Introducing Evaluation of Development Programmes in Croatia – an Option, Obligation or Necessity?

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1. INTRODUCTION

Experience with evaluation has evolved through several stages, with its origin in the late 80s and early 90s, when evaluation was more formally developed and integrated around specific stages in the programming cycle, and designed with the aim to meet public accountability requirements. Evaluation activities are now a part of a wider trend within the Commission and since 2000 have become a requirement for all types of Commission activities. This paper seeks to provide an overview of the relevance, main goals, objectives and purposes of evaluation for all those implementing it, with particular focus on ex ante evaluation, as well as relevance of evaluation for a country which is in the very initial phase of introducing it - as is the case of Croatia. The paper stresses the main evaluation purposes such as accountability, improving planning, quality and performance, but also argues that there are other very relevant purposes, particularly learning and capacity building - relevant from point of view of Cohesion policy, but also for all management of socio-economic development programs implemented within a certain region/country - an aspect which was not given due importance so far. A short overview is provided regarding the main approaches, methods and evaluation functions, which have substantially changed in the past nearly two decades, as the result of some weaknesses and constraints of the evaluation process. However, these obstacles and constraints do not undermine in the least the importance of evaluation as a methodology, tool and practice/principle whose implementation is of undisputable contribution to the effective and efficient management of development programmes and development policies.

2. THE CONTEXT, PURPOSE AND MAIN GOALS OF EVALUATION

We can define evaluation as a selective exercise that attempts to systematically and objectively assess progress towards the achievement of an outcome. It involves assessments of different scope and depth carried out at different stages in time in response to evolving needs for evaluative knowledge and learning during the effort to achieve an outcome. Its focus is on expected and achieved accomplishments, and it aims at determining the relevance, impact, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of the interventions (Smith, 2007). In this regard, its main purposes are to:

- understand why and to what extent unintended and intended results are achieved, and their impact on stakeholders
- serve as an important source of evidence on the achievement of results and institutional performance,
- contribute to knowledge and organizational learning.

Evaluation practice, definitely cannot be perceived as purely scientific research. The main challenge is to produce directly useful knowledge that is of value to society. From this point of view, it can be looked upon as a form of participation in the European "knowledge based society" (Basle, 2006).

If we agree that the moving force behind evaluation activities is very often the desire to have a positive influence on policy, then we can also agree that one of the main goals of evaluation is to upgrade the current as well as future development policy by way of the assessment of the results of particular interventions, to enable transparency and accountability when reporting on the results of development activities and policies to citizens, as well as to improve the management of socio-economic programmes. In this regard, evaluation can be perceived as a management tool, formalizing thus some of the good practice which is currently emerging on an informal basis in the framework of Cohesion policy evaluation

An important evaluation goal is also the improvement of management and delivery. Namely, a fully integrated evaluation process can definitely contribute to the way programs are managed and delivered, by way of providing feedback to programme management and supporting "mid-course correction" on the basis of nearly always existing early outputs. Since many of the issues encountered at the early stages of implementation concern processes (how parties interact, how decisions and pans are made, how partnerships are being developed, etc.) their evaluation can be helpful to all involved partners as well as to the main sponsors and programme managers (Tavistock Institute with GHK and IRS, 2003).

The most commonly recognised purposes of evaluation as pointed out within the Commission sponsored Guide (Tavistock Institute with GHK and IRS, 2003) are:

- Planning/efficiency - ensuring that there is a justification for a policy/programme and that resources are efficiently used.

- Accountability - demonstrating till what extent a programme has achieved its objectives and how well it has used its resources.

- Implementation - improving the performance of programmes and the effectiveness of how they are delivered and managed.

- Knowledge production - increasing understanding of what works in what circumstances and how different measures and interventions can be made more effective.

- Institutional strengthening - improving and developing capacity among programme participants and their networks and institutions.

The purpose of evaluation is also learning by way of systematic appraisal regarding the efficient design, implementation and delivery of development programs and policies. Among the mentioned purposes, accountability was actually the first purpose adopted in the framework of the Structural Funds and still remains the most relevant aspect of evaluation conducted within Cohesion policy. Accountability is partly expressed by way of the formal requirement for evaluation to be undertaken and specifically through assessments of impact that strive to demonstrate what has been achieved through expenditure of public money (Batterbury, 2006). A further purpose – improvement of planning – is addressed through ex-ante appraisal, and, recently, through mid-term evaluation as well. Along with the mentioned, numerous other purposes are often stated – from improved quality and performance, increased ownership of the programme and empowerment of stakeholders. However, from point of view of Cohesion policy, accountability and better planning and programme design seem still to have the leading role, while the empowerment of stakeholders and programme ownership seem to be considered as least relevant. Among the often stated, but still rather neglected, even though useful evaluation purposes are capacity building and learning. The first mentioned purpose addresses continuous improvements in performance and organizational learning and directly relies on stakeholder engagement focusing on issues such as: identification of the criteria the programme managers would use to judge "success", the aspects that programme managers feel need to change in order to achieve better results; and whether the evaluation helps programme managers gain better understanding as to how to achieve success in the future. As far as the purpose of learning is concerned, we can state that it is both the ultimate goal and purpose of evaluation. Issues like what lessons can be learned for other programmes and policies, and whether and why there are unintended effects are in this regard very valuable (Batterbury, 2006).

Evaluation is not a goal per se. In the framework of socio-economic development, the focus of development policy is on fostering social and economic aspects of particular regions, sectors and individuals. Even though each socio-economic development program has its own specific goals and justification**,** reasons for evaluation are in all cases the same and strive to answer whether it is possible to apply evaluation procedures and methods in such a way as to upgrade the quality of life, well fare and opportunities available to citizens. In this regard, evaluation puts forward and answers to questions which are useful and relevant to all concerned with development programs, regardless of whether they are managers, policy makers or beneficiaries of development programs.

