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### The Evaluation of the European Social Fund in Italy: a *central* evaluation of a *decentralized* system

Aviana Bulgarelli and Alberto Vergani  
ISFOL- ESF Evaluation Unit<sup>1</sup>

#### 1. The reference framework

With this paper we intend to present some considerations related to the evaluation of major national programmes, designed and implemented at regional level. More specifically, we relate to the activity that the *European Social Fund Evaluation Unit* (operating in ISFOL<sup>2</sup> since 1995 on mandate from the Ministry of Labour and Social Security) has carried out with reference to the implementation of the *national* programming of Objectives 3 (policies aimed at the employability of long-term unemployed and young job seekers, social inclusion and equal opportunities) and 4 (continuing training) of the European Social Fund (ESF).

In particular, this activity can be defined as a *central evaluation of a decentralised system* on the basis of the following elements:

- a) the features of the *evaluand* (the *national* programming of the ESF, that is an institutional supra-regional *framework*);
- b) the features of the body formally entrusted with the evaluation activity (a *central* research structure operating on mandate of the *national* Ministry of Labour in agreement with the *regional* Authorities and the European Commission);
- c) the nature of the system largely responsible for the implementation of the ESF programming (a *decentralized* structure composed of Regions and Autonomous Provinces).

#### 2. Labour market, training policies and the ESF in Italy

The responsibilities for labour market govern in Italy have, with time and over and beyond the dictates of the law, gradually become divided between the State and regions/autonomous

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<sup>1</sup> ISFOL - ESF Evaluation Unit, Via Morgagni 33, 00161 Roma: a.bulgarelli@isfol.it; a.vergani@iol.it. Web site: **Errorre. L'origine riferimento non è stata trovata.**

<sup>2</sup> ISFOL, Institute for the Development of Vocational Training for Workers, is a public scientific research institute working in cooperation with the Ministry of Labour, other State administrations (Ministry of Education, Ministry of Economy, ...) the Regions, the European Commission and other International organism.

provinces on the basis of reciprocal *balances of power* and on *circumstances* rather than on precise *intentions*. Only in recent years, devolution of several public policies from the Central Ministries to the Regions has become a clear and intentional design of State powers organisation.

In the more recent mid-nineties, and with particular reference to the governance tools represented by *active* labour policies and public employment services (PES), responsibilities and relative intervention tools started to be *concentrated* on a regional and sub-regional level. This process, still far from being completed, has become significantly interwoven with the ESF 1994-99<sup>3</sup> which has acted as a design stimulus and financial support. Specifically, this concentration - made possible by allocating most of the ESF programming implementation to regions/autonomous provinces - has been produced both in delivering specific *services* (mainly involving training) and in strengthening local systems for designing and governing ESF policies.

In this *changing* context characterised - as always happens - by the presence of both opportunities and risks, the *National Evaluation Unit* has seen its mandate as *one* of the possible *tools* for supporting a *decentralized* ESF implementation process that would develop *permanent skills/capabilities* for programming, planning and governing certain labour policy lines.

### **3. The activity of the ESF National Evaluation Unit**

The *Unit's* activity has had three key benchmarks from the design phase on:

- a) the EC constraints and indications with regards to *national* ESF evaluations;
- b) the need to respect and make the most of the aforesaid *decentralization* of competence and responsibilities in ESF implementation;
- c) the *Unit's ideas* and *convictions* about the features the evaluation should/could have, under a profile of approach, methods and contents, in the light of points (a) and (b) above and, more in general, of the Italian *context* of the evaluation of major public policies and programmes co-financed by the ESF.

The Unit thus had to set up and conduct the evaluation in a manner coherent and consistent with this reference framework. It had to focus on the dimension of both the *process* (or *how* the evaluation was carried out) and the *result* (or the *contents* and *assessments* of the evaluation provided by the relevant actors). From a methodological angle, this meant an approach to the evaluation definable as:

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<sup>3</sup> It will be even more *interwoven* with the ESF 2000-2006 programming.

- *reasonably participatory and shared* as a whole;
- *multilevel, pluralist and multidisciplinary* under the method profile;
- *developmental* with regards to contents and implementation logic<sup>4</sup>.

These approach and method options will be briefly presented below (para.4) and some conclusions made out of the experience carried out (para. 5). The aim is to highlight the most significant and interesting method *intersections* emerging in the theoretical and practical reference frameworks available on the relationship between *evaluation and decentralisation*.

#### **4. Approach and methods in evaluating complex national programmes in decentralised settings.**

##### ***A process and product evaluation***

The evaluation approach adopted has a dual connotation of *process* and *product* evaluation. This is an option that does not directly refer to the *decentralised* connotation of the implementation system, but which is in any case relevant with regards to the potential impact of the evaluation activity on all those concerned.

