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**THE EVALUATION OF THE ESF PROGRAMME IN A
MULTILEVEL GOVERNANCE CONTEXT:
LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE ITALIAN EXPERIENCE**

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Abstract

In 1999 the European Commission and the Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policies asked ISFOL's National European Social Fund Evaluation Unit (Unit) to undertake the evaluation of the Italian European Social Fund (ESF) Objective 3 Programme for the period 2000-2006.

The Objective 3 Community Support Framework (CSF) mid-term evaluation, carried out at the end of 2003, faced some important challenges related mainly to: (1) the complexity of the programme, implemented through continuing processes of decision and negotiation; (2) an institutional context of multilevel governance, linked to the decentralization process which has increased the number of actors involved in the management of public policies and in their evaluation. These new forms of complexity and uncertainty had to be tackled in the evaluation by identifying new objects of analysis and by building new forms of relationship or partnership with various actors.

This paper describes the evaluative path carried out in the mid-term evaluation by the Italian National ESF Evaluation Unit within the framework of a new context of multilevel governance. Attention is given to the main methodological choices made by the Unit and to the evaluative approach applied. Furthermore, using examples from the recent experience, the paper addresses the issue of lessons learned and the challenges for the future, helping stakeholders to guarantee a better governance through evaluation.

Introduction

In 1999 the European Commission and the Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policies asked ISFOL's¹ Unit to undertake the mid-term evaluation of the Objective 3 CSF within the framework of the new Structural Funds 2000-2006 programme. Community regulations decree that this evaluation must cover various aspects of the implementation of the ESF co-financed policies. It must also analyse the initial results of the interventions, their pertinence and the extent to which targets have been met, as well as the utilisation of financial resources and the performance of monitoring and implementation activities.

The mid-term evaluation of Objective 3 CSF, concluded in September 2003 (ISFOL's National ESF Evaluation Unit, 2004), was the outcome of an evaluation pathway that the Unit had initiated in Italy in 2000, the year in which the methodological tools were prepared and the main evaluative research lines identified.

The Italian experience of the evaluation of Objective 3 CSF is described in this paper and the main "lessons" learnt are illustrated, retracing the most important stages in the definition and drafting of the evaluation report and its dissemination.

The paper thus focuses on the Unit's choices regarding the organisation of the evaluation activities, the definition of their contents and the utilisation of the results. Later on, some of the lessons learnt from this experience which could be helpful for future evaluation activities will be presented.

This contribution is thus a meta-evaluative study, that is an evaluation of the evaluation, through an *a posteriori* reconstruction of the evaluative pathway and the lessons learnt from this experience. There is still a lack of studies on this type of evaluation (Bustelo, 2003). In this case, a self-evaluation exercise has been carried out that seems particularly significant in a perspective of learning and of improving the evaluation.

The aim of the paper is twofold. Firstly, to provide, by presenting a concrete experience such as the Italian one, elements useful for evaluators and other actors interested in programme and public policy evaluation for a better management and rationalisation of the evaluative practice. Secondly, to study the relationship between political decision-makers and evaluators, and thus between programming and evaluation, from the evaluation demand stage to the political decision-makers' utilisation of the evaluation results.

The paper is divided into four parts. In the first part, the reference context of the mid-term evaluation is analysed, characterised by the complexity of the programme in terms of the new and more extensive intervention area of the ESF and of the new actors interested and involved in evaluation. In the second part, the evaluative pathway is reconstructed. In the third part, the main lessons learnt are proposed and analysed with reference to three main elements: the evaluation process, the definition of the evaluation contents and the utilisation of the results. Finally, the last part is devoted to the challenges which the evaluators will have to face in updating the mid-term evaluation in view of the new Structural Fund 2007-2013 programme.

¹ Isfol is a public research institute in the field of education, vocational training and labour market. The Evaluation Unit has been created in 1995.

The mid-term evaluation reference context

The decentralization process underway in Italy in recent years has increased the number of actors involved in the management of public policies and in decision making. The ESF co-financed activities are being performed against a background of a gradual transfer of responsibilities from the centre to the periphery, designing a new model of governance in Italy with new responsibilities and new relationships (Lion et al., 2004).