Socio-economic development is often extremely complex and faced with numerous uncertainties since it is not a precise science. When properly applied, evaluation can contribute to effective management of such programmes and contribute to the solving of unavoidable uncertainties of complex situations. Identifying development objectives and measures, designing programmes and implementing as well as sustaining development dynamics all ask for analysis, anticipation, establishing feedback systems and mobilizing different institutions, agencies and population groups. Evaluation know-how and practice has contributed to these processes and has thus become a key component in so many socio-economic development programmes.

Since evaluation can be perceived as an integral part of decision-making and management, contributing to democratic accountability, a well-functioning evaluation system must be integrated into the policy/programme cycle. Furthermore, evaluations and those who commission and use evaluation results need to balance most suitable methods with the demands of pragmatism. Namely, in the real world of socio-economic development, we rarely have the time or resources - or even the data - to implement a comprehensive "State of the Art" evaluation. In this regard, there are many strategic choices that have to be made about evaluation. For example, just to mention a few: when are greater investment in evaluation justified? Under what circumstances are sophisticated methods needed? How can evaluation fill gaps in knowledge that in a more perfect world would have been covered before an intervention was even planned? (Tavistock Institute with GHK and IRS**,** 2003).

3. CONCEPTS, CURRENT APPROACH AND METHODS OF EVALUATION

3.1. Current concepts in evaluation

The current approach in evaluation practice and activities is, in regard to previously mentioned, basically related to Cohesion policy, in the framework of which evaluation, in the sense we are referring to here, was introduced during in the 1990s, since it was this policy that was subject to more systematic evaluation than any other EC policy. The approach was basically focused on accountability, efficiency, relevance, coherence, sustainability, environmental impact and added value. However, regardless of the often stated aim of DG REGIO to foster policy learning, the dissemination of good practice in evaluation and the espousal of methods that identify causality – what works, where and why – have yet to be systematically incorporated into Cohesion policy evaluation (Batterbury, 2006)

During the 90s, the Structural Funds provided the first solid grounds for the new evaluation approach, led by the Commission, which at that time had the main responsibility for the evaluation process. Since the end of the 90’s, the evaluation of the development programmes in the framework of Cohesion policy was substantially decentralised to the national and regional levels of the member states.. However, the national and regional authorities still functioned in this regard within a tightly regulated framework for monitoring and evaluation, as determined by the 1999 Council regulation (Council of the EU, 1999), which tightened the monitoring process by using indicators, measurable objectives, benchmarks and targets. Success is now being assessed through measuring the programme’s achievement in regard to specified targets based on predefined indicators (European Commission, 2003).

The current Commission approach on stressing four purposes of evaluation: contributing to improved policy and programme design; assisting in the effective allocation of resources; improving the quality of programmes and accountability (European Commission 2004) confirm a shift from ex post, summative evaluation approaches in the direction of ex-ante evaluation and impact assessment. In order to understand better the current evaluation concepts and practice, regardless of still present debates and unanswered questions, as well as some still present problems and obstacles, it is necessary to consider the main philosophical background, evaluation functions and some of the most relevant methods which underpinned evaluation practice in the past two decades.

3.2. Basic approaches , methods and evaluation functions

Evaluation experience of the EC Cohesion Policy shows a variety of ways in addressing evaluative questions, which resulted with a relatively similar general approach, but based on differing evaluation functions and methods - each of which has its advantages and shortcomings. They are considered in the following section since they are interesting to a country only introducing the evaluation practice within its own development policy.

Namely, the debates related to evaluation practice have their origin in different philosophical traditions. The Tavistock Institute's Guide distinguishes three main approaches - ***the positivist, the realist and the constructivist approach*** to evaluation which present the different purposes and methods of EC Cohesion policy evaluation.

The classical, i.e. positivist approach, is based on the assumption that objective knowledge is obtained through observation. This approach presents the initial purpose of EC Cohesion policy evaluation, i.e. accountability, with the main focus being on efficiency and effectiveness of Structural Funds, i.e. measuring what has been achieved in regard to objectives and determining the policy appropriateness as well as specific types of intervention (Bachtler and Wren, 2006). Evaluations based on this tradition are often referred to as ***"summative" or "allocative***" - carried out with the main purpose of justifying the use of Cohesion policy expenditure. We come here to one of two main functions of evaluation - delivering accountability. "Objectivity" is of pivotal importance - providing legitimacy for external stakeholders contributing with financial resources. The main points of examination within this "summative" evaluation approach are programme performance with regard to efficiency and effectiveness, with programme impacts identified (Eser and Nussmueller, 2006) .

In the framework of this approach, particularly within ex-post evaluations for major programmes, macro-economic models have been used, as well as dynamic input-output analysis for the ex-ante evaluations. Among other techniques, even though more rarely used, were control groups and other statistical methods. Initially, "top-down" methods were common, based on statistical techniques, drawing upon macro-level secondary data sources or regional relocation cross-sectional data. By the end of 1980-s, these initial methods were joined by "bottom-up" techniques, drawing upon micro-level information, which were often applied to smaller programmes. Among the most commonly used were the combination of programme monitoring data, surveys of beneficiaries and regional or sub regional statistics.

Both "top-down" and "bottom-up" approaches remained positivist in nature from point of view of seeking to make objective estimates of the impact of the Structural Funds on variables such as employment - striving thus to disentangle the impact of regional policy from other influences, by way of directly seeking the needed information from those surveyed, or through applying statistical methods to the survey data (Armstrong and Wells, 2006; EC 1999)

The positivist approach still remains the most commonly used philosophical background when the evaluation of *economic* impacts of the Structural funds community economic development initiatives (CED) are concerned. However, the shortcomings related to this approach, stemming from measurement difficulties – are due to their results often providing imprecise estimates, and the unsolved issue related to reconciling bottom-up micro-analysis, with top-down macro-analysis, (Bachtler and Wren, 2006) are still often raised.

The realist approach builds upon the mechanisms that explain the changes in policies and programmes by way of social enquiry among practitioners.