With regards to the first aspect, the *process* dimension is based on a concept of ESF programmes as *open systems*, that is as systems not only able to receive messages/stimula from the external environment and to react to them but also to influence them. It is underpinned by the will to see the evaluation first and foremost as an applied social research activity *closely* interwoven with the design, implementation and *on-going* adjustment of the public policies.

This choice has meant planning and carrying out an evaluation activity that did not only consist of measuring/reconstructing and analysing the results achieved with regards to the general and specific programming objectives, according to the usual *objectives-results* model. It also had to *discover and build from the bottom up* all the *phenomena* and elements relevant for the evaluation of the ESF and their significance<sup>5</sup>.

The *product/results* dimension (or the *merit* features that the evaluation activity could provide for the various *stakeholders*) even by measuring effectiveness and impacts, refers to how the

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<sup>4</sup> Naturally, the Unit's activity has been *translated* into a series of evaluation documents and reports as well as other actions (dissemination of results, participation in conferences, seminars, etc.) deriving from the evaluation mandate. For an overview see: ISFOL - ESF Evaluation Unit, *Valutazione finale dell'Obiettivo 3 in Italia*, Angeli, Milan, 2000; idem, *Valutazione finale dell'Obiettivo 4 in Italia*, Angeli, Milano, 1999; A.Bulgarelli, "Final Evaluation of ESF Objective 1 in Italy: a contribution for system strengthening", Paper presented to the 4th Conference on Evaluation of Structural Funds, Edinburgh, 18-19 September 2000.

<sup>5</sup> See for example: Bulgarelli A., "Valutazione di programma: riflessioni dalla ricerca", in Palumbo (ed.), *Valutazione 2000*, Angeli, Milan, 2000.

1994-99 ESF has significantly changed the mentality and practices of the institutional systems governing labour public policies - and in particular training - in Italy.

Three elements, in particular, were crucial with respect to this option:

- 1) the strategic contents of the ESF, strongly concentrated on important achievements, results and impacts deriving from the execution of the relative programming;
- 2) the consistency of the financial resources provided by the ESF. The funds have been concentrated on the regional vocational training system and represented, in the 1994-1999 period, around 77% of the entire regional outlay on training. The dependence on the European Social Fund, the main financial investment channel in training managed by the Regional Authorities in that period, with its goals of changing the contents and rules of the game, has contaminated all the training policy programming from 1994 to date ;
- 3) the *strong* discontinuity - in terms of goals, objectives and contents - between the 1994-99 ESF and the previous publicly-financed training system. Up to 1993, the Italian system mainly consisted of basic training lasting one or two years and aimed at young people who, after finishing compulsory schooling, did not continue or interrupted their education (88% of those using the regional training system)<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, instead of supporting a training system that mainly met the social demand for training<sup>7</sup>, the ESF 1994-1999 programme set the goal<sup>8</sup> of achieving both social justice and competitiveness through a well-coordinated and integrated supply of opportunities and the participation of a plurality of actors. The ESF did not simply constitute a financial channel for managing national and regional policies, but a driving force for changing them.

### ***A reasonably participatory and shared evaluation***

This second distinctive element of the approach adopted is very clearly connected with the *decentralised* ESF implementation system in Italy. This system has two features that can be coped with adopting a *reasonably* (the use of this adjective is not casual) *participatory and shared* evaluation.

- a considerable *number of actors* - first of all *institutional*<sup>9</sup>;

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<sup>6</sup> Giovine M., Lion C., *Elementi per la valutazione ex post delle attività di formazione cofinanziate dal Fse 1990-92* in "Osservatorio Isfol" n.1-2, 1996.

<sup>7</sup> The reference is to early school leavers or drop outs from upper secondary education. The drop-out rates in the first two years of secondary school are still over 30%.

<sup>8</sup> The ESF Evaluation Structure reconstructed the goals during the mid-term programme evaluation. The need to spell out the impact of programmes is common to all countries "(they) were not specifically identified when drawing up the programme" but, as the European Commission points out in the Conclusions of the ESF Interim National Evaluations "(they) have been defined simultaneously with the implementation of the programming and have been formalised during the evaluation".

<sup>9</sup> 19 Regions and 2 Autonomous Provinces

- extremely structured and differentiated situations in the governance of ESF co-financed policies - on one side - and in their evaluation - on the other.

For both these points, the choice of a *reasoned participation and sharing* has meant that the evaluation could be configured as an activity able to respond, albeit with reference to a *higher* framework of constraints, to the specific nature of the different managing authorities. Above all, it is useful for qualifying and supporting the action of the *same authorities* in the direction of the change anticipated by the ESF programming. The critical reconstruction of results and processes, with a continual feed-back from the stakeholders, has enabled a *critical accumulation of knowledge* with repercussions on the learning process of the entire system. In particular, the option of interpreting the evaluation task as a support for change, made us highlighting the weak signals and the innovations (understood as cultural shifts) as well as the contradictions and weaknesses emerging in policy governance.

