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***Programme implementation evaluation: a tentative model  
to learn from evaluation***

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## **Foreword**

In 1999, the European Commission and the Italian Ministry of Labour asked ISFOL's Evaluation Unit to undertake the evaluation of the Italian European Social Fund (ESF) Objective 3 Programme for the period 2000–2006. In 2000 and 2001 the Unit concentrated on producing standard evaluation guidelines, tools and support for the 15 central, regional and local evaluators and authorities involved in the next mid-term evaluation. The Unit further investigated the evaluation of programme implementation during 2001 and in 2002 a methodological document was presented to the public administrations involved in the ESF Objective 3 Programme, with the idea of adopting a standard evaluation model<sup>2</sup>.

This paper illustrates the evaluative path followed by the Unit, the characteristics of the evaluation model and how it supports the management of ESF Programmes. This path started from the most recent trends in the approach to evaluation. In particular, European Structural Fund guidelines have stressed the importance of widening the focus of the evaluation and of evaluating the 'conditions' that allow the programme objectives to be achieved. Programme evaluation must not only give an answer to 'what' and 'how much' has been done by a certain programme, but also to 'how' and 'why' some results have been reached. The proposed model of implementation evaluation identifies the links in the causal chain between some 'factors' acting during the implementation of the programme and the 'performances'.

The overall approach of the proposed model is that of learning from evaluation. It is mainly addressed to policy-makers, helping them to make decisions by showing them the most important factors for the programme and its actual implementation. Since the model takes into account the 'process' of programme application, it is closely related to organisational learning.

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<sup>2</sup> For further details see ISFOL- ESF National Evaluation Unit 'Orientamenti metodologici per la valutazione del processo di implementazione di Programma', July 2002.

# 1. Why evaluate a programme implementation

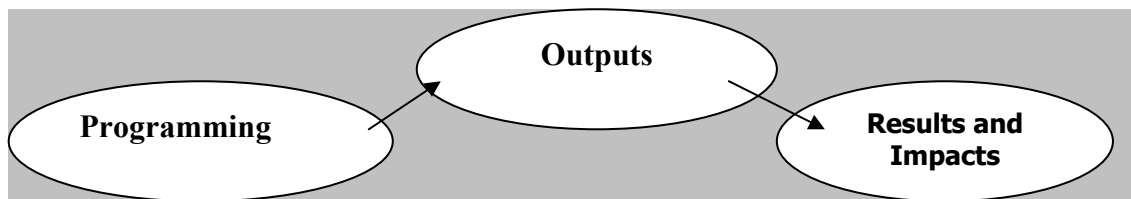
## 1.1. Some basic theories

The public administration's programmes and policies aim to solve a problem or satisfy a need, and these are policy goals. Hence the first thing that a policy maker asks him or herself, when setting up a programme or at its conclusion, is basically whether or not the goals have been achieved, that is if the policy has been successful. It is on the basis of the assessment of the results obtained (and not only this) that civil servants have to decide whether to continue with this policy or whether to opt for different choices, in both cases justifying their action.

The 'traditional' approach to a programme evaluation is therefore essentially goal-oriented, since it checks that the goals set by the programming have been achieved.

Diagram 1 shows the three stages of the policy cycle for an evaluation of a programme. It is based essentially on the quantification and assessment of outputs, results and impacts.

*Diagram 1*



However, limiting the role of the evaluation to checking the outputs and achievement of the results can be misleading. It gives no reasons for any failures or unexpected outputs and effects, or simply different from those aimed at by the policy.

Often, policy makers and evaluators have to cope with what has been called the implementation gap between how much has been decided and how much has been achieved. This is usually only shown up ex-post when the actual outputs and results of a policy are compared with those initially planned<sup>3</sup>.

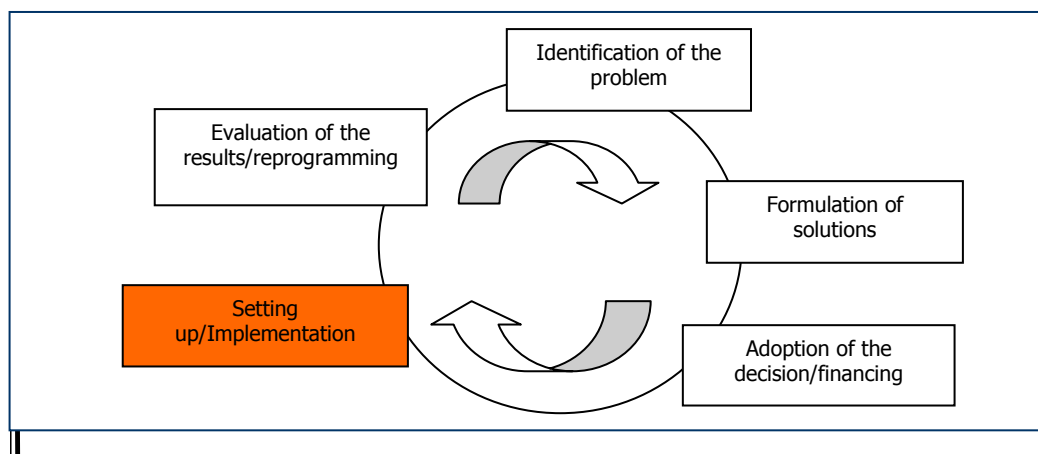
It is thus important for the evaluation to open the often neglected black box of the implementation of programmes by investigating the contents, components and relations existing between a programme and a policy during work in progress. This approach offers policy makers additional elements, helping them in the decision-making process by constantly checking how the policies are put into practice. In other words, it appears fundamental to reconstruct and evaluate all the information on the implementation process of programmes. This is because, by offering keys for reading the phenomena observed, it enriches the analysis of the outputs and results.