Based upon measuring impact an performance within the previously mentioned approach, an often put forward "realist" question is "why things work (or not) in specific contexts" (Bachtler and Wren, 2006; Batterbury, 2006"). This approach, encompassing the often referred to ***"formative" evaluation techniques*** focuses on examining the effectiveness and relevance of implementation procedures with the goal of improving programme design and deliverables. In contract to the first mentioned main function of evaluation (summative evaluation), such a formative evaluation function gives prior importance to internal stakeholders, i.e. programme management, civil servants and intra-organizational learning (Eser and Nussmueller, 2006). This philosophical tradition seeks to open up the "black box" of the positivist methods (leaping directly from the input side of the policy to the outputs) within programmes nad policies with the aim of uncovering the mechanisms that account for change (Tavistock Institute with GHK and IRS, 2003).

The most often used methods within this approach are stakeholder interviews, case study research to assess programme management, partnerships, project appraisal and selection, as well as monitoring arrangements - resulting with a relevant contribution to the "learning effect" within programmes (Bachtler and Wren, 2006). However, problems are present here also, related to the conflict between accountability and learning . i.e. deciding whether the main purpose of evaluation was to justify expenditures or to learn, i.e. whether the role of the evaluator was to be a judge or moderator. The shortcomings are partly seen in the governance structure of the Structural Funds as well as to the narrow focus of EC Cohesion policy evaluation - on improved planning, accountability and performance - with the other possibly useful functions such as capacity building and learning being neglected (Batterbury, 2006), which are crucial for enhancing the quality of the programme.

However, this philosophy has not been successful in supplanting positivism, since, for example, community economic development priorities still continue to be evaluated using orthodox economic evaluation methods. Theory-oriented methods have effectively come to be used to complement orthodox economic evaluation rather than as an alternative to them, typically providing insights into *how* programmes work. while positivist approaches *measure* the net economic impacts of programmes (Armstrong and Wells 2006). This has resulted with the practice that the realist approach is now to a large extent espoused on the project level, supplemented by active community engagement from the project design to completion phase.

The constructivist approach, on the other hand, rejects objective knowledge and promotes evaluation by way of joint interaction with stakeholders with the aim of understanding different views, values and interdependencies. It radically opposes positivist philosophy since "it is only through the theoretisations of the observer that the world can be understood; *constructions* exist but cannot necessarily be measured " (Tavistock Institute with GHK and IRS, p. 20). Constructivist approaches have not been strongly reflected in evaluation procedures and the Commission sponsored Guide (Tavistock Institute with GHK and IRS, p. 20) argues that "such an approach can be helpful in improving engagement of the local community due to the fact that an evaluator, applying it, is likely to assume a responsive, interactive and orchestrating role bringing together different groups of stakeholders with divergent views for mutual exploration and to generate consensus".

Methodological approaches thus depend on the 2 different above mentioned functions of evaluation. If a formative function is envisaged, the recommended methodological approach will be the strong involvement of evaluated administration - thus enabling organizational learning effects. On the other hand, in the framework of infrastructure programmes, with quantitavely measured outputs, where there is no need for organizational learning, a summative methodological approach can be a better evaluation option (Eser and Nussmueller, 2006).

Internal versus external evaluations

Approaches related to internal versus external evaluations also reflect some of the above mentioned issues and still trigger debates. Namely, evaluation implemented by external evaluators had certain advantages, like higher probability of delivering objective information. Also, external assessors are better in delivering new ideas based on their independent positions. However, as argued by Esser and Nusmueller (2006), they are, among other, in a more difficult situation to obtain internal information and insights into informal processes. In contrast, main advantages of internal evaluations are in the more substantive organizational learning effect - as a result of the fact that the problems are addressed by the administration itself. Also, in contrast to the situation with external evaluators, internal ones have better access to all internal information. The shortcoming with this approach is in the possibility that the internal evaluation lacks credibility and the evaluator suffers from organizational blindness.

Qualitative versus quantitative approach.

Debates related to different approaches and methods also relate to the qualitative versus quantitative evaluation analysis. Even though it is understandable that clients require precise quantitative data from evaluations, particularly when considering project deliverables and impacts, thus legitimizing public resources, it is also evident that evaluations should reflect upon the strengths and weaknesses of management and delivery systems, which go beyond economic analysis of the effects of strategies, and require a multidisciplinary approach using qualitative analysis (Jakoby, 2006). Immediate outputs of a project can be easily measured, but more indirect impacts are not easy to analyze by way of only quantitative analysis. Even though the EC has not found an appropriate balance and viewpoint regarding this approach, common understanding is reached among experts in this regard. Namely, that quantitative data should be provided whenever available, but should also be complemented with qualitative analysis.

4. SOME WEAKNESSES AND CONSTRAINTS OF THE CURRENT EVALUATION POLICY

Some constraints, we might even say failures, related to evaluation policy were considered already in the previous chapter dealing with approaches, methods and evaluation functions, since the changes of approach were primly triggered precisely due to some constraints related to currently applied evaluation methods and approaches. Along with generally known imperfections of the scientific approach in human and applied social sciences, the most frequently referred to constraints are, among other, the result of management and other problems, such as unavailability of appropriate statistics and data before the evaluation is commissioned, the difficulty of producing adequate terms of reference, problems of adequate timing etc. (Basle 2006)

A fact to be taken into account is that there are considerable lags involved between policy action and final outcomes, as well as conceptual problems that are common to all policy evaluation exercises. For example, it is always difficult to determine what would alternatively have happened to key economic variables such as investment, output and employment had policy intervention been absent. (Martin and Tyler, 2006). The previously mentioned and often repeated constraint related to the quality of available data for assessing the extent of change that takes place in a certain region is definitely one of the key obstacles. This varies significantly and only a few Member States have developed detailed and consistent data systems at the regional level needed to measure these changes in economic development. For example, evidence has been found in past evaluations on the basis of which it can be concluded that there was no feasible way to cross-check data implying that some results were more "expectations", rather then scientific results from observation tests or similar methods. These results were further put under question when noticing that there was no possibility to cross-check data with national data (CSES Report in Basle, 2006) Similar, quality of data based on interviews with key partners also has its weaknesses. It is expected that the further improvement of the process of monitoring will also contribute from point of view of providing a better foundation in knowledge from databases that are constructed at the regional level.