The regions, provinces, municipalities and other local authorities, to whom functions and tasks have been gradually transferred according to subsidiarity, differentiation and suitability criteria, have become increasingly involved in the definition of political strategies, shouldering leading roles in the implementation of the ESF co-financed interventions.

The institutional context in which the ESF policies are programmed and implemented is thus no longer hierarchal, but increasingly spelt out in autonomous local areas with equal powers to represent their own needs. Since the State is no longer the sole arbiter with regards to a policy and the instruments to use, the sub-national space has become the level where the other policy-makers involved in the decentralization of that policy are pinpointed and required to act.

The programmes co-financed by the ESF are thus implemented through continual processes of decision, negotiation and mediation, where numerous actors with specific, and often diverging, values and priorities take the stage, all able to decide on their own moves within the policy. This implies a participatory and negotiating approach instead of the intervention of a single authority.

Concurrently with the institutional changes in the national domain, in the Community area the reform of the Structural Funds for the 2000-2006 period has considerably extended the ESF's aims and thus its spheres of intervention. In this programming period, it is financing not only the training policies but also other active labour, educational and social inclusion policies, becoming the financial and operative arm of the European Employment Strategy (EES) and the National Action Plans (NAP).

The broadening of the ESF's spheres of intervention is also reflected in the strengthening of the system actions that the ESF can finance, ranging from employment services to educational and training systems and their integration.

Alongside this, the growing awareness on a Community level of the need to define a new model for participating in the labour market, accompanied by a redefinition of the social organisation, is reflected on the ESF programme. This latter has innovative elements regarding accompanying measures for strengthening the effectiveness of the co-financed activities. These run along two main lines: firstly, through the removal of the social and structural conditions hindering labour market access and permanency and the achievement of higher career levels; and secondly by promoting assistance actions for beneficiaries and their families and by reconciling working and private life. These actions are significantly new in the current programme and cut across the axes and measures.

Thus, with the 2000-2006 programme, the ESF becomes an instrument targeted at policies rather than beneficiaries (young people, unemployed, women, etc.), unlike the previous programme in which the contribution of the ESF was mainly directed at interventions involving persons.

The reference scenario of the mid-term evaluation has become more complex, both because of the presence of two levels – national and individual Operational Programmes (OP) – and the plurality of actors within them, and because of the greater division of programmes into objectives (global and specific), set during the programming, into policy-fields and into specific lines of intervention (axes, measures, action typologies and main intervention typologies).

The ESF programmes evaluated have the following specific qualities: plurality of objectives pursued, multiplicity and heterogeneity of co-financed actions, new intervention areas with regards to the 1994-1999 programme, and links between the ESF and other concurrent or complementary national policies.

Also to be considered within this framework are the choices made on a Community and national level to strengthen the role of the evaluation, always considered an integral part of the ESF policy-cycle management. The evaluation is also an instrument for reconstructing outputs, outcomes, impacts and intervention implementation processes and thus, as in the case of the mid-term evaluation, also for the reprogramming *in itinere* of the co-financed actions.

The evaluative pathway: the approach to the evaluation

As said earlier, the ESF financed programmes have a multiplicity and heterogeneity of contents, objectives pursued, actors involved and implementation modes. All this implies a particularly complicated evaluative activity, precisely because referred “to a complex and multilevel public programming, placed in a multi-actor context with a high institutional exposure” (Vergani, 2004).

During the previous ESF programme, the Unit had already set up an approach to the evaluation (ISFOL – National ESF Evaluation Unit, 1999). With the mandate received for the evaluation activity for the 2000-2006 seven-year period, this approach was then systematised by writing guidelines and methodological standards for the mid-term evaluation of the CSF and OP’s (ISFOL –National ESF Evaluation Unit, 2002, 2003). The basic options, for both methods and contents, of that approach were reconfirmed and partly implemented on the basis of the changes needed to respond to the new ESF intervention dimensions.