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<sup>3</sup> Meny Y., Thoenig J.C., *Le politiche pubbliche*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1996. A famous precursor here was Pressman and Wildavsky's case study in 1973 on subsidies to firms in the city of Oakland: the financing granted to firms to create new jobs was never used because of a series of obstacles and deterrents that occurred when a wide and diverse range of actors tried to put the policy into practice.

Theoretical reflection and the analysis of public policies and their implementation have given an important contribution to widening the focus of the evaluation, placing particular emphasis on the implementation stage as a crucial passage within the policies. In the traditional policy-cycle diagram the implementation of a programme or a policy represents the stage in which the inputs are transformed into outputs<sup>4</sup>

Diagram 2<sup>5</sup>



Simplifying greatly, we could say that the implementation is everything that occurs between the programming of the policy and the production of results. In this sense it represents the dynamic and ‘process’ dimension of the policies since it is placed between the goals set during the programming and the outputs and results obtained and reconstructed/measured when the programme has been completed.

This stage involves execution processes, but these processes are neither automatic (whether or not they have been planned) nor neutral (especially when not clearly defined) since they have been implemented by the various actors who directly or indirectly manage the activities and who are also stakeholders. What normally happens is a transfer process, codified by the actor-network theory, in which any input aimed at obtaining a result is systematically used and ‘manipulated’ by the different actors involved, who can transform the original design of the interventions and consequently their results.

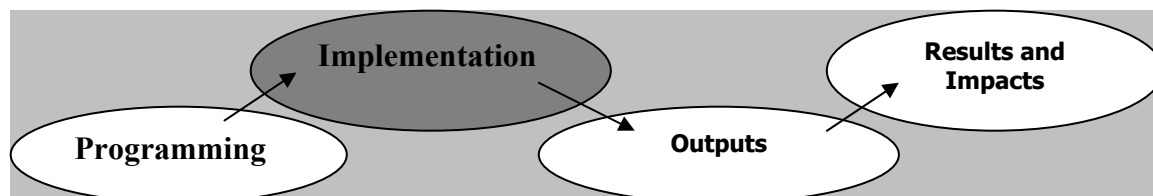
If the programmes tend to change and take on a different physiognomy, the evaluator has to realise that it is not sufficient simply to check that the programme goals have been achieved to formulate an overall judgement on the programme. The evaluation of the implementation has also to be incorporated in it as the keystone of the goal-oriented analysis.

<sup>4</sup> There are various definitions of the term implementation in literature, on which there is still little agreement: Meny and Thoenig identify it with the French ‘mise en oeuvre’ defined as ‘that stage of a public policy during which acts and effects are produced ascribable to a regulatory scheme of intentions, texts and declarations’. It is also identified as those ‘processes of interaction between the fixing of general objectives and the actions aimed at achieving them’. Similarly, in the most recent Community documents, implementation is described as ‘the operational process needed to produce expected outputs’ (EC – Structural Funds, *Means Collection, Glossary*, vol.6, EC Luxembourg, 1999)

<sup>5</sup> Diagram given in Meny Y., Thoenig J.C., op.cit.

The following Diagram 3 reproduces Diagram 2 with the addition of the implementation stage, seen as an additional specific evaluation area.

Diagram 3



## 1.2. The implementation process evaluation in ESF programmes

The first evaluations of the implementation of public policies financed by the Structural Funds were carried out on a European and national scale during the ESF 1994-1999 programming<sup>6</sup>.

Some countries began to realise that relations between the various actors present in the system and the factors characterising the ‘putting into practice’ of a programme had to be reconstructed to get a better idea of what phenomena intervene in its outputs and influence its results. Not everyone opted for this methodology. In its document *Orientations communes pour le suivi et les évaluations intermédiaires* (1995) the European Commission, albeit stressing the need to consider cause and effect relations, had given the ‘mise en oeuvre’ a secondary role. It grouped the general conditions under which a programme is carried out into two macroitems: ‘operational context’ and ‘management trend’, considering them as outside the logic of the indicators of output, result and achievement of the objectives<sup>7</sup>.

In the summary document of the European Social Fund final evaluation of June 2000, the European Commission reported that administrations are paying increasing attention to the process of implementation, generally analysing a dual prospect: that of administrative aspects (financial channels, controls, etc.) and that of the quality of the intervention methods (admissibility and information, partnership, etc.)<sup>8</sup>.

The final evaluations demonstrate the interest in the evaluation of the implementation of activities and in understanding the ways in which the programme operates. The field of investigation in the 1989-1993 period was limited to studying the impact; it now also includes the process through which the change is defined. In particular, in France, Barbier focuses the final evaluation of Objective 3 on the concept of ‘mise en oeuvre’, choosing six topics (partnership, rules, controls, financial circuits, actors’ strategies, evaluation)

<sup>6</sup> The need to analyse the implementation process was already recognised and developed in the 1989-1993 programme, when the policy makers encountered administrative problems, slowness in procedures and delays in payments with negative impacts on the effectiveness of the interventions

<sup>7</sup> EC, *Orientations communes pour le suivi et les évaluations intermédiaires*, Bruxelles, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> EC, *Conclusions of the Final Evaluations of the ESF*, June 2000.

that could intervene in the implementation of a programme and that could give a better understanding of the outputs, results and impacts. The French experience represents one of the first attempts to shift the focus of the research to a hitherto little explored field of the implementation<sup>9</sup>; however, the study also has its limits since it only examines certain factors, leaving the road open for further surveys on the whole series of elements that could intervene in this process.