Further, evaluation practice is currently still rather centralized, as can be expected due to the way it emerged and developed in the framework of Cohesion policy. A centralised approach is often characterized by inflexibility, and, in this regard, it can be an obstacle to further development of evaluation as an effective and efficient tool for programme management, and, actually, management of socio-economic development itself – which definitely asks for a flexible and decentralised approach. Ideal conditions for evaluation do not exist due to a number of reasons - lack of data, resources, time, problems regarding time adjustment related to different cycles of evaluation, as well as problems related to the lack of certain skills for the implementation of evaluation. Having this in mind it is very important that both programmers as well as evaluators and all those who use evaluation results always balance the most adequate and available methods with pragmatic requests.

Shortcomings related to time adjustment are linked to specific types of evaluation, actually, evaluation cycles. Namely, the first cycle starts with ex-ante evaluation, which determines the initial needs and feasibility of planned programs. This is followed by mid-term evaluation which determines the achieved and realized so far. Finally ex-post evaluation is focused on the results. However, ex-ante evaluation should be build into the programme design and formulated policy, just like mid-term evaluation should help in the designing of the implementation of the programmes and policies. At the very end of the cycle, ex-post evaluation should contribute once again to the verifying of the policies (Maleković, S., Puljiz, J., Polić, M. 2005) The adjustment of these cycles is necessary, but often does not take place. Namely, ex-ante evaluation often takes place too late to be of maximum use for the designing of the programme, and even more so for policy formulation. The results of this first evaluation simply often end up coming too late on the table, thus impeding their contribution to further questioning of the policy.

Also, changes in policy and programming can appear once evaluation is in course - which actually often happens in national and EU programming of socio-economic development. This can cause changes in defining goals and priorities, after the systems for measuring results have already been determined. It is even possible that the same projects and interventions which were the focus of evaluation will be cancelled. One of the means for decreasing these obstacles is the inclusion of policy makers and planners in the design of evaluation which can help in the adjustment of these mentioned interlinked activities.

Even though most obstacles related to evaluation policy can be considered from point of view of constraints for evaluators, experience in some countries has shown that requirements from, for example, ex-ante evaluators, were sometimes too demanding and ambitious. Pressure from their part on programming teams to target Structural Funds interventions on more narrow and focused operations could have endangered the implementation of programmes (Blažek, Vozap, 2006). Namely, the SF interventions introduced new interventions, and in such circumstances, narrowing priorities and measures could have accentuated even more absorption capacity problems. Such issues are very relevant, particularly to new Member States, and even more so to countries in the process of accession, faced with complex institutional and capacity issues related to creating the initial systems for management of Pre accession funds.

Furthermore, despite the commonality of issues, and the prevailing role of EC Structural Funds approach in evaluation policy, it is becoming quite obvious that there is still no standardized approach to strengthening evaluation capacity development and developing effective monitoring and evaluation systems. As mentioned earlier, and due to constraints related to quality data collection, effective monitoring can be an extremely important tool for effective implementation of evaluation exercises.

Lack of a standardized approach, which is a major hindering stone for new Member states, and particularly those in the process of accession, is even more accentuated by the fact that in these countries institutional structures that would facilitate evaluation and the sharing of specific know-how and experience is missing (Blažek, Vozap, 2006). This constraint is even more accentuated by the fact that most evaluators in these countries often lack sufficient knowledge on the practice and techniques of evaluation as well as by the fact that the roles of evaluators and those drafting programming documents are not always clear – as a result of still undeveloped systems, capacity, institution and procedures. Such conditions result with the slowing down of the process of improving programming documents, thus not enabling the expected impacts on the basis of evaluation exercises.

Last, but definitely not least important, the independence of the evaluation function is a hotly debated issue as one of the key constraints in the current evaluation practice. These constraints partly relate even to the political environment and the still present weak demand for evaluation in many countries, the systematic problems that still exist in various countries that hinder the application of sound evaluation systems, as well as limited internal capacities in terms of financial and qualified human resources.

Part of the mentioned constraints reflect the different philosophical approaches to evaluation as well as evaluation functions, as elaborated previously. Since evaluation practice is a relatively new one, on the basis of not only previous, but also current and future experience with evaluation exercises, it is probable that a number of changes will follow in the forthcoming years, enabling alternative approaches in evaluation practice as well as its further development and upgrading.

Notwithstanding the mentioned constraints, evaluation policy as implemented in the framework of the EC Cohesion policy is still considered as one of the best-managed in the Commission (Basle, 2006), and the obtained results enable their use in the process of reporting at all relevant EU levels.

5. TYPES OF EVALUATION AND ITS MAIN PRINCIPLES

5.1. Types of evaluation - cycles of the evaluation

Generally, there exist three main types of evaluation and they are the following.

- **ex-ante evaluation**: implemented prior to the start of a certain programme, i.e. parallel with the process of its preparation. It is most relevant in the course of defining results, indicators and development goals.

- **mid-term evaluation**: it is carried out in the middle of the programme cycle, i.e. in the midst of elaborating the medium term Review/Report with the goal of confirming that all instruments for achieving the goals have been defined. This type of evaluation is considered as potentially very relevant from point of view of improving performance and programme planning. However, this has still not been sufficiently confirmed in practice.

- ex-post evaluation: it is implemented one to two years after the programme termination, enabling thus reporting to the financial authorities on the results of activities and obligations in regard to the initially determined goals. In this period it is possible to measure the programme impacts. While Member states are responsible for previous types of evaluation, the Comission, in cooperation with the Member States, is in charge of this stage of evaluations.