This approach represented the supporting structure of the mid-term evaluation, finding a concrete application but also assuming new meanings as the work progressed. The main components of the approach used are described here below. An *a posteriori* reflection on the work undertaken has highlighted new elements to bear in mind when updating the mid-term evaluation.

Participatory/multiactor

The mid-term evaluation of the CSF partly changed the concept of “participatory

evaluation” as it had been formulated and implemented in the 1994-1999 experience. In the previous programme, the participatory evaluation mainly figured as an “empowerment evaluation” (Fetterman, 1996), that is as an evaluation in which the role of the external evaluator was also that of the facilitator inside a process of learning and improvement of programmes by the different stakeholders, in line with Guba and Lincoln’s “fourth generation evaluation” (1995). The concept of participatory evaluation thus implies accompaniment and knowledge sharing with the aim of improving programmes (De Lellis and Vergani, 1998).

In the mid-term evaluation, this empowerment aspect has partly disappeared to leave space for a different way of interacting with stakeholders, whose evaluation culture has grown over the years thanks also to the impulse given by the Structural Funds. This is imputable not only to (and thus consistent with) the devolution underway in Italy for human-resource development policies but also to a learning process that has helped the various institutional actors implementing the ESF interventions to insert effectively the evaluation within the life cycle of the co-financed programmes and projects.

This new context, with the strengthening of tasks and powers attributed to the different institutional actors on various levels, which is designing a new model of governance in Italy, has also meant choosing independent actors on a level of the single operational programme for performing the evaluation.

The dimension of the participatory evaluation in the mid-term evaluation has therefore implied an intense preliminary work in defining methodologies and instruments, in partnership with those responsible for the ESF implementation and with those actually implementing it. The final objective was to lay the foundations, in a context of “accelerated” decentralization of the programme and policy implementation, as well as of the evaluation, for constructing a common language and practice for the ESF evaluation. The aim was to guarantee the comparability of results and to provide an across-the-board analysis on a national level (in this case in the centre-north).

The CSF as an “open system”

The CSF constitutes a public-policy intervention programme which is necessarily inserted in a wider context than the general and specific objectives it pursues. This meant that the evaluation had not only to start by checking that the objectives indicated during the programming had been achieved by analysing the results, but had also to take into account the evolution of the same objectives in the light of their contextualization in the European, national and regional scenarios. The adoption of a goal-free approach (Scriven, 1991) to the evaluation has meant reconstructing all the effects produced by the programme or attributable to it, starting with its initial objectives.

This choice is based on a series of considerations: first of all, the programme can produce different or unforeseen effects, which if not suitably grasped can lead to biased evaluations; secondly, a multiplicity of actors are responsible for the implementation of the policies, and particularly the co-financed ones, who can change the original objectives in a complex process of negotiation and transfer; and finally, the evaluation of the CSF reference context, that is the Italian socio-economic, demographic and politic-regulatory context, causes new objectives and priorities to emerge during the progress of the work, obviously not foreseeable during the programming (the seven-year duration of the current

programme necessarily implies changes in the context).

In this sense the CSF can be considered an “open system”, that is created with the aim of acting on the external context, but which in turn is inevitably affected by this same context. It is permeable to impulses from outside because it is implemented within specific economic and social structures and has multiple relationships with the environment in which it is placed (Bulgarelli, 2000). The idea of programmes as “open systems” (Pawson and Tilley, 1997) means a “realistic” type of approach to the evaluation where the key element lies in the fact that the programmes are inserted in a context, or several contexts, which determine its outputs and results.

In the mid-term evaluation this infers a particular attention to the reconstruction of the political/regulatory and economic/demographic context of the labour market in which the ESF interventions have been implemented. This has helped to define the reference framework within which the programmes have been implemented and has also enabled reasoning in terms of the relevance of the CSF strategy.

