted in the mid-term evaluation report shows a positive trend of economic variables. The scenario analysis the independent evaluators undertaken describe only their variation, but there is not a counter-factual analysis. That is to say, it is not explained what was the actual impact of the programme.

As seen for the other two case studies, the collaboration in the definition of the evaluation questions – the partnership – may have resulted in the strong recommendation from the commissioning administration to analyse the data in a way that would result in certain conclusions. On the other hand, the lack of a proper analysis of the macroeconomic impact could also rely on the lack of expertise in this sense. The last condition for learning, the creation of ad hoc evaluation units, has not yet been met. In Andalucia there is not a regional evaluation unit, but there is one at national level, the Subdirección General de Programación Territorial y Evaluación de Programas Comunitarios<sup>5</sup>. As seen for the Southern and Eastern Region in Ireland, it is not clear how the interaction with the rest of the administration worked. Scholars of the Spanish evaluation admit that the overall diffusion of evaluation culture in Spain is still weak (Fernandez-Ramirez and Rebeloso, 2006). Therefore it is not surprising if evaluation findings were not altered but stayed confined in the office of the commissioner.

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<sup>4</sup> Check the definition

<sup>5</sup> Sub-General Directorate for Territorial Planning and Evaluation of EU Programmes

### 1.4.2 Southern and Eastern Region (Ireland)

The second of the case studies is the Southern and Eastern Region in Ireland. The evaluation report is different from the one previously analysed. The impact of OP is assessed with reference to specific sectors: infrastructure, local enterprise, agriculture and social inclusion. The report analyses the financial performance, that is to say how fast the funds received were spent. Besides, the physical performance of the programme was measured, i.e. how much output was produced for a given input and the financial resources available. Nothing is being said on the effectiveness of the programme and which impacts have been produced in the first three years. The sources of the data are only administrative documents; no interviews have been undertaken with public officials involved in the delivery of the programme.

Since the beginning in the use of evaluation, a massive investment has been undertaken to training public sector officers to raise their more awareness of the role played by evaluation in the policy-making process. The overall experience has been judged close to the UK approach to evaluation, bearing in mind that Britain is one of the first countries in Europe which developed the evaluation culture (Boyle, 2002: 261-271). This conclusion finds support in Hegarty (2003) who analyses the utilisation of the evaluation findings after the 2003 mid-term evaluation: “The interim evaluation work carried out over the last couple of years – which has concentrated on issues around programme management and implementation – has met with a positive response and good co-operation from programme managers” (Hegarty, 2003: 13). What should be stressed is that the type of evaluation requested did not carry any political meaning, but was merely technical. The impact of the policy was not actually evaluated and the political choice was not discussed. The exam of the report highlight that evaluation is focused on managerial and organisational aspects only. This in turn suggests that during the evaluation design<sup>6</sup> was actually dominated by the choice to privilege this aspect.

This aspect is related to the partnership principle. The close cooperation between the independent evaluator and the commissioner seemed to have taken the direction that the EU contemplated in the Structural Funds regulation. The interaction also demonstrated a deep understanding of evaluation and its role in the policy-making: “Findings of the mid-term evaluation made a significant contribution to the mid-term review” (Hegarty, 2003: 12). In addition, the decision to reject some of the findings had to be motivated, not simply asserted, and evaluation questions were clearly defined (Capacity Building in Ireland, 2003: 6). However, it must be recalled that the report examined did not actually assessed the effect of the programme, and did not even justify this with the reason that it was too early to evaluate the impacts.

The third condition was the creation of ad-hoc offices capable to liaise with the whole administration in charge of evaluation. The Southern and Eastern Region did not establish its own regional evaluation unit, but at central government level there is a national office. This might be due to the fact that the sub-division of Ireland into Objective 1 and Objective 2 regions did not result in the creation of fully functioning regional government. Thus all the functions related to evaluation of regional programmes are left to the central evaluation unit. It is not clear in which way this office liaise with the rest of the administration. Informal

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<sup>6</sup> The evaluation design is the first stage of the evaluation process in which evaluators and commissioners set the questions and the aspects to cover

conversations<sup>7</sup> with some Irish officials of the Community Support Framework Unit (CSF Unit) at the European Evaluation Society biannual conference in 2006 revealed that the overall satisfaction for the 2003 evaluation was high.