The *Unit* aimed to foster - through the evaluation - both the decision-making and the learning-in-the-system processes. This has been done by attempting to share the choices on survey areas and methodologies with the various actors involved in the ESF implementation as well as encouraging the continuous exchange of knowledge and comparison. This participation generated information flows and feedback between those responsible for ESF implementation and the evaluators to build up knowledge on the systems involved and to activate learning processes in those concerned<sup>10</sup>.

This gives an idea of the *participatory and shared* nature of the evaluation carried out, where the adjective *reasonably* reduces the elements of risk and methodological ambivalence and, above all, the potential *self-reference effect*. In this sense, the *participation* has been a *means* to achieve - given the features of the context - the aims set for the evaluation activity and did not constitute a *goal* or a *value* in itself.

### ***A multilevel, pluralist and multidisciplinary evaluation***

These three distinctive elements of the evaluation activity are linked more closely to the nature and features of the *evaluand* (i.e. the implementation of the ESF programming) than to those of the reference implementation system. In this sense, they are more similar to the process/product presented earlier than to that of *participation and sharing*.

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<sup>10</sup> On this point see the paper presented by A. De Lellis and A. Vergani ("Participatory Evaluation and Transformation of Institutional Systems") at the 1998 Conference of the European Evaluation Society.

First of all, the *multilevel* character of the evaluation is based - as general motivation - on the search for coherence between the *evaluand* and its evaluation, an element taken for granted under the theoretical profile but of particular practical criticalness in the case of the evaluation of complex actions such as the ESF on a national level. This *complexity* is present on different levels, with varying priorities and depths according to their significance. Each level has been considered and analysed to evaluate the programme implementation in *all* its dimensions and components.

These levels are the following:

- the policies (training, guidance, placement assistance, system actions,...);
- the implementation design (national plans, regional operational programmes, policy priorities, measures, annual planning documents of managing authorities, single interventions);
- the implementation process and procedures.

The option to have a *pluralist and multidisciplinary* evaluation is also based, analogously with that claimed for the previous point, on the *complexity and structure* of the *evaluand*. This has induced a quantitative and qualitative *reading* of the ESF implementation situation where:

- the quantitative aspect, referred to the *policy analysis* approach, involves longitudinal and retrospective surveys, econometric techniques and *shift-share* analyses: overall, it has mostly shown the progress in the programme implementation and the *outcomes* produced as well as, partly, its macroeconomic impact;
- the qualitative aspect, complementary, and consisting of interviews, cases studies, *focus-groups*, participatory observation and desk analysis, has been used to verify the relations existing between the phenomena observed and the formulation of interpretative hypotheses.

When adopting this option, the *Unit* was careful to define which procedures and conditions were needed to ensure that the *multidisciplinary* effect was not reduced to *methodological eclecticism* and that the necessary *integration* between the different methods and tools was not limited to their *juxtaposition*<sup>11</sup>.

At least three indispensable conditions for the ESF programmes have been pinpointed:

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<sup>11</sup> This is the topic of the paper presented to the 2000 Congress of the Italian Evaluation Association by C.Lion, A.De Sanctis and A.Vergani.

1. *coherence* between the *evaluand* (its nature, structure and complexity, its *position* in the network of relations and the *interests* of the various actors involved) and the *approach* (methods, tools,....) used for its evaluation;
2. scientific *accuracy* in the application and utilisation of methods and instruments<sup>12</sup>;
3. *utility* of the results of the evaluation and their correspondence to the mandate . This is the *focalisation* of the evaluation in the sense intended, for example, by Patton<sup>13</sup>. He defines this as an evaluation carried out *for and with specific intended uses*, naturally not excluding the possibility of innovating and experimenting in the implementation of an evaluation action, but keeping this experimental character *consistent with and aimed at* the mandate given to it.

#### *A developmental evaluation*

The last distinctive element of the approach adopted is the *developmental* nature of the evaluation carried out. This element is closely connected with the *decentralised* structure of the reference implementation system, not so much because the decentralization *in itself* necessarily involves this option but because the implementation system *as it is constructed* in Italy requires it.

More specifically, it was the intersection between four *dimensions* that made it difficult and probably inopportune to define the evaluation *field* beforehand with all its contents. It was preferred to make use of the indications, emerging factors and stimuli that the analysis proposed or that the various stakeholders proposed while the evaluation was in progress. These dimensions are the following:

- a) the aforesaid *characteristics* of the ESF implementation system in Italy;
- b) the contents of the ESF programming;
- c) the change processes involving the organisation and contents of labour policies in Italy;
- d) the state of the dissemination and consolidation in Italy of evaluation theories and, above all, *practices*.