Since evaluation is one of the main principles of EU Cohesion policy, it is the Cohesion policy which determines the types of evaluation according to the period in which they are carried out. In this regard, since strategic documents for certain countries (for example Country strategy papers) cover the period of 5-6 years - this determines the average evaluation cycle to proximately 8 years (with ex-ante evaluation carried out a year prior to, and ex-post evaluation one to two years after the termination of the development programme).

Types of evaluation can also be considered as parts of the cycles of development policies (policy cycles). This cycle logic begins with the formulation of a programme/policy and is continued through planning, allocation of resources, programme design, implementation, and realization of outputs and programme results. However, as mentioned in the segment which reflects upon some main shortcominga related to evaluation, these cycles also point out to certain well known obstacles of the evaluation process from point of view that certain types/cycles of evaluation go parallel one with the other.

5.2. Main evaluation principles

Experience with evaluation based on the mentioned purposes and evident benefits, as well as the specific requirements of the socio-economic development policy, have resulted with a number of good practice rules that have proved to be of help in the process of planning, undertaking and use of evaluation. Among the most commonly used rules, or practical evaluation “principles” as drawn in the Commission sponsored Guide (Tavistock Institute with GHK and IRS) are the following :

- The purpose of evaluation is the improvement of socio-economic development programmes – not the undertaking of evaluation for its own sake. When planning to undertake an evaluation it is necessary to determine how will the results of the evaluation task improve the lives of citizens, the prosperity and well-being of regions and the competitiveness of economic actors.
- In order to ensure that evaluations make their maximum contribution, it is extremely important to adjust their time cycles with the time cycles of development programmes and policies.
- Different stakeholders have different expectations of evaluation.. Involving policy makers and those responsible for programmes, as well as finding out what their interests are in an evaluation and involving them in the process will ensure they take evaluation results seriously.
- It is necessary to fully integrate evaluation results into programme planning and management. Programme managers need to consider evaluation activities as a

resource: a source of feedback, a tool for improving performance, an early warning of problems (and solutions), as well as a means of systematizing knowledge.
- Bridge building and team building is necessary in order to obtain good results from the diverse groups which are engaged in evaluations
- Evaluation is not only about looking back to rate success or failure and allocate blame. It can contribute to every stage in the programme cycle. In particular, at the earliest stage, its benefits are evident in strengthening programmes by helping to reveal weaknesses in programme design – allowing thus early remedial actions.
- Gathering large quantities of data in the belief that these will eventually provide answers to all evaluation questions is no longer acceptable since it is nearly always inefficient.
- It is important that evaluations be located within a certain policy context, i.e., to take into consideration policy debates and decisions in order to ensure that evaluations are sensitized policy priorities.

As can be seen on the basis of the mentioned most widely acknowledged good practice suggestions, i.e. "principles" of evaluation - as the result of nearly two decades of very extensive evaluation practice - their taking into consideration is not only recommended to all those undertaking evaluation, but, rather, this good practice and the necessity for its acceptance is gradually being established in the form of required formal rules. These principles on the basis of such extensive conducting of evaluation exercises in the framework of EC Structural Funds approach are very relevant to those countries which are only paving the way for introducing evaluation policy within their own structural policy.

6. EX-ANTE EVALUATION - ITS OBJECTIVES AND KEY COMPONENTS

We can define ex-ante evaluation as an interactive process providing judgment and recommendations by experts, separately from the planners, on policy or programme issues, with the main objective to improve and strengthen the final quality of the Plan or Programme under preparation.

This type of evaluation has to be carried out within the programme planning phase and involves a structured assessment of the social and economic situation in the programme area. Particular focus is given to issues such as the expected impact of proposed measures, analysis of the relevance of the proposed implementation and monitoring arrangements, environmental situation and equal opportunities (Bachtler and Wren, 2006).

In the framework of Structural policies, the ex ante evaluation process has the following objectives (The Ex-Ante Evaluation of the Structural Funds, 2000):

<u>1. Assessment of whether the overall programme is an appropriate means for addressing the issues confronting the region or sector</u>:

<u>2. Assessment as to whether the programme has well defined priorities and objectives as well as whether it reflects an informed opinion as to whether these are relevant and can actually be achieved</u>**.**

<u>3. A contribution to the quantification of objectives and the establishment of a basis for monitoring as well as future evaluation work</u>**.**

<u>4. Analysis of the adequacy of the implementation and monitoring arrangements and support to the design of project selection procedures and criteria provided.</u>

Considering the above acknowledged main objectives of the ex ante evaluation, this process has to facilitate a constructive dialogue between those responsible for a programme and the experts in charge of its elaboration. Of course, it is the public authorities which have the ultimate responsibility for the contents of the final document. Following previously mentioned, the evaluation task carried out by the expert evaluation team should take into account the following 6 main elements of a programme: Previous experience; the socio-economic context of the intervention; the strategic choices and the action priorities selected and their internal and external consistency; the quantification of objectives; the estimate of the expected socio-economic impact and the allocation of resources; the implementation system of the programme. Each of these elements should be part of the elaborated evaluation report, but with a varying degree of precision, according to the principle of proportionality (between major and small programmes).

In the framework of the Cohesion policy, the acknowledged methodology for ex-ante evaluation covers the whole programming system: Plans, Programmes, Programme Complement, even if the draft Plans submitted to the Commission are only at the level of Priorities and quantified objectives, in accordance with the regulations. From this point of view, if the evaluation process is to bring genuine added value and improved quality of the documents to be negotiated between the different partners, it must take into consideration the programming process in its entirety.