The evaluation has further analysed the links between the programme and the EES that the ESF has to forge and the relationship between the ESF and national policies. Moreover, as will be amply illustrated later, the survey of the calls for tender issued by the administrations has introduced a further level of analysis by defining the connections between the original programming and that developed on a decentralised level. On this latter level are the negotiating processes in which the different actors represent their own values and needs, helping to transform the original design of the policy.

Multilevel/ multifocus

The mid-term evaluation is divided into various levels in which the co-financed interventions are spelt out within the CSF and in the various implementation aspects. In this sense the approach has a multilevel and multifocus character.

The adoption of a multilevel logic means analysing the CSF and its implementation in an evaluative key, considering the essential levels of implementation - the OPs and their structure in axes and measures as set out in the logical programming structure of the CSF. However, an axis does not necessarily coincide with a policy objective and this implies a further level of analysis, reading across the axes by surveying action and project typologies, as well as the targets reached. As pointed out earlier, one of the key innovations of the 2000-2006 programme is the different approach to the definition of the specific objectives, no longer target-oriented but policy-oriented. Shifting from a perspective focused on users to a transversal perspective has meant isolating significant levels of evaluation capable of providing useful and meaningful knowledge for policy makers.

Nevertheless, the multiplicity and heterogeneity of the CSF co-financed actions has necessitated a greater focus on evaluation areas by pinpointing some priority objectives for policy-makers. In this sense, the definition of the “demand for evaluation” expressed by stakeholders has been incorporated in the evaluative design through a selection of areas of interest. The different cognitive needs expressed both by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (as responsible for the CSF), mainly on specific topics, and by the European Commission, more general and extensive, has also made it necessary to reconcile these different demands.

The multifocus logic has mainly involved the analysis of outputs and an initial evaluation of the outcomes based on physical and financial indicators and on the results of the *ad hoc* surveys carried out with the placement surveys. In addition, the Unit has set up an innovative model for evaluating the implementation process which has been widely utilised in the evaluations performed on an OP level by the various actors involved. This has helped to widen the focus of the evaluation to what has been defined as the black box in the lifecycle of a policy (ISFOL –National ESF Evaluation Unit, 2002).

Multidisciplinary

The multiplicity and heterogeneity of the co-financed actions has made it necessary to set up specific instruments and methodologies for the evaluation areas considered, in a multidisciplinary perspective. In general, this option covers two different aspects: the implementation of the evaluation with the support of methods, techniques and instruments belonging to different but complementary disciplinary fields, and the coordinated use of quantitative and qualitative methods (De Sanctis et al., 2000).

Besides the use of a plurality of evaluative methods and techniques, it seems important to stress that, in the mid-term evaluation, the multidisciplinary dimension mainly implies team work with professionals and experts from different disciplinary fields. This has given an input of perspectives and points of view which has enriched the significance and interpretation of the evaluation subjects.

Measurement/quantification for the evaluation

The quantification of what is being evaluated implies the possibility of structuring the evaluation on the basis of numerical surveys. This option has prompted the preparation of the system of output, result and impact indicators contained in the CSF and fed into the national monitoring system.

This element of the approach to the evaluation has undoubtedly represented the core of the evaluative analysis. However, when drafting the report, the “quantitative dimension” of the evaluation developed alongside further analyses that enhanced the interpretative capacity of the indicators. This refers not only to the contextualization of the programme, as mentioned earlier, but also to the use of evaluation reports on a level of individual OP that have provided further interpretative keys through in-depth qualitative surveys. This also forms part of an evaluative logic that envisages the “evaluative research” as the main constructive activity for collecting information useful for the evaluation (Palumbo, 2001).

The reconstruction of the physical implementation and financial progress of the programme on the basis of the indicators, which naturally represent the focus of a mid-term evaluation, was not therefore exclusive. The indicators used were not considered explicative in themselves but represented a “point of departure” (Vergani, 2004) and became meaningful precisely because inserted in a research pathway that considers approaches to the evaluation of a neo-positivist and of a constructivist type as complementary (Cronbach, 1982).

This latter aspect suggests that information sources for the evaluation should not be limited to the system of indicators, anyway mandatory, but extended to a wide and diversified ranged of sources which, as we will explain later, can help to fill possible gaps in the monitoring systems themselves.