In Finland, in the final evaluations of Objective 3 and Objective 4, a holistic approach is adopted for a better comprehension of the programme. This meant reconstructing and analysing the evolution of the reference context (in this case the labour market and the local welfare system) with an ear to the values and opinions of the various stakeholders who could be involved in the ESF implementation process.

In Italy, in the interim and final evaluation reports for Objectives 1, 3, 4 by ISFOL's National Evaluation Unit, the performances of the programme management authorities are evaluated as well as some components of the system, considered as crucial in the implementation of the Community Support Framework. There are also thematic surveys on the administrative decentralization process, the organizational learning of the administrations and the changes in the regulatory context. The final reports of the independent evaluators embraced this logic, with particular care being taken to analyse what factors could have influenced the performance of the process - helping or hindering it or steering it towards one direction instead of another<sup>10</sup>. In this context it is considered crucial to define the administrations' approach and programming choices, the tools and regulation guidelines adopted and the main feature of the socio-economic background.

In the 2000-2006 programming of the Structural Funds, the evaluation of the ESF implementation process is considered one of the key topics within the framework of the general strengthening of monitoring and evaluation activities. This has been reiterated in various Community and national documents, as well as in some provisions adopted by the Management Authorities for monitoring the OPs. The analysis and evaluation of the implementation process are fundamental for an exhaustive reconstruction of the life cycle of a complex programme in which a wide range of actors intervene with different stakes<sup>11</sup>.

The EC-DGV document *Guidelines for Systems of Monitoring and Evaluation of ESF Assistance in the Period 2000-2006* (1999) first of all demonstrates that the ESF evaluation does not only concern the analysis of outputs, results and impacts, but also the different Management Authorities' process and mechanisms. For the latter in particular it is important to provide qualitative information on the evaluation of the implementation conditions and the political context of the interventions.

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<sup>9</sup> Barbier J.C., *La mise en oeuvre du programme objectif 3*, Rapport final, 99/27, May '99.

<sup>10</sup> For example, Ati Irs- Ismeri Europa's case studies on the evaluation of CSF Ob. 3 1994-1999 highlighted the identification and analysis of operational processes and procedures for implementing government models. The attribution of resources and the regulatory instruments adopted were also covered. The research assumes that there is a strong link between motivations, actions carried out and effective results.

<sup>11</sup> EC – Structural Funds, *Means Collection, Evaluation design and management*, vol.1, Ec, Luxembourg, 1999.

According to these *Guidelines* the evaluation of the ESF implementation has to cover:

- On a programme level, information on the socio-economic developments and changes in the policies of the Member State, programme assistance, the start-up of implementation procedures, the performance of payment and monitoring systems, the quality of the monitoring.
- On a measure level, information on how objectives are met in terms of units and organisations involved, links with other measures, choice of target and tools on the basis of needs and priorities, quality of services offered and adequacy of resources mobilised.

DG Regio, in *Working Paper XX - The Mid Term Evaluation of Structural Fund Interventions* (December 2000) stresses that the interim evaluation, besides quantifying the goals in terms of outputs, results and impacts, should investigate the quality of the implementation, since the impact of a policy also depends on the managerial capacity of the actors involved. In particular, six topics are picked out for an in-depth investigation:

- Clarity of management and implementation responsibilities on the one hand and consultation procedures on the other.
- Control mechanisms.
- Transparent and competitive procedures and criteria for project selection.
- Guidelines for project selection to ensure their quality and application and that they correspond to the programme goals.
- Contribution of the partnership.
- Regulations in force, their conformity with Community rules and administrative system.

The importance of the evaluation of the implementation process is also stressed in the document *Terms of Reference* designed by the Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policies for choosing independent evaluators for 2000-2006 Objective 3 regional and national OPs, approved by the Monitoring Committees on 26 July 2000 and subsequently adopted by the Management Authorities as a benchmark for regional calls for tender. In this document, one of the actions for the interim evaluation is the collection and use of qualitative data that explains how the goals are met and defines the factors of success and/or obstacles encountered. It is also expected that the annual evaluation documents in progress and the final evaluations will consider not only the effectiveness and efficiency of the interventions, but also the implementation process of the operational programme.

## **2. The model designed by ISFOL's National ESF Evaluation Unit**

### **2.1 The aims, recipients and distinctive features of the model**

The in-depth analysis of the theory and practice of implementation (and its evaluation) has demonstrated how important it is to understand any differences between the expected and actual results and to study how a programme/policy is put into practice. This applies even more to a complex programming such as the ESF's, which is a continuing process that constantly interlinks with its implementation and is fed and supported by it. The ESF Operational Programmes (OP) and Programme Complements (PC) are very structured documents based on complex negotiating processes and developed within the framework of binding regulations and standards, mediated by the context and by the actors who actually interpret them. The implementation of these programmes thus occurs in a multiactor and open context.

Bearing this in mind, the model designed by ISFOL's National ESF Evaluation Unit is intended as a conceptual reference and initial working tool for:

- Enabling the 15 central, regional and provincial administrations managing ESF Objective 3 in Italy to meet the demands of the Commission regarding the quality of the implementation of the 2000-2006 programme (forming an integral part, for example, of the in progress, midterm and final evaluations of the various operational programmes and annual reports<sup>12</sup>).
- Steering and assisting ESF policy makers (aforesaid administrations and all the actors concerned with Objective 3 implementation) in a systematic and periodic analysis and reflection on the features of the new programming period implementation.