6.1 Key components of the ex ante evaluation

Herewith is a short description of the main 6 previously mentioned elements of a programme, which should also be considered as the main components of ex ante evaluation (EUROPEAN COMMISSION (2000):

1. Analysis of the previous evaluation results (Learning from past experience and results)
Previous evaluations are a very relevant source of knowledge. They often cover similar types of actions since many policies do not change much from one year to another or, indeed, from programme to programme. Evaluations carried out either by the Commission or at national level provide useful information by comparing the effectiveness of policies in specific fields as well as identifying best practice which often be transferable. From point of view of learning from past experience, ex ante evaluation can contributes to a better understanding of:

- The relevance of the existing strategy or the need for amendment.
- The effectiveness of existing policy delivery instruments.
- The critical factors affecting implementation and effectiveness.
- The types of problem in terms of policy availability and monitoring.

2. Analysis of the strengths, weaknesses and potential of the state, region or sector concerned
A very relevant important contribution of the ex ante evaluation is verifying the priority to be assigned to the various socio-economic needs. This prioritizing of needs is a precondition aimed at defining relevant strategic objectives and priorities. This component asks for an in-depth analysis of the socio-economic context.

3. Assessment of the rationale and the overall consistency of the strategy

The ex ante evaluation should help clarify the balance between the combination of policies and activities proposed in the plans, as well as the justification of the made choice. The rationale of the plan and the chosen policy mix is assessed by checking how each part of the programme ("priority area or axis") will contribute to the objectives. From point of view of **relevance**, the starting point, therefore, is a justification of the priorities according to the global objectives of economic and social cohesion. In this regard, employment and competitiveness are the most important ones. The priorities should also be justified on the basis of identified needs on the basis of the main disparities observed in the concerned regions or sectors. In regard to **consistency** the ex ante evaluation should address the internal consistency between Plan, programme and Programme Complement objectives. Furthermore, it should also address the external consistency of the Plan. Structural policy and interventions should be compatible with national macroeconomic and budgetary policy, as well as Community policies and rules.

4. Quantification of objectives

Quantification exercises relate to both the objectives of the Plan/programmes as well as the key disparities. They are the basis for any subsequent monitoring and evaluation of the programme. The classification suggested corresponds to the following chain of indicators: *Inputs* ➔ *Outputs* ➔ *Results* ➔ *Impacts*

Relevant indicators need to be identified by way of ex ante evaluation in order to quantify impacts and results at the level of the Plan, programme and physical outputs, as well as at the Programme Complement level.

5. Evaluation of expected socio-economic impacts and justification of the policy and financial resources allocation

The ex ante evaluation has to gather information in order to understand the extent to which the Plan or the programme, along with its expected impacts and results, will contribute to the achievement of general and specific objectives. The ex ante evaluation has to demonstrate the sound foundation of the strategy and of the proposed financial resources allocation on the basis of its response to the needs stated as well as its expected impact.

6. Quality of the implementation and monitoring arrangements

The ex ante evaluation has to address the quality of the implementation, monitoring and evaluation arrangements envisaged as well as to assist the planning authorities in order to identify the necessary improvements, based also on past experience. This part of ex ante evaluation should provide the basis grounds for demonstrating how and why the monitoring and evaluation of the programme will represent an improvement in relation to past interventions.

Successful experience with ex ante evaluation is extensive in EU member states, including all the more the new Member states and, based on above mentioned principles and components, are very useful to countries which have only started introducing evaluation practice. In this regard, experience which ex-ante evaluation with the National Development plan in Ireland, (CSF, 1999; Hegerty, 2005), with the INTERREG II – A PHARE programme on cross border cooperation between Greece and Bulgaria, Ex Ante Evaluation of the South of Scotland Objective 2 Programme 2000-06 and other are a very useful starting point when considering evaluation approaches and systematic introducing of evaluation practice in countries which have only initial experience and are in the process of setting up institutions, building capacity for evaluation and embarking upon first evaluation practices.

7. FIRST EXPERIENCES WITH EVALUATION IN CROATIA

7.1. Current circumstances in Croatia

Croatia applied to become an EU member state in March 2003. In June 2004, Croatia officially received candidate country status. The target of the Croatian Government is the reaching of the level of internal readiness for EU integration by the end of 2007 and full membership in 2009. The EU membership negotiations started in October 2005 with a screening process and in October 2006 the screening of all 35 chapters of the Acquis Communautaire was completed.

Croatia has already undergone comprehensive and demanding reforms related to the EU accession process. A number of economic policy and strategy documents have been elaborated, such as the National Pogramme of EU Integration, Croatian Pre-accession Economic Programme 2006-2008 (PEP), National Development Framework, Economic and Fiscal Policy Guidelines and other, all emerging from or driven By the EU accession process (Samardžija, 2006).

PEP shows that the Croatian economy has achieved a considerable degree of macroeconomic stability. According to this document and data available within the Government's Strategic Development Framework, expected macroeconomic indicators for 2008 are the following: the GDP real growth is expected to be 4,3% (3,8% in 2004 and 4,3% in 2005), GDP per capita should reach 8.342 euros, while inflation is expected to increase to 2.6% (in comparison with 2,1% in 2004.) and the budget deficit is expected to be reduced from 4,5% of GDP in 2004 to 2.9% (CODEF, 2006; Samardžija, 2006). However, the overall public debt is slowly rising (46,4% in 2004, to 47.8% in 2006 (est.) and the foreign debt, even though rising, is expected to decrease from the current 87,9% in 2006. Simultaneously, further rise in employment is expected (around 1% per year), and the current unemployment rate has decreased below 13% (Ott, 2006). One could conclude that the macroeconomic situation is quite favorable: increase of GDP, employment, budget deficit, moderate wage increase and appreciation of currency.

However, inflation is slowly rising, and, due to the rising deficit of the current account and foreign and public debt, Croatia can be included among highly indebted countries. In such circumstances, the process of introducing EU rule, standards and approaches, in line with the overall accession process, will simultaneously go hand in hand with the process of crucial further structural interventions and consolidation.

Adjustments related to compliance with EC evaluation policy and practice are carried out within the Framework of Chapter 22: Regional Policy and Coordination of Structural Instruments. The closing of this Chapter is soon expected and a number of activities and initiatives are currently being undertaken from the part of the main government bodies (including newly established agencies and institutions) which will be in charge of coordinating EC structural instruments.