The lessons learnt from the mid-term evaluation

Processes and methods

Evaluation criteria

For the evaluation report guidelines, the Unit had to use the standards defined by the Community with regards to monitoring and evaluation. The analysis of the context was based on the criterion of relevance spelt out by the Community, that is analysing the goals and policy strategies defined in the CSF in relation to the evolution of the context.

The other basic report guidelines are coherence, efficiency and effectiveness. The criterion of coherence was used to analyse the complementarity of the ESF interventions with national/regional policies within the framework of the EES and the NAP's.

The criterion of efficiency was used to evaluate the outputs of measures, axes and programmes with regards to the financial resources mobilised. The effectiveness criterion checks on the achievement of goals and analyses any deviations from the expected results due to changes in the context and/or caused by policy implementation processes.

Fractal structure

An important option in the approach to the mid-term evaluation report was that of giving the final document a fractal structure. This is an architecture where the same structure is repeated on different hierarchical levels. In the ESF case, these go in a vertical sense from the programme to the measure and in a horizontal sense include the analysis of the project typologies, the cross-cutting topics and the new EES goals and priorities.

This choice is not only formal, nor is it a purely editorial option. This structure means that the individual parts are independent, constituting units self-sufficient in content and in the information they provide, and the various subjects are treated in a uniform manner.

The immediate result is a more user-friendly document, where the relevant information is easier to pinpoint. However, this choice undoubtedly implies a longer and therefore weightier report.

Critical points of the monitoring system and solutions adopted

As already observed, the focus of the mid-term evaluation was the analysis of the programme outputs quantified through the indicators. These latter are calculated on the basis of the data present in the monitoring system and on the results of the placement surveys performed on a regional/provincial level.

The Unit has for some time been working on a cognitive base for checking the progress of the programmes as a whole and the effects generated by their implementation, defining standards for the variables to survey for obtaining indicators. In Italy, it was considered necessary to adopt a common language and standardise the survey, since there are various actors responsible for programme implementation. The work carried out with the Ministry for the Economy for the European Regional Development Fund and with the National Institute of Agrarian Economy (INEA) for the [European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund](#) has produced a centralised national monitoring system which enables

financial, physical and procedural data to be collected and filed. This is fed by local monitoring systems which make use of information provided by the executing agents.

Although representing a rich storehouse of information on the co-financed policies put into practice, some critical elements emerged during the first three years of the programme which prevented the Unit from fully tapping this source for the mid-term evaluation. This was mainly due to lacks in the physical and procedural progress data, often not entirely reliable for the various analysis levels covered in the report. The financial monitoring is now standardised and the information provided has represented a solid base on the programme's state of progress.

The drawbacks found in the system are mostly linked to communication problems involving the transfer of data from the managing authorities' information systems to the central system and to the times for transmitting information from the financial beneficiaries. It was also necessary to check the completeness and reliability of the data.

In the mid-term evaluation, the Unit had to face some critical aspects related to the availability of data present in the system. However, it was able to tap other sources of an administrative nature that enabled it to integrate and extend the details of the information arriving from the central system.

Relationship between central evaluation system and decentralized levels

The partnership in the evaluation is considered a priority dimension in the Community regulations, which also ensures, through specific opportunities for meeting, that it is actually put into practice.

The partnership between the Unit and the other actors was guaranteed by institutional bodies such as the Technical Evaluation Group and also by the working groups set up at the request of the various stakeholders. In particular, the launch of specific working groups coordinated by the Unit met the participants' need to discuss the scientific and methodological aspects of complex topics considered particularly important for the evaluation of the first three years of CSF implementation.

This involved a process of accompaniment and response to the evolution in the demand for evaluation, covering the following topics: the analysis of employment outcomes, the evaluation of the quality of the vocational training system, the implementation process, equal opportunities and the indicators system. As said earlier, this option has represented the most important dimension of the participatory evaluation the Unit decided to undertake, in terms of both contents and working mechanisms.