In particular, and especially for the last point, the evaluation model presented here offers potentially significant methodological and operational support for the subjects indicated, since:

- It defines the set of factors with a positive or negative effect on the ESF outputs, providing ESF Management Authorities with the possible causes and keys for interpreting the state of progress of the OPs, to supplement the quantitative analysis on the data from the monitoring systems and relative indicators adopted.
- It points out the factors that the Management Authorities involved in the construction of the model have considered most significant and that therefore (although only indicative and after surveying the context) should be studied during the policy-makers' management/control stage.
- It proposes, for each of the 30 implementation factors pinpointed, a specific evaluation tool for reconstructing and checking the casual link with the outputs, that is the effective influence of the individual factors on each of these.

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, para.2.6 of DG-Regio document of 5.12.2000 which, albeit not specifically referring to the ESF, is anyway indicative of the Commission's orientations.

As said before, the main actors to whom the evaluation model designed by the Unit is addressed are the Management Authorities and their technical/evaluation advisors (firstly the independent evaluators and the internal programming, evaluation and technical assistance units). However, it is also addressed to the series of actors formally involved in the implementation of the ESF programme (especially social and economic partners) and concerned both with understanding its functioning and pinpointing possible improvements.

The methodological options underpinning the evaluation model proposed are given below. But before going into these aspects, it seems appropriate to highlight some general but distinctive features of this model.

First of all, considering the basic importance of the topic treated, the complexity of the aims pursued and the vast range of actors involved in its implementation, the model presented here has necessarily to be experimental and needs an on site validation by the Management Authorities and their internal and/or external evaluation advisors. It should not therefore be considered as a work manual that forces its recipients to adopt ‘closed’ automatic procedures, defined once and for all. It should be seen as an initial tool open to further examinations and changes in method and content ensuing from its concrete use, on the basis of that same logic of consultation between evaluators and policy makers already adopted for its construction<sup>13</sup>.

The experimental nature of this evaluation model is also due to its innovative character compared to similar experiences in the ESF framework: as said earlier, these experiences are based on effects already produced by the OPs in order to reconstruct, ex-post, the implementation process that has conditioned them and to take into consideration the role played by some administrative procedures or decision-making processes. However, what the Unit decided was to provide the Management Authorities with a support to use during the implementation of the OPs to encourage the adoption of corrective interventions based on all the factors potentially able to condition the ESF implementations (imputable – as we shall see - to all the actors involved in this process, to the characteristics of the reference context and to the rules, procedures and technical supports the Management Authorities have adopted).

Finally, even though the model is mainly addressed to those actors concerned with the implementation of Objective 3, the logic underpinning it makes it a tool that can also, in concept, be used by the Management Authorities of Objective 1 and be transferred to the evaluation of the implementation not only of the ESF, but also of other intervention programmes and/or policies on a national and regional level.

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. paragraph 3 below.

## **2.2. The working hypothesis and the reconstruction of the individual factors/mechanisms**

In line with the evaluation approach explained above, the Unit's first action for the construction of the model was to pinpoint the factors, elements and variables (defined here as implementation factors/mechanisms) intervening between the programming of the ESF supported policies and their outputs and which, by influencing these latter, can explain them. The model designed thus does not directly reconstruct the OP/PC implementation process<sup>14</sup> but enables the potential casual links between the implementation factors/mechanisms and the production of determinate outputs to be evaluated.

The Unit's hypothesis is that the implementation of the ESF programme, and in particular the relative outputs, is mainly influenced by factors/mechanisms involving the system of actors involved in the ESF, by the context in which the programming is carried out and by the system of rules, procedures and technical supports that, often to a binding degree, steer and support the implementation.

On a theoretical and conceptual level, this approach has many points in common with Pawson and Tilley's 'realistic evaluation', and especially with their claim that the results of a programme are influenced both by the context in which it is implemented and by the mechanisms activated to produce them. The main task of the evaluation is therefore to understand the real functioning of a programme by analysing the mechanisms and context that play a part in its implementation and by reconstructing the specific conditions capable of activating and supporting its development<sup>15</sup>.

In particular, the choice of the three macrofactors cited (actors; context; rules, procedures and technical supports) is based on the conviction that they effectively represent the great variables that intervene in the implementation process by conditioning the outputs of the policies supported by the ESF programmes.

First of all, the OP/PC is implemented through continuing (implicit or explicit) processes of decision, negotiation/mediation, execution of interventions and transformation and use of opportunities contained in the programme in which the different actors are protagonists - with specific and often diverging values, codes and priorities – inserted in a network of balances of power and reciprocal relationships. The actors involved in the implementation of the ESF exercise an influence because they transform/ reinterpret the ways in which the programme goals are achieved. They have their own logic of action and condition the activities in relation to the interests they pursue or to their perception of the goal to be achieved.

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<sup>14</sup> This reconstruction needs more extensive research and is anyway preliminary to the evaluation activity and has to be carried out in the individual reference contexts.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Pawson R., Tilley N., *Realistic evaluation*, Sage, London, 1998.

Moreover, the programme is shaped and developed by interacting with a context with which it has an open relationship of mutual conditioning/adaptation. The structure and evolution of the external context of a programme is all-important for its success or failure, since the implementation of the initially planned goals can be enhanced/changed/hindered by it. The context is also in turn conditioned by the programme to the extent in which the outputs have an impact and thus change it.