The EC "Opinion on Croatia's Application for Membership for the EU" (European Commission, 2004) highlights that Croatia's regional policy mechanisms are at an early stage, and that considerable and sustained efforts to define strategies, create administrative structures and implement programmes will be necessary in order to allow Croatia, in the medium term, to apply Community rule and channel the funds from the EU structural instruments. Evaluation of development programmes is only one segment within this whole process, but, together with monitoring, a very relevant one in the field of adjustments in the segment of regional policy and coordination of structural instruments.

Reaching compliance with EC rule, requirements, practice and standards in this segment are only one of the reasons for systematically introducing evaluation of development programmes, based on benchmarks and introducing of best practice from other countries with much more experience with evaluation practice. Namely, it is a fact that Croatia is today negotiating for full membership of the EU and now finds itself at a social and economic turning point that will result in new opportunities and new challenges. However, the main goal that Croatia wishes to achieve (as stated within CODEF, 2006) is social prosperity through development and employment in a competitive market economy acting within a European welfare state of the 21st century. Introducing evaluation policy we perceive thus as a necessity, from point of view of achieving better accomplishment and accountability, as well as effectiveness of our public actions and development policy, regardless of the fact that it is also a requirement from the part of the EC in the process of accession and coordination of the current pre-accession funds, as well as future Structural funds.

From point of view of the discussed topic and first experiences, as well as further planned actions regarding evaluation of development programmes in Croatia, related mainly to the segment of regional development, the two main government institutions involved are The Central Office for Development Strategy and Coordination of EU funds (CODEF), and the Ministry of Sea, Tourism, Transport and Development (MSTTD). CODEF is the key coordinating body for Croatia's preparation for management of EU Structural Funds (SF), and has started setting up the necessary administrative structures for the management of the IPA programme and corresponding programming documents, as the precursor to SF. MSTTD, on the other hand, has a mandate for the coordination of regional (county) development and was the government body in charge of elaborating the National Strategy for Regional Development (NSRD), with EU technical assistance, related to which the first experience of ex-ante evaluation is considered herewith.

7.2.Ex ante evaluation of the National Strategy for Regional Development

Only the first experience exists with evaluation so far, and this is basically in the segment of ex-ante evaluation. The first ex-ante evaluation according to EU guidelines and principles was carried out within the EU CARDS project in 2004-2005: National strategy for Regional Development. It was carried out by a team of experts from three institutions: Institute for International Relations, Zagreb; Faculty of Economics, Split; and Institute of Economics, Zagreb. Within the framework of this CARDS project, the capacity was raised of the evaluation team for ex-ante evaluation, but indirectly, initial evaluation capacity was also raised of the main stakeholders involved in the project. This first coherent project dealing with regional development in Croatia was evaluated in all its phases, priorly in line with the main ex-ante evaluation criteria, i.e.: rationale, relevance, internal and external coherence and consistency.

The evaluation task was carried out through continuous and dynamic interactive work with the experts in charge of the document – following each stage of the project as it was finalised, and, after thorough discussions and briefings with the team of experts engaged on the project, the evaluation results were integrated in the preparation, elaboration and final version of the document.

The evaluation team started initially as "outsiders", commenting on the first phase of the document as an adjacent team, not closely linked to the authors of the document. It was initially maybe even perceived from the programming team that the requirements of the evaluation team were sometimes far too critical, demanding and ambitious, and in this sense in the first phase of the project's elaboration were perceived maybe as a kind of pressure which might even delay the particular project's phases. However, this gradually changed already in the second stage of the project and the ex ante evaluators were perceived more as a technical assistance, cooperating very closely with the project team, as well s stakeholders, debating on all relevant problem issues and contributing with concrete proposals regarding the upgrading of the final document.

Regardless of the at later stages very close and constructive cooperation of the programming and evaluation team, the results of evaluation were completely independent and often very critical, with alternative views and proposals provided. The different "stages of cooperation" which were very evident in the framework of this project evaluation were actually also a process of learning how evaluators and programmers should cooperate effectively in order to reach a satisfactory result. It is important to note that this first ex-ante evaluation was carried out in circumstances of weak coordination and the horizontal and vertical levels between different policies programmes, and the relevant implementing bodies and structures. However, one of the purposes of this CARDS project was particularly the solving of this complex situation and activities related to it are still under way. The elaborated National Development Framework, as well as newly established bodies with the main objective of strengthening overall coordination of development planning and programming are a very relevant step in this regard and will help to foster further evaluation exercises of plans and programmes which are due to be elaborated in the forthcoming period.

Value added of this first evaluation exercise was by all means the first such institutional capacity building for ex-ante evaluation, which exists today within the ex ante evaluation team, experts from the Directorate for regional development in the Ministry, as well as experts from other line ministries. With the process of negotiation with the EU in Chapter 22, Regional policy, under way, and the whole ongoing accession process, it is expected that this first know how and experience, as well as lessons learnt will be further developed and upgraded, and used for other similar plans and programmes which are due to be elaborated.

Evaluation as a process is gradually also being introduced through other means and institutions in Croatia. Ex-ante evaluation has been carried out in the framework of implementing development projects funded through the EC SAPARD programme. However, these were mainly externally conducted evaluations, i.e. from the part of foreign consultants, so the learning effects were not so useful. Also, it is worth mentioning the role of **the Fund for regional development,** which is among the first institutions which has given due importance to the introducing of the main principles of EU structural policy in practice, i.e. in the process of programming on the regional level. The Fund has also commissioned the elaboration of a study introducing the first ex post evaluation of socio-economic development programmes in Croatia, and results on the basis of implementing this type of evaluation on the case of programmes co-financed by this Fund are yet to be seen.