Faced with this situation, the option for the *developmental evaluation* seemed consistent with what we consider as two key acquisitions on the evaluation topic:

- the placement of the evaluation action in the *arena* constructed each time by the different actors involved, with the need - which is also a precondition and a derivation of the

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<sup>12</sup> This point is anything but banal or predictable: just think, for example, of the risk - far from being remote - that the *passion for the qualitative* or for the *integrated quali/quantitative* approaches will obscure the potential repercussions that the *methodologically correct* use of a certain instrument has on the possibility of using it jointly with others.

<sup>13</sup> Patton M.Q., *Utilisation-Focused Evaluation (3rd ed.)*, Sage Publ., Thousand Oaks, Cal. 1996.

methodological choice of the *participated* evaluation - “continually to assess the social ecology” of the same *arena*<sup>14</sup>;

- the possibility/advisability that the evaluators acquire directly *on site* the awareness of the existence of different and sometimes conflicting interests around their work; these come on one side from the direct experience of a *multiple stakeholder* system and, on the other, from the fact that the evaluation “is usually part of a political process”<sup>15</sup>.

## 5. Conclusions

A **first** conclusion to be drawn from the above considerations regards the different links that the approach options have with the topic of *decentralisation*. It has already been pointed out that the *participation/sharing* and *developmental* options are those most firmly linked to the decentralised nature of the reference implementation system.

Although these options are not exclusively guided by the decentralisation dimension but also by the other factors referred to, the diagram below proposes a synthesis of the overall elements constituting the approach used, showing the link with the features of the implementation system or of the ESF programming and contents.

Table1.Connection between approach elements and relative references

Elements of the evaluation approach	<b><i>Implementation system (decentralised)</i></b>	<i>ESF Programming</i>
<i>Focus on process</i>	<b>Weak Connection</b>	Strong connection
<i>Focus on results</i>	<b>Weak Connection</b>	Strong connection
<i>Participation, sharing</i>	<b>Strong Connection</b>	Weak connection
<i>Multidisciplinary pluralistic methodology</i>	<b>Weak Connection</b>	Strong connection
<i>Developmental</i>	<b>Strong Connection</b>	Weak connection

<sup>14</sup> Rossi P.H., Freeman H.E., *Evaluation (A Systematic Approach)*, Sage, Newbury Park, Cal., 1993, p.406.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p.407.

A **second** conclusion concerns the aspects of the *evaluation theory* on which the approach tested can offer points for reflection and discussion. Briefly, these aspects involve four *issues*:

- a) the relationship between the features of the *evaluand* and the actual evaluation modes: here the activity carried out has not led to the definition of elements modifying or supplementing the existing theory. However, the pursuit of the necessary coherence between these two poles has highlighted the extreme complexity and difficulty encountered when the *evaluand* is multidimensional and multilevel, structured in successive stages and approximations and in a dynamic manner. The option for a specific concept of the *evaluand* (an *open system* in the case of the ESF national programming in Italy) seems indispensable, at least for initially setting up and defining the evaluation activity;
- b) the joint use of several methods and tools for the evaluation: on this matter, the conclusions, moreover not particularly original, which the *Unit* reached following the evaluation activity have already been presented. These conclusions basically confirm what literature and reflection have for time been demonstrating, and that is the need to define not only a priori, but also *empirically* how to connect sensibly both the use and, above all, the results of this use, of the different methods and tools;
- c) the relationship between evaluation and reference context: here the activity carried out has shown it is better to define the context in *multidimensional* terms and, specifically, as made up of: 1) all the actors involved in the evaluation (this is the context in which the dimension of the decentralisation is shown); 2) the *evaluand* as such; 3) the state of the evaluation mentality and practices relative to 1 and 2. It is the joint consideration of these three elements that has led to the configuration of an evaluation activity defined in the terms of Table 1 given above. It suggests that it is advisable to check, when designing the evaluation, the *correspondence* conceptually represented by the contents of this table;
- d) the relationship between *predetermination* and *openness* in the definition of contents of and modes for carrying out the evaluation. The choice adopted by the *Unit*, expressed in terms of *developmental*, is certainly not comparable to Stake's *responsive evaluation*, but it undoubtedly has the same basic logic, albeit heavily reworked in the light of the constraints and requirements expressed by the ESF evaluation. However, considering the overall results and impact of the *Unit's* action, it is clearly important to have remained open *in itinere* to the stimuli and demands of the evaluation that the implementation of the ESF programmes - and also the evaluation itself - posed and highlighted in terms of significant aspects, themes or issues, difficult to forecast during the initial design of the evaluation activity.

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