Finally, an OP/PC is implemented within the framework of specific regulations and uses an organisation, procedures and technical supports that play a crucial role in regulating the outputs and outcomes. In other words, the ways in which administrations organise themselves to achieve their objectives (the practices and administrative-procedural rules adopted) can also act as a resource or a constraint for the activities and thus have to be carefully considered for evaluation aims. The reconstruction of these modes is aimed not so much at evaluating the efficiency of the administrative action (in terms of transparency, impartiality and respect of administrative-bureaucratic procedures) as at checking its effectiveness and adequacy with regards to the outputs.

On the basis of these assumptions, the Unit then defined and described, through special cooperation schemes with the administrations managing ESF programmes in Italy, 30 factors/mechanisms with a potential impact on the implementation process of these programmes and thus influencing their outputs: the ‘actors’ macrofactor has 12 factors/mechanisms regarding the major actors who influence the OP/PC; the ‘context’ macrofactor is broken down into 4 factors/mechanisms constituting the complex reference framework of the programmes within which the actors ‘move’; finally, in the ‘regulations’ macrofactor, procedures and technical supports have 14 factors/mechanisms of sufficient number and heterogeneity to effectively represent the operational and administrative/management organisation connected with the implementation of the OP. The table below presents, for each of the three macrofactors, all the factors/mechanisms to which they refer:

*Table 1. Macrofactors and Implementation Factors/Mechanisms*

<i>Macrofactor</i>	<i>Implementation factors/mechanisms</i>
Actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Values, strategies and priorities on the Management Authorities' political agenda</li> <li>• Values, strategies and priorities on the Management Authorities' technical agenda</li> <li>• Management Authorities' organizational set-ups and equipment</li> <li>• Values, strategies and priorities on the provinces<sup>16</sup>, political agenda</li> <li>• Values, strategies and priorities on the provinces' political agenda</li> <li>• Provinces' organizational set-ups and equipment</li> <li>• Values, strategies and priorities on the Social Partners' political agenda</li> <li>• Strategies, lines of action and priorities expressed by the regional Monitoring Committees</li> <li>• Values, strategies and priorities on the agenda of intermediate agents</li> <li>• Intermediate agents' organizational set-ups and equipment</li> <li>• Executing agents' values, strategies and priorities</li> <li>• Executing agents characteristics and set-ups</li> </ul>
Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evolution of the socio-economic context</li> <li>• Changes in the policies/regulations of Member States/Management Authorities</li> <li>• Structure and dynamics inside vocational training, work and educational systems</li> <li>• Characteristics and numbers of potential recipients of interventions</li> </ul>
Rules, procedures and technical supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provisions connected to the implementation of Community regulations</li> <li>• Management Authorities' programme implementation formalities</li> <li>• Management procedures</li> <li>• Control system and procedures</li> <li>• Development and use of monitoring systems</li> <li>• Development and use of evaluation systems</li> <li>• Project selection and evaluation procedures</li> <li>• Financial procedures</li> <li>• Partnership</li> <li>• Concerted action practices</li> <li>• Measures undertaken to publicise the programme</li> <li>• Networks/links between Management Authorities and executing agents</li> <li>• Technical assistance to the programme</li> <li>• Other monitoring of the programme execution</li> </ul>

It should be pointed out that these factors/mechanisms were reconstructed not only on the basis of cooperation with the administrations managing ESF programmes but also by researching several sources, and especially national and international literature on the evaluation of implementation processes and the many documents regulating both the ESF 2000-2006 programme and its implementation<sup>17</sup>. Albeit validated by the administrations involved in its construction, they cannot be considered exhaustive since it is possible that

<sup>16</sup> In many cases Managing Authorities at the regional level delegate the implementation of ESF programme to provincial administrations.

<sup>17</sup> The Unit analysed the Structural Fund and ESF regulations; the EC Guidelines on monitoring/evaluation; the working documents on the structure and contents of Structural Fund Annual Reports; the Community Support Frameworks; the Operational Programmes, the Programme Complements and the calls for tender issued by ESF Objectives 1 and 3 Management Authorities.

other equally important factors/mechanisms have not been considered<sup>18</sup>. Finally, under a methodological and operational profile, this reconstruction formed the basis of the Unit's evaluation model.

### **2.3. The constituent elements of the model**

To make it more user-friendly, the Unit's evaluation model is broken down into cards for each of the factors/mechanisms pinpointed. Each card is also self-sufficient in the sense that it contains all the elements and indications needed to calculate how the individual factors/mechanisms condition the outputs. These factor/mechanism cards are in turn organised to form a kind of working path. The following information is indicated as necessary or anyway useful for the evaluation:

- the importance assigned to the factors/mechanisms after meetings with the Management Authorities;
- the dimensions of the factors/mechanisms;
- the link/connection with the outputs;
- the indications for the survey/reconstruction of the factors/mechanisms' dimensions;
- the evaluative logic and indications to use for interpreting to what extent and how the individual factors/mechanisms condition the ESF outputs.

The importance refers to the weight attributed to the factors/mechanisms in the cited preparatory work carried out with the ESF Management Authorities. As will be illustrated later, this is to be considered as purely indicative and thus not in principle valid in all situations: it could be used (in the lack of counter indications) to steer the survey/reconstruction – and thus the evaluation – towards some factors/mechanisms rather than others.

The dimensions of the individual factors/mechanisms represent the detailed components which – at the same time - make it clearly comprehensible and define a minimum list of objects that have to be reconstructed and evaluated.