8. CONCLUSIONS

The first experience with evaluation in Croatia has confirmed what had been confirmed in other countries also, i.e., that policy makers will perceive evaluation as necessary and relevant if evaluation assessments are turned into clear-cut public messages for policy makers, and if the policy-makers are required by partners to respond with information that only evaluation can provide (Barca, 2006).

The further introducing and raising of capacity for evaluation in Croatia is extremely relevant due to a number of reasons, among them first of all the following:

- ensuring transparency, efficient and effective management of development programs
- ensuring financial and other accountability of the programme managers
- ensuring maximum return of invested resources for development programms
- ensuring maximum socio-economic development impacts for the development of certain Croatian regions
- serving as a tool for the implementation of the policy of financing regional development in regard to "learning", as a direct outcome of systematic implementation of the evaluation process
- serving as a tool for implementing regional policy, since evaluation exercises explicitly point out the results of socio-economic development of the implemented development programms and policies.

Further to the mentioned reasons for further upgrading the existing evaluation methodology, and its incorporation into planning and programming, it is necessary to stress that monitoring and evaluation are one of the most relevant principles of EU Cohesion policy, and there is no question as to the needs for their incorporation within the current Croatian regional policy which is just at the moment being established on completely new grounds, based on new instruments, as well as a new legal basis. In this regard, it has to be clear at all instances and all levels that, without adhering to this EU principle, access to Structural funds, as well as pre accession instruments will not be feasible.

Regarding the above mentioned, it is necessary to master skills related to the implementation of the evaluation process in as short a period as possible in Croatia. Benefits from this will be visible through more effective future development programmes, but also through the development of a tool for continuous improvement of the regional development policy, as well as for financing regional development in Croatia. Last, but not least important, the effective implementation of this approach will facilitate the process of adjustment to EU requirements in the segment of regional policy and structural instruments, since, based on European Council Articles 40-44, from1999 the managing authorities of Structural Funds in each Member State are obliged to adopt the European evaluation procedures at both regional and national levels (Basle, 2006).

Along with mastering skills, it is necessary to establish formal coordination structures and introduce evaluation practice as an obligatory procedure. Further, introducing of evaluation practice in Croatia, based on experience in Austria (Huber, 2007) can be supported through the organization of a network for the exchange of experience among evaluators. Such a joint learning process is maybe a longer road, but will, in the longer term period, enable the development and further upgrading of evaluation practice further from a purely formal exercise. In this regard, while other bodies are still not established, the Government's working team for the negotiation with EU in Chapter 22: Regional policy and coordination of structural funds, could be used as a pivotal body, continuation to meet regularly, with its members (including experts, policy makers, key stakeholders, etc,), among other issues, sharing their views, knowledge and experience regarding initial evaluation practice at seminars and similar events, and discussing the further options for developing this practice in Croatia.

From point of view of initially considered approaches, it is our view that the organizational learning effects, so much addressed from the part of Batterbury, Esser and Nusmueller, Bachtler and numerous other, are of key importance when considering the approach to be taken in Croatia. The initial experience with ex-ante evaluation has confirmed this. We full agree that evaluation, if aiming at learning effects and policy improvements, should not be mixed neither with publicity nor with control and sanctions for failure. We are referring here to the previously mentioned conflict between accountability and learning . i.e. deciding whether the main purpose of evaluation was to justify expenditures or to learn, i.e. whether the role of the evaluator was to be a judge or moderator. The shortcomings are partly seen in the governance structure of the Structural Funds as well as the narrow focus of EC Cohesion policy evaluation - on improved planning, accountability and performance - with the other possibly useful functions such as capacity building and learning being neglected (Batterbury, 2006), which are crucial for enhancing the quality of the programme.

While systematically introducing evaluation in Croatia – from institutions, to raising capacity for evaluation, developing own approaches and methods, it is relevant that both evaluators as well as policy makers in Croatia are aware and well acquainted with the current debates and often quite conflicting views regarding approaches to evaluation, including the mentioned weaknesses and present main constraints – at times considered even as “failures” of evaluation policy. Such awareness from their part is crucially important regardless of the fact whether we are referring here to previously in more detail elaborated constraints related to different approaches and methods of evaluation, the still present centralized approach in evaluation policy, low level of capacity, different approaches in regard to either enabling the learning process and organizational learning, or, rather, focusing on justifying expenditures, but also on obstacles such as data collection, time adjustments of evaluation, not to mention too demanding requirements from the part of evaluators and numerous other (Batterbury, 2006, Bachtler, 2006, Blazek and Vozap, 2006 and other).

Insight into all the relevant and in this paper often referred to EC Cohesion policy evaluation guidelines and principles, but even more so, the existing practice and immense experience based on carried out evaluation exercises in EU member states, including the most recent members - will surely lessen at least some of these obstacles and shorten this learning curve in Croatia, and serve thus as very valuable experience as the basis to build upon, and, hopefully, enable also contributions from the part of Croatian experience which will enhance future impact of public actions and organizational learning in Europe. While fostering this process, we can agree with Basle (Basle 2006), that it is important to bear in mind that evaluation practice cannot be perceived as purely scientific research – but should be looked upon as a challenge in producing directly useful knowledge that is of value to society – i.e. as participation in the European "knowledge based society”.

Reflecting upon the stated main goals, objectives and purpose of evaluation, as well as its relevance for the development of efficient and effective development programming and implementation of Croatia’s regional policy - one can hardly deny the fact that introducing evaluation of development programmes in Croatia can definitely not be perceived as just an option, hardly an obligation, but only and indisputably as an extremely relevant necessity - from point of view of overall management of socio-economic development of the country as well as its regional development. The Structural Funds approach in evaluation policy can be an excellent starting point in this process of introducing evaluation practice effectively and efficiently in Croatia. From point of view of mentioned obstacles and still present constraints of this “EC approach”, it is a big challenge for Croatian evaluators, other experts, jointly working with policy makers and relevant stakeholders, to contribute to the generation of new approaches, methods and tools, with the ultimate aim of lessening present weaknesses in evaluation policy.

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