### **1.4.3 Sardinia (Italy)**

The third case study is taken from Sardinia. The quality of the report is similar to Irish one. The independent evaluators did not actually evaluate the impact of the programme, but simply offer an overview of the performance of the single measures, financial and physical. The effectiveness of the programme is not assessed anywhere in the report. Therefore is not possible to say whether the changes in the regional economy were driven or not by the intervention. As in the Irish report, the data come from administrative sources, no fieldwork research was conducted or a macroeconomic simulation was ever undertaken.

In Sardinia, like all the other Italian regions, evaluation was introduced along with several reforms of the public administration (Stame, 2002: 273-278). Since it was the driver was clearly external, the impact the beginning was not understood: “Past experience showed that in previous programming periods evaluation requirements had been substantially avoided: Managing Authorities had delayed or even omitted to hire evaluators. Even when evaluators were hired there had been very few interactions between Managing Authorities and evaluators. Most evaluation appeared of little or no use” (Casavola and Tagle, 2003: 2).

When turning to the three conditions, in the case of the political stance, although evaluation carries political meaning, it did not generate particular anxiety in terms of loss of credibility. When conflict arose, it was more related to the content of the findings and the recommendations as not responsive to what the administration requested, provided that the latter not always specified its requirements. In any case, the latent fear was that when released, evaluation findings could generate loss of trust in the administration by the public. The political constraint as defined above by Palumbo and Weiss is weak, due to the resistance to the general Europeanisation process<sup>8</sup>.

The second condition, the partnership principle, is perhaps the main explanation of the Italian case, more than political concerns: the lack of trust in the institutions, so that if evaluation comes from the feature of the Southern Italy regions, and particularly the scarce social capital endowment. The concept refers to the lack of cooperation and mutual trust, but also to the scarce transparency in the management and the interaction between evaluators and commissioners in this case. Some meetings<sup>9</sup> were actually steering the recommendations towards certain conclusions, not only in the content, but also in the wording. Evaluators were keen on accepting this three because of the scarce expertise, and in order to obtain further assignments (Mura, 2006).

The third condition, the organisational learning, was partly sorted with the creation of ad hoc institutions, specifically devoted to the evaluation. Part of the problem is covered with the

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<sup>7</sup> These informal conversations happened at one of the panels I attended at the EES Conference

<sup>8</sup> Europeanisation refers to the progressive influence of EU regulations and directives on the national and regional institutions, acts and the policy-making process as a whole

<sup>9</sup> This information originated from my personal experience at the Managing Authority in Sardinia during the last stage of the mid-term evaluation

second conditions, as the relation between evaluators and officers may lead to the bias of the findings. In this respect, what is important is the interaction between the evaluation officers and the rest of the administration involved in the evaluation. In Sardinia, as in all the Italian regions, a regional evaluation unit was created. In the specific case, this office worked in the Managing Authority building, therefore the exchange of information on the evaluation findings was possible. In other regions for example, such as Campania, this was not possible and the evaluation findings remained confined in the evaluation unit.

## **1.5 Conclusions**

Same drivers produced different outcomes. This is the first general conclusion that can be drawn from the analysis of the three cases studies. There is a connection between the methodology adopted and the policy learning. In all the case studies examined the commissioner had some influence in the definition of the evaluation question. Sardinia and the Southern and Eastern Region from this respect are quite similar, since their reports both were a mere account of financial and physical progress, in response to the request of the commissioner to privilege these aspects. Andalusia moved further and attempted to measure also the impact of the programme, although as seen the chosen method is not appropriate.

The fact that evaluators respond to the requests of their commissioners could also mean that their expertise in this field is not yet well built up. This could be explained partly because all the three case studies (and many more) have not yet developed a market with a demand and a supply of evaluation services. As a consequence, there is no incentive to develop the necessary skills. Likewise, commissioners themselves are not fully aware of the importance of evaluation findings and even less of how the assessment of the programme should be carried out. As seen, this may depend on the fear to be observed and judged by an external subject, and this true when findings are in some way directed towards the conclusion that everything is working. None of the report analysed compared the findings with the past and the policy strategy as a whole was not questioned.

Lastly, it is not clear in which sense the political inherency worked in the three case studies. This could be explained with the highly technical nature of Operational Programmes, whose content seems to have been produced more from socio-economic analysis than from the political debate, although some aspects from time to time are debated. Even if political influence was higher in the definition of regional development strategy, evaluation has not yet reached the political arena.

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