The link/connection with the outputs hypothesises the relationship existing between the individual factors/mechanisms and outputs, also helping to clarify their meaning. In the design of the model this is a crucial node, since the features of the link/connection should guide the evaluation of how the factors/mechanisms condition the outputs.

The indications for the survey/reconstruction suggest how the data collection/information activity should be carried out, and are aimed at describing the features and profile of the factors/mechanisms. Of particular utility, especially when complex factors/mechanisms are involved, is the reference to their dimensions.

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<sup>18</sup> Other factors/mechanisms of implementation could be pinpointed in the aforesaid ESF Annual Reports, in which the Management Authorities are required – among other things – to indicate the *positive/negative elements that have influenced the development of priorities/measures* and those *which have caused a gap between the expenditure in the Programme Complements and that actually made*.

Finally, perhaps the most ambitious component of the individual cards and of the model in general is represented by the evaluative logic and indications for the evaluation. This leads to the formulation - remembering that this is a work path - of the operative indications on the elements (general logic, activity, procedures and methods/techniques) for seeing exactly how the individual factors/mechanisms influence the outputs in terms of 'significant/not significant', 'high/nil' or similar.

Three of the card contents - besides the dimensions of the individual factors/mechanisms – are especially important for using the evaluation model:

- the link/connection of the factors/mechanisms with the outputs;
- the indications for the survey/reconstruction of the factors/mechanisms;
- the evaluative logic to use and the indications for the evaluation of the factors/mechanisms.

They represent the bearing wall of the model, aimed at providing indications for the individual factors/mechanisms and for their evaluation in the strict sense. There is a very close relationship between them, that is between what it is desired to evaluate, the way in which it is evaluated, the hypotheses steering the evaluation choices and the information on situations that can be enlisted to support the evaluative themes proposed.

The following is an example of cards for evaluating two factors/mechanisms that, albeit within the aforesaid limits, the ESF Management Authorities consider have had a particular influence on the implementation of their OPs.

*Table 2 - Evaluation Card for the ‘Characteristics and Set-Ups of Executing Agents’ Factor*

<b>IMPORTANCE ASSIGNED BY MANAGEMENT AUTHORITIES: HIGH</b>
<b>DIMENSIONS</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Typology of executing agents and previous experience</li> <li>▪ Organisational and functional structure</li> <li>▪ Characteristics of human resources used by executing agents, in terms of:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o numbers</li> <li>o function/occupational profile</li> <li>o occupational experience acquired in function/occupational profile</li> <li>o motivation</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ Any external supports used</li> <li>▪ Material resources available (local, equipment, etc.)</li> </ul>
<b>LINK/CONNECTION WITH THE OUTPUTS</b>
<p>This factor/mechanism has a structural and organizational type of component that – according to specific values and mentalities - makes the executing agents’ work effective. Their configuration in terms of human, material, organizational and network resources influences the outputs of the ESF insofar as it represents the framework supporting the planning, implementation and management of the interventions. This factor therefore has a potential impact on the overall state of progress of the OP (priority fields/measures implemented and financial progress) and on the specific features of this progress (typologies of action, of executing agents and of target groups reached).</p>
<b>INDICATIONS FOR THE SURVEY/RECONSTRUCTION</b>
<p>The survey/reconstruction of the dimensions of this factor/mechanism should rely on analysis of documents as well as debates and individual and group interviews with both the Management Authority’s ESF advisors and with the direct contacts of the executing agents.</p>
<b>EVALUATIVE LOGIC TO USE AND INDICATIONS FOR THE EVALUATION</b>
<p>The evaluation of the influence of this factor/mechanism on the OP (CP, priority fields, measures) outputs with reference to a time scale (for example one year) implies:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Pinpointing the essential dimensions of the factor/mechanism with reference to the specific OP/Management Authority through a critical reading (focusing on elements such as: the sectoral specialisation of the executing agents and their experience in using the ESF; their micro-organizational set-ups; the quantity and quality of the human resources employed on the ESF).</li> <li>b) Comparing the programming (forecasts) and the outputs (real figure) with particular emphasis on those outputs that are most influenced by the technical/organizational profile of the executing agents starting with their link with these outputs.</li> <li>c) Linking up, with an inductive and logical procedure, the outputs to the most significant dimensions of the factor/mechanism.</li> <li>d) Linking up, again with an inductive and logical procedure similar to the previous one, the differences existing between the programmed and the achieved to the dimensions of the factor/mechanism.</li> </ol> <p>This process, which should show whether the influence of the factors/mechanisms is nil/high (low/high, significant/non significant, ...), can be achieved: a) independently by the evaluator; b) by the evaluator with a series of witnesses/advisors of the Management Authority and the major executing agents or with external technicians/experts (through interviews – individual or group – or focused panels); c) using both modes a) and b).</p>

*Table 3 Evaluation Card of the 'Development and Use of Monitoring Systems' Factor*

