How to manage evaluations in a decentralised governance environment?
The European Commission's experience

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The European Commission was initially created as a central authority. Over time and in practice, its role has evolved to embrace "networking" and "partnership" governance styles, be it sometimes only as a complement to its role as central authority, be it voluntarily in areas where its competencies towards EU member states are limited.

Three cases of managing evaluations about the very topic of decentralisation illustrate this changing role of governance bodies and its underlying challenges:

1. The "Thematic evaluation of the partnership principle" (Jörgen Gren's paper will be presented by Timo Takkula)

The evaluation (completed in 1998) explored the decentralisation applied in the European Structural Funds evaluation management. The presentation will cover the evaluation findings and conclusions and the impact they have had on the management of the new programming period (as from 2000 onwards).

2. The PHARE "Partnership programme" evaluation (Jari Haapala)

The Programme evaluated intended to strengthen the non-governmental organisations (NGO) and other civil society actors in the Central European countries. The programme involved the European Commission, the Central European countries' central administrations and the "grass-roots" projects with NGO actors. The evaluation was completed in 1998. The presentation will cover the evaluation findings and changes implemented in the revised "Access" programme management.

3. Evaluating European Agencies (Rainer v. Leoprechting)

European Agencies on specific topic areas like environmental information or specific works like medicinal substance approvals are an instrument of "decentralising" or "centralising" European policies. In practice, they tend to "network" European issue-based interests. Quite a few agencies, only established in the early nineties, are now being evaluated. Based on five current evaluation cases, a Commission-internal working group draws lessons on "how to" evaluate European Agencies from the "central" European Commission perspective, while respecting the decentralised nature of the Agencies' work. The presentation covers emerging "lessons learned", which are based on experience gathered with ongoing evaluations of Agencies.
Partnership and evaluation: utilisation and interaction

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The partnership principle

The principle of partnership underlies the operation of the Structural Funds. Formally introduced in the 1988 reforms, the principle was strengthened in 1993 to include also the economic and social partners (designated by the Member State) and has since played a fundamental role in the implementation of the Structural Funds. In short, Partnership, although a relatively recent innovation, has already become deeply embedded in all stages of Structural Fund programming.

Normally, partnerships will have some role in the initial development of the programme, in its implementation and administration and in monitoring progress. It should also play a role in the evaluation of the programme either as part of the steering group or as interlocutors for the evaluators (or both).

The thematic evaluation on the Partnership\(^1\) concluded that in many programmes and initiatives the partnerships have gone beyond a formal mechanism for consultation and co-ordination and now represent a significant multi-organisational capacity which can extend beyond the remit of Structural Fund activities. It is thus possible to talk of system effects i.e. dynamics induced by the Structural Funds Regulations which have spilled over into activities of often purely national nature. More extended or new types of partnerships have been, for instance, an important part in establishing national regional policy frameworks such as the Contrat Etat Région in France or the growth agreements in Sweden (both very similar to EU SPDs).

In the study, the following broad conclusions can be outlined:

- the broadening of partnership to include partners such as NGOs and municipalities enhances the effectiveness of programmes,
- appropriate secretariat and technical support enhances the performance of partnerships,
- clear distinctions between strategic and operational roles for different partners enhances programme coherence, and
- there is no necessary trade off between the inclusiveness of partnerships and the efficiency of partnerships.

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\(^1\) Made for DG REGIO by the Tavistock institute. Final report February 1999 available on the inforegio web-site.
Expressed in table form, it is possible to distinguish certain steps on an ‘experience ladder’.

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<td>Partnership</td>
<td>Exclusive</td>
<td>Semi-exclusive</td>
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<td>Monitoring and evaluation</td>
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It should however be noted that the development of the partnership principle is uneven across Member States and across programmes. This is particularly clear when it comes to evaluation.

**Evaluation and partnership**

The inclusion of the partnership in the evaluation process is not as clear-cut as it may seem. Often, but not always, the inclusion depends on the ‘maturity’ of the country in terms of evaluation of regional policy. This because the interest of the partnership for evaluation matters, beyond the financial distribution, differs according to importance accorded to evaluation. In other words, if the evaluation is used as a management tool with redistributive effects, the interest will be high. If it is ‘just a report’ or if it is exclusively centrally managed, the interest to participate in the design of terms of reference and the presentation of results will be low.

It is possible to distinguish 3 observed scenarios (for the period 1989-99):

**Low involvement**

The evaluation is managed centrally and the results are presented to the partnership without (or with little) involvement in any stage.

**Nominal involvement**

The partnership listens politely to the results presented by a consultant. The terms of reference having been drawn up nominally by a steering group where the partnership was present, but in reality by one (or two) state representative or regional officials.

**High involvement**

The partnership is involved in the steering group, draws up the terms of reference, are interlocutors, criticise the evaluators for not taking into account sufficiently their point of view and use the evaluation for redistributive purposes. There are often in these cases a permanent ‘evaluation group’ made up of members of the partnership (on regional or national levels).