The timing

The Community regulations attribute an important role to the mid-term evaluation since the co-financed intervention reprogramming process is linked to it and, in this seven-year period, to the new mechanism for allocating the performance reserve.

Precisely because the evaluation is useful for this reprogramming, the Unit had been asked to finish it before the deadline fixed by the regulations (December 2003), so that the results would be available ahead of time for supporting policy-makers in their decisions. This was possible thanks to the prompt organisation of the evaluation, which was able to rely on the

preparatory works carried out at the start of the programming and on the intensive feedback from the independent evaluators who were evaluating the OP's. In fact, the times fixed by the Community regulation would have made the whole practice worthless, since its results would have only been made available around the time of the reprogramming. This process instead needs suitable time for analysing the results of the evaluation and using them for decision-making.

The definition of the evaluation contents

One of the first activities the Unit carried out at the start of the new Structural Fund programming in 2000 was to classify the ESF co-financed activities on a level of individual project in a partnership scenario.

The classification of projects on the basis of homogeneous typologies would make comparable the different types of ESF financed actions implemented on a decentralised level by the various OP managers. The monitoring system has been constructed on this classification and hence the evaluation.

This is a classification structured on four levels, intermediate and in cascade, between the measure and the individual project. It reconciles the cognitive needs of the actors involved in the programming, that is it proposes a structure of the programme implementation that provides information useful for the all different aggregation levels.

The classification by project typology was based on the contents of the programming regulations and documents (CSF, OP and Programme Complements) and shared with all the managing authorities. It enables the definition, in the different OP's, of the analysis unit on which to construct the common and homogeneous area for the evaluation so as to give a national reading of the experience.

This classification has been incorporated in the monitoring system and also provides information on the implementation of the EES and the annual NAP according to the Eurostat classification "Labour Market Policy".

The ambitious choice to create such a detailed classification was prompted by the need to analyse policies cross-cutting the Objective 3 CSF and the individual OP's and to provide useful information for political decision-makers.

However, in the Objective 3 CSF mid-term evaluation, only for some administrations has it been possible to develop a detailed analysis of the activities implemented, to achieve the objectives indicated on a measure and axis level. As said earlier, some problems were encountered in loading the data onto the central monitoring system, meaning that it is not yet possible fully to tap the information on the ESF co-financed policies present in the data collection and filing system.

To define a complete picture for the entire Objective 3 CSF, it was thus necessary to integrate the information present in the monitoring system with other sources, such as the regional authorities' execution and evaluation reports and the regional files containing project cards and personal details of beneficiaries. The intensive work of collecting physical

data involved the cooperation of all those responsible for monitoring under the various managing authorities.

The mid-term evaluation report covered all the measures contained in the ESF, reconstructing: the outputs, outcomes and impacts of the programme for each of them and pinpointing the links with the EES and with the other measures; the relationship between the ESF policies and national policies; the implementation programme; the outputs and the financial progress; the initial outcomes and impacts.

On levels above the measure (axis and programme), the analysis followed the same path, with information inserted on the outputs and financial progress in the reference context (in this case axis and programme) and on the national and Community policies as a whole. Specific attention was devoted to the main changes in the relevant socio-economic and regulatory and institutional contexts to evaluate the applicability of the strategic design of the Objective 3 CSF.

The conclusions of the evaluative surveys and the recommendations for the political decision-makers were presented on an individual measure level. This undoubtedly provided very detailed data on the individual policies, offering points for reflection and extensive information for decision-makers. However, such a high level of detail has sometimes made it difficult to obtain an overall vision of the results achieved.

When defining the contents of the evaluation, it was sometimes decided to focus the analysis on topics considered as priorities for political decision-makers, such as continuing training, job placement policies, policies for fostering the participation of women in the labour market, policies for supporting the EES (ISFOL – National ESF Evaluation Unit, 2003c) and the quality of training systems.

The Ministry of Labour and Social Policies asked the Unit to set up a model for evaluating the quality of training systems following the Objective 3 Monitoring Committee's choice - during 2001 - to study further this topic for the 2000-2006 period.