<b>IMPORTANCE GIVEN BY MANAGEMENT AUTHORITIES: HIGH</b>
<b>DIMENSIONS</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Architecture and characteristics of the Management Authority's physical, financial and procedural monitoring system</li> <li>• Operation/integration with the physical, financial and procedural monitoring system set up at the national level</li> <li>• Processes and outputs of the monitoring system</li> <li>• Procedures and mechanisms for the use and valorisation of the monitoring outputs</li> <li>• Interaction/integration between monitoring and evaluation</li> <li>• Problems encountered and solutions adopted in the implementation of indicators</li> </ul>
<b>LINK/CONNECTION WITH THE OUTPUTS</b>
<p>Monitoring represents a fundamental function for the management of ESF activities, as established by the Regulations on Structural Funds. It shows in real time what is happening inside a programme and therefore controls whether the goals have been achieved. Monitoring is the 'operational arm' of the evaluation because it provides the input needed to analyse and formulate recommendations and, consequently, to programme/reprogramme the activities. The architecture, functionality and use of the monitoring system (variables, indicators, survey systems) give Management Authorities useful information about the effective state of progress of the OPs. They can then act on the elements considered most important, influencing the outputs (financial progress of priority fields/measures, target groups and executing agents reached, typologies of intervention used).</p>
<b>INDICATIONS FOR THE SURVEY/RECONSTRUCTION</b>
<p>The survey/reconstruction of the specific dimensions of this factor/mechanism must give absolute priority to individual/group interviews possibly with the analysis of documentation (technical documents regarding the configuration/functioning of the system, reports, annual report). This factor/mechanism could be the subject of a case study when a Management Authority's situation is known for its excellence.</p>
<b>EVALUATIVE LOGIC TO USE AND INDICATIONS FOR THE EVALUATION</b>
<p>The evaluation of the influence this factor/mechanism has on the OP outputs (PC, priority fields, measures) with reference to a specific time scale (for example a year) implies:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Pinpointing the essential dimensions of the factor/mechanism with reference to the specific OP/Management Authority with a critical reading (for example: architecture, the functionality and use of monitoring systems).</li> <li>b) Reconstructing to what extent the monitoring system responds to/tallies with both the indications/requisites established in the ESF programming and with the technical/operational functionality requisites, starting with the link with the outputs (for example the connection/link with the monitoring system set up at the national level).</li> <li>c) Comparing the programming (forecasts) and the outputs (real figure) with particular emphasis on those outputs influenced most by the development and utilisation of the monitoring systems.</li> <li>d) Linking up, with an inductive and logical procedure, the outputs to the most significant dimensions of the factor/mechanism.</li> <li>e) Linking up, again with an inductive and logical procedure similar to the previous one, the differences existing between the programmed and the achieved to the dimensions of the factor/mechanism.</li> </ol> <p>This process, which should show whether the influence of the factors/mechanisms is nil/high (low/high, significant/non significant, ...), can be achieved: a) independently by the evaluator; b) by the evaluator with a series of witnesses/advisors of the Management Authority or with external technicians/experts (through interviews – individual or group – or focused panels); c) using both modes a) and b).</p>

## **2.4. The limits and conditions for using the model**

To foster the correct application of the evaluation model it should be pointed out that the analysis level considered is that of all the OP-supported policies. However this does not

mean that it cannot be used by independent evaluators and Management Authorities for in-depth surveys on specific aggregates contained in the programmes (priority fields, measures, action typologies).

It should also be reiterated that the importance given to the individual factors listed by the Management Authorities is purely indicative. Each administration should first of all see which of the Unit's factors are the most significant in its own context and then apply only these to the evaluation model. Hence not all the factors proposed have to be evaluated, but only those which each administration considers more capable of influencing its own implementation of the programme.

It should also be pointed out here that the evaluation model enables all those factors/mechanisms that have most influenced the OP outputs to be defined, but it does not show the reciprocal influence that can exist between two or more factors/mechanisms. This is certainly a limit, but since it was an experimental work it was preferred just to outline the survey field.

Moreover, the model is not a closed and automatic tool (a kind of electronic sheet that calculates the influence of the individual factors/mechanisms on the outputs of a specific OP). It is instead an instrument that demonstrates - through logical operations and calculations based on very rigorous methodological criteria - the influence of the individual factor/mechanism on the outputs and that requires an active and intelligent input by those applying it.

For its concrete utilisation it should also be emphasised that the evaluation model designed by the Unit is based on the following methodological assumptions:

- The use of a constructivist<sup>19</sup> approach or one which focuses on the logic of the programme and its performance in the light of the context, generally reconstructed with the relevant actors<sup>20</sup>. This approach produces indications for the evaluation, formulated for all the factors/mechanisms: for some of them, however, the constructivist approach is combined with the pragmatist/quality approach, used mainly to support the first stage of a factor/mechanism evaluation<sup>21</sup>.
- The recourse to qualitative methods, more appropriate for the process evaluation (for understanding how a determinate output or outcome has been obtained) and the implementation evaluation (or the evaluation of how a specific programmatic or

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<sup>19</sup> According to the meaning given in Bezzi C., *Il disegno della ricerca valutativa*, Angeli, Milano, 2001, that is indicating an approach that distinguishes it from the *positivist and pragmatist* ones. For some interesting considerations on this approach see also Dahler-Larsen P., *From programme theory to constructivism*, in 'Evaluation', 7/3, 2001.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Bezzi, op. cit.

<sup>21</sup> The pragmatist or quality approach focuses on to what extent the evaluand meets determinate quality criteria or fixed standards. This approach can also be used for some factors/mechanisms of the *Regulations, procedures, technical supports* macrofactor since they are sometimes configured in terms of processes, procedures or devices whose sequences or components can be predetermined (such as 'control system and procedures' or 'financial procedures').

planning instrument is put into practice)<sup>22</sup>. These methods: a) are based on three ways of collecting data/information: interviews, direct observation, written documentation; b) imply that the evaluation activity uses analyses and interpretations of an inductive and logical type<sup>23</sup> and is implemented through thick descriptions, or through analyses of content.