**The prospects of partnership and evaluation: interaction and utilisation**

The ex-ante evaluations for the period 2000-2006 are, in virtually all cases and as with the plans, a product of the partnership. In general, this seems due to the fact that the
ownership of the product (the evaluation) has been more clearly defined in the new Regulations. There is also the learning factor i.e. a customary use of evaluations which was not necessarily the case in earlier periods. It should be noted, however, that the partnerships have not always been extensive. Certain commentators in the regions have welcomed a smaller but more efficient partnership and have thus concluded the exact opposite of the Tavistock report’s conclusions.

The interaction and interest of the partnership for evaluations should logically move towards the third group as the performance reserve and the mid-term evaluations both represent the factors needed for an active partnership (in terms of evaluation):

• redistributive effects,
• evaluation accepted as a standard management tool and
• normative evaluation results.
Evaluating European Agencies
Emerging lessons from ongoing evaluations

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Some words about European Agencies

European Agencies are bodies created by European legislators, via regulations proposed by the European Commission and decided by European Council of Ministers and Parliament. They have a purpose and working procedures defined in their founding regulation that can be

- technical work (e.g. the Translation Centre of the European Communities)
- regulatory work (e.g. the approval of new pharmaceuticals)
- information, research, and monitoring (e.g. the observation of racist and xenophobic phenomena).

Agencies have a central headquarters, while most of their tasks are being carried out via a network of correspondent bodies in the Member States of the Union.

Due to their issue-based nature, Agencies tend to work with specialist audiences and are part of professional networks.

As a consequence of the European institutional setting, the management boards of Agencies tend to be complex, and decision-making slow and complicated. Some management boards comprise a representative of each member state's administration, two representatives from each member state's social partners (employers and workers), and a representative from the European Commission (summing up to 46 members in this example).

Evaluating agencies: the recent cases

The European Commission funds most of the Agencies via a contribution from its operating budget. Some Agencies, however, are fully self-financed. In all cases, the European follows its self-imposed policy of regularly evaluating its programmes at least at intervals of six years. This policy has been made law in all of the Agencies' regulations.

Many of the more recent Agencies, established in the early nineties, now are "due" for evaluation. Inside the European Commission, DG Budget has organised a working group to share experiences from the first wave of evaluations launched. This sample includes the ongoing or planned evaluations of the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP), European Environment Agency (EEA), European Agency for the Evaluation of Medicinal Products (E.M.E.A.), European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, and the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia.

The working group is a self-help group of Agency evaluation managers. It discusses the evaluation projects while they are still under preparation, or in the course of the process.
The objective is to learn from the experience, to share it, and to generalise findings for the coming wave of Agency evaluations in the next year.

**Purpose**

Most evaluations recently launched were triggered by the "Accountability" motive and the schedule set in the Agencies' regulations. In practice, the purposes of the evaluations are mostly concerned with "Improving the management". The most common challenge to European Agencies (as with the European institutions in general) is the coming enlargement. The terms of reference of evaluations often mention this challenge explicitly and seek evidence and recommendations.

**Methods**

All evaluations are external, carried out by contracted consultants.

Most evaluations are accompanied by steering committees, with only one exception. The committees tend to represent the more active members of the board, the European Commission and the Agencies' management. More remote stakeholders, like final beneficiaries, tend to be overlooked when steering committees are being set up. As far as evidence-finding methods are concerned, we observe a large variety, mostly proposed by the professional consultant.

**Results**

The methods implemented to use the findings cannot be evaluated yet, since the projects are not finished. In one case, a concrete action plan of the Agencies' management will be the direct outcome from the evaluation, supplemented with workshops with the Agencies' staff. In another case the Commission will use the evaluation to propose a new draft of the founding regulation. Quite a few practical learning results tend to occur, like the review of website designs and a new communication approach to the target audiences.

**Emerging lessons**

*The challenge to involve and strengthen the end-user's perspective*

Final recipients and users of the Agencies' services risk being under-represented both in the ongoing management of the Agency and the evaluation process. The working group now recommends that the evaluation mandate should be drafted with the end-users perspective in mind, and that the steering committee should be established earlier in the process to give it a chance to own this mandate, ideally while working out the terms of reference.

In steering committees, the staff of the Agency should be represented. The management should have an observer status. The chair of the steering committee should associate with a rather neutral interest to specific parties' views on the Agency. In most cases, the European Commission can provide a competent chairperson with this profile.

*Difficulties to focus the evaluation*

The complexity of the management structure in Agencies does not help to focus the evaluation. On the board sit officials, technical experts and lobbyists that oversee the
Agencies management. There is a tendency for it to decide to launch an evaluation on both the final impact of the agencies' work and the regularity of its internal procedures, with a maximum budget of, say, 50,000 €. Since decisions taken are difficult to change, the mandate risks asking the impossible.

The Agency group now recommends that the mandate should be worked out in moderated workshop sessions rather than quickly decided as an "Other business" item of a full agenda.

_Evaluating an organisation_

In all Agency evaluation cases, the subject of the evaluation is a complex organisation with a permanent structure at its centre (the Commission and the Agency), and an EU-wide network at its periphery. A recurrent problem is the management of communication and knowledge in these complex networks whose centres are subject to archaic administrative rules. As a general rule, evaluations of these networking bodies need to include organisational development techniques to prepare the implementing of emerging findings and recommendations already in the process of the evaluation.