The aim was to define a model for evaluating the quality of training systems on a regional level through the analysis of their main components. This implied defining a set of indicators for describing and rendering comparable the different regional training systems.

The model uses an analysis scheme which pinpoints, with progressive levels of precision, the elements determining the quality of a training system. At the same time, it also enables the performances of the different regional situations to be compared. The analysis is organised, in successive levels of detail, in terms of macro areas of quality dimensions and, in cascade, in factors/indicators (ISFOL – National ESF Evaluation Unit, 2003b)

For employment policies, specific studies have quantified the rates of coverage of the potential beneficiaries and of job placement, as well as the impact on the trained of the ESF co-financed vocational courses one year after the end of the training. The outcomes of the placement survey concerned two administrations in the centre north, but it is planned to extend the survey to other regions when updating the mid-term evaluation.

To compare the local supply with the administrations' political strategies, the Unit has also promoted and implemented a project for analysing calls for tender (public-service tenders and public announcements) by Objective 3 and Objective 1 administrations. A computerised system was created for collecting and filing the implementation programme documents used during the 2000-2002 period by the managing authorities and delegated bodies. The aim was to provide constant updating on the managing authorities' strategies and an *in itinere* check of underlying trends.

The data bank enables examining, in real time, if and how the innovative aspects and the specificity of the new ESF programme are finding concrete expression in the managing authorities' calls, verifying what is occurring nationwide and following its evolution during the programming period.

Specifically, information has been collected for the data bank on the following items: calls issued by each administration, measures and project typologies activated, beneficiaries of the measures, proposing agents, and references to cross-cutting topics such as equal opportunities, local development, the information society and the social economy, financial data, evaluation grids for project selection, call dates of issue and deadlines.

Utilisation and dissemination of the results

There are many studies which have dealt with the possible uses of the evaluation and its utilisation (Weiss, 1998; Patton, 1999). How can it be ensured that an evaluation is utilised? What are the features an evaluation must possess to be of effective help for those who have to programme activities and make decisions? How is it that the results of the evaluations are often ignored, despite the fact that often considerable financial resources are committed?

The Unit's evaluation experience provides some elements for further debate. Since 2000 the Unit's intention has been to accompany the activities' programming stage, with the aim of producing an *in itinere* evaluation that would not only increase the various actors' knowledge of the functioning of a policy but, above all, would provide useful elements for making decisions and steering policies. Thus the choices that have been made in the organisation of the activities and in the definition of the report are based on the awareness that the utilisation of the evaluation is closely connected to its usefulness for political decision-makers. The evaluation was thus seen as an analysis of the state of progress of a policy/programme for supporting the decision-making process. That is, as an activity increasingly inserted in the policy cycle and strictly linked with the programming of the interventions.

Within this framework, to implement an evaluation which is not a mere bureaucratic exercise but a useful and utilised activity, the approach was that of sharing the methodological tools and policies to analyse among the various stakeholders, who were involved right from the launch of the new programme. The Unit's twofold role as Objective 3 CSF evaluators and as scientific and methodological coordinators for the evaluation of the regional OP's facilitated this task. It also enabled setting up a system of methodologies and instruments in partnership with the other evaluation actors for numerous areas and topics.

The evaluation demand was mainly defined within the Technical Evaluation Group, a partnership of the main actors involved in evaluation topics on a European and national level. Partners included representatives of the European Commission, of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, and of other central administrations, regional institutions and social partners, each with its respective cognitive needs and therefore with specific priorities.

The Unit has thus chosen priority themes, defining the guidelines for performing the evaluation so as to provide a complete reading of the topics studied by analysing the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the interventions.

The evaluation report was transmitted to the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies and the European Commission in September 2003, within the deadline established on a Community and national level. This has provided the various actors involved with information useful for reprogramming the activities of Objective 3 CSF and in cascade for the OP's. The respect of the times for delivering the report was very important in fostering the policy-makers' utilisation of the evaluation.