- The use of procedures of an inductive and logical type for the evaluation. In the first case the models, interpretations and features of the influence exercised by a factor/mechanism on the outputs of the OP/PC emerge from the reconstruction. In the procedures of a logical type instead, connections and casual links between the individual factors/mechanisms, broken down into their dimensions, and the outputs are constructed. These connections are then subject to a cross check to formulate conjectures and hypotheses firmly anchored to the reconstruction<sup>24</sup>.

### **3. The present importance and future developments of the model**

It is widely claimed that the evaluation of policies has the distinctive trait – unlike other studies and/or social research – of actually being able to guide policy makers' behaviour and decisions. Hence, the importance of the model described can be based on various factors and we can ask to what extent the evaluation has involved a learning process on the part of the ESF Management Authorities and what the results of this process have been. In replying to these questions we must obviously bear in mind that the model has not yet been tested, since it was only constructed and formally validated by those responsible for monitoring ESF evaluation activities in July 2002.

However, already in this initial stage the Unit has involved those potentially interested in using the model (Management Authorities and their internal and external evaluators, social partners and representatives of the European Commission) creating the conditions for a reciprocal learning process on the theme of analyses. The idea was also to check – and possibly integrate - the working hypotheses formulated by the research group. The most significant stages in this ‘joint’ construction of the model were:

- a meeting with the Objective 3 Evaluation Technical Group (ETG) on 31.5 2001 to present information on the methodological approach of the model designed by the Unit;
- a meeting with Objective 3 Management Authorities (ISFOL, 11 July) and another with Objective 1 Management Authorities (ISFOL, 24 July 2001);
- a seminar on 23 October 2001 for publishing the results of focus groups meeting as above;
- the presentation of the evaluation model designed by the Unit to Objective 3 ETG on 5.12.2001;
- the seminar on the technical contents of this model on 1.2.2002;

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<sup>22</sup> See for example: Patton M.Q., *How to Use Qualitative Methods in Evaluation*, Sage, London, 1987.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>24</sup> On these procedures see Patton, and also Shaw I.F., *Qualitative Evaluation*, Sage, London, 1999.

- the presentation of the updated model to Objective 3 ETG on 2.7.2002 and its formal validation by the Monitoring Committee on 23.7.2002.

The model presented here has thus also taken into account the various observations emerging from the debates and meetings that the Unit specifically sought and/or created, over and above its institutional obligations, to involve the main actors potentially interested in the evaluation of ESF programme implementation.

The focus groups constituted a very significant input during the two days of working meetings with the ESF Management Authorities, since they stimulated participants to pinpoint the factors they considered most important during the ESF implementation process. This technique is now widely used and seemed particularly appropriate here since the focus group:

- is very useful at the beginning of an evaluation when one wants to know the *evaluand* on which to construct a research path, highlighting not only the main dimensions and components of the problem and its reasons, but also new points of view and prospects;
- is able to encourage stakeholders to meet, promoting a friendly climate for the evaluation and fostering a learning process among the actors involved.

For the results obtained to date from the model it should be pointed out that, as a probable consequence of the aforesaid debate between evaluators and policy makers, the model designed by the Unit is now considered a priority benchmark by many of those involved in the evaluation of the implementation process within the ESF framework.

Under Objective 3, for example, the data available at May 2002 shows that this topic is considered a priority in seven cases, and that in five of these express reference is made to the Unit's model as the initial instrument on a methodological and operational level. If you then consider the results of the seminar of 2002, in which two Management Authorities and an independent evaluator expressed the desire to test this model, it can be affirmed that – even before its formal validation in July – it had already been explicitly approved by five Management Authorities and/or independent evaluators of Objective 3 (over half of the institutional actors where information on evaluation activity existed and around two-thirds of those expressly interested in the evaluation of the ESF implementation process).

*Diagram 4 – Importance of ISFOL Model for Objective 3 Management Authorities (at May 2002)*

<b>MANAGEMENT AUTHORITIES</b>	<b>EXPLICIT REFERENCE TO EVALUATION OF IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS</b>	<b>EXPLICIT REFERENCE TO ISFOL MODEL</b>	<b>EXPLICIT REFERENCE TO TESTING ISFOL MODEL</b>
<b>ABRUZZO</b>			
<b>P.A BOLZANO</b>			
<b>EMILIA-ROMAGNA</b>			
<b>LIGURIA</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	
<b>LOMBARDIA</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	
<b>MARCHE</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	
<b>PIEMONTE</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>P.A.TRENTO</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>UMBRIA</b>	<b>X</b>		
<b>MINISTRY OF LABOUR AND SOCIAL POLICIES</b>	<b>X</b>		

Moreover, the Ministry of the Economy, which coordinates Objective 1 evaluation on a national level, has already requested, on the basis of the work described in this paper, the Unit to prepare a form for the implementation process evaluation to insert in the guidelines for evaluators and regional administrations in southern Italy for the mid-term evaluation of their OPs.

In conclusion, it should be pointed out that only the effective field testing of the evaluation model by its recipients can confirm its usefulness in supporting the choices made by ESF policy-makers and the practicability of its developments. The latter could include:

- the review and/or maintenance of the model according to the global methodological approach, of the detailed operational choices and/or technical/instrumental structuring;
- the review and/or maintenance from an angle of contents; for example, in relation to the reconstruction and description of the factors/mechanisms of implementation defined;
- the extension of the model to support the evaluation of the implementation of other national and/or regional policies not supported by the ESF.

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