The communication strategy was multidirectional to inform all the various stakeholders about the outcomes of the evaluation and evaluation process. The evaluation report was distributed in two versions: a more analytical version which reconstructs the main methodological choices adopted and describes in detail the outcomes, and a briefer one summing up the main results of the evaluation. The first version, besides being delivered to the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies and European Commission, was inserted in the websites of the Unit and of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, divided into thematic sections to aid consultation.

The summary evaluation report was first presented to the Technical Evaluation Group and Objective 3 CSF Monitoring Committee. It was then distributed during a national conference organised by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies on the role of the ESF in the new EES. During the conference, held in 2004 in all the Member States on the same subject, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies dwelt on some key topics covered in the report, such as: continuing training within the logic of lifelong learning, equal opportunities and job placement policies, commenting on the main findings emerging from the report.

To disseminate the results of the report to the widest possible public, it is currently being published in its integral version; particular attention has been devoted to the language, rendered less technical to make the report more approachable for anyone interested in finding out about the features of the ESF co-financed policies. In addition, articles have been published in national and international reviews and papers have been presented during national conferences.

The information produced and contained in the evaluation report has been used by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies which has pointed out the contribution the Unit has given to the reprogramming of interventions. As proof of this, the recently reprogrammed Objective 3 CSF contains a chapter summarising the main outcomes of the first three years of implementation and the main indications emerging from the mid-term evaluation.

The Unit thus had the objective of providing, in a systematic and recurrent manner, a treasury of significant knowledge on human-resource development policies (training, education, social and labour policies) in central and regional administrations managing ESF OPs. In doing this, it has been able to rely on a political context aware of the importance of the evaluation activity and ready to acknowledge its outcomes.

Challenges for the future

In the light of the above and in view of the final evaluation it seems appropriate to focus attention on some aspects.

The complexity and heterogeneity of the co-financed programmes meant that it had to be decided whether to have an extensive evaluation or to pinpoint key topics. An initial indication came from the regulations, where the evaluation of outcomes is the main target of the updating report of the mid-term evaluation, and should be performed on a level of specific objective and not that of axis or measure. Thanks to the well-proven methodological coordination of the placement surveys, the evaluation of outcomes can count on a broader and more meaningful universe of analyses.

In addition, the evaluation demand is clearly spelt out both by the Commission and by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, which have already shown interest in various topics that will help to focus the analysis fields.

Also in this case the evaluation will have to be completed at least a year before the end of the programme to help reprogramming. It should be stressed that the evaluation to be implemented by December 2005 will be a document with a strong “political” value, able to propose recommendations, outline scenarios and pinpoint the potentialities and limits of certain interventions.

Another important aspect regards the need for a further monitoring effort on the part of the different actors to render the data transmission more efficient.

Finally, for the communication strategy, the challenge for the future is that of extending the range of potential users of evaluation activities. For example, specific workshops and thematic seminars could be organised open to a wider public than that strictly involved in the ESF co-financed policies and their implementation and evaluation.

Conclusions

In this paper, the Unit’s experience in the mid-term evaluation of Objective 3 CSF of the 2000-2006 ESF has been presented by reconstructing, in a self-evaluative perspective, the evaluative pathway taken and the lessons learnt. The complexity of the programme to analyse and the new institutional scenario which has gradually appeared in recent years has meant that the approach to the evaluation had, more than in the past, to be aimed at:

- sharing evaluation methods and instruments with the various stakeholders;
- analysing the significant policy levels, not necessarily coinciding with the programme measures and axes;

- quantifying the phenomena supported by a reading of the main outputs in a qualitative key;
- providing a support for policy makers for reprogramming;
- disseminating outcomes bearing in mind the various levels and targets.

The evaluation experience has highlighted the importance of taking into account, when organising the evaluation activity, the constraints linked to the availability of information sources, to the times available for producing information useful for political decision-makers and the - not always coinciding - cognitive needs of the multiple stakeholders. It was also seen that a greater dissemination of the evaluation outcomes to a wider public should be encouraged with a more user-friendly format.

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