

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF THE REGIONAL STUDIES ASSOCIATION

REINVENTING REGIONS IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

PISA CONGRESS CENTRE, ITALY

12th-15th April 2003

GATEWAY 12: EVALUATION AND REGIONAL POLICY

## **Evaluation and Governance: the Italian Experience**

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## Introduction

Evaluation today is carried out in a complex, multistakeholder context. Decentralization has increased the number of actors involved in the management of public policies and in the decision-making process. New balances of power and reciprocal relationships are being developed. Evaluation has to deal with a multilevel governance, that is with new levels of complexity and uncertainty since new objects and subjects of evaluation are emerging. In particular, the European Social Fund (ESF) programmes are implemented through continuing processes of decision, negotiation and mediation in which different actors are protagonists with specific and often diverging values, codes and priorities. In this framework the features and the role of the evaluation is being changed.

The aim of the paper is to illustrate the links between evaluation and a multilevel governance in the Italian context by defining the concept of governance, analysing its relevance for the evaluation activities at a programme level and describing its possible applications in the Italian context of ESF 2000-2006. The paper will also look at the effects of governance on the evaluation, illustrating why national, regional and local authorities co-operate and how they are involved in multiple interactions across different levels of government.

### 1. A definition of the concept of governance

For some years now, the concept of governance has become particularly important, both in the Community and national sphere, among the various actors interested in seeing how and why public activities, and in particular the implementation of a programme or policy, are organised and managed and what repercussions they have on the system as a whole.

This concept highlights the importance of analysing public programmes and policies in terms of the relationships existing between:

- the institutions and the organizational contexts that help *form* the decisions made by the policy-makers;
- the various performances of the network of social actors required to *implement* these decisions in the local area (administrations and public and private bodies);
- the *formal aspects* regulating the programming and management of a policy (codified, for example, into laws and administrative provisions) and above all, the *informal aspects* that depend on the specific interests of the various stakeholders and whose effects cannot therefore be anticipated.

An analysis of the recent literature on the subject shows the presence of various meanings of *governance* that include one or more of the aforesaid aspects. To give an example (and without claiming to be exhaustive), this term is currently used:

- as opposed to *government* that stresses the centrality and/or centralisation of the actions carried out by the institutions responsible for a policy, whereas *governance*

incorporates the idea of a plurality of actors involved in the implementation of the same policy<sup>1</sup>;

- to indicate the complexity of contemporary society in which the interactions and power levels have multiplied, with repercussions on the performance of the government: Baslé stresses that dealing with governance means dealing precisely with “complexity”, since the decentralization of the policies launched by States has extended the forces and interests at stake, the number of actors involved and their reciprocal interactions<sup>2</sup>
- to define the set of laws, legal regulations, administrative rules and practices that bind, guide and enable the main activity of a government system on a central and/or local level, that is the production and distribution of goods and services financed by the community<sup>3</sup>;
- as a synonym of “multilevel partnership”, in which consultation – with regards to the changes triggered by decentralization within a Community, national and local framework – becomes even more important as a method and tool of expression and synthesis of the interests of the administrations, economic and social actors, and citizens<sup>4</sup>;
- to indicate to policy-makers guidelines, goals and value criteria that should be able to improve the results of a policy implemented within a complex and multiactor context such as the one described: here the term *governance* is used to highlight the importance, for example, for the public action to be decentralised and for the local level to be involved in working out strategies of a bottom-up type<sup>5</sup>.

Attempting to generalise, the concept of governance incorporates the idea that the achievement of an objective is the result of an autonomous but not isolated action of the different actors who must/can give a contribution to the implementation of the policies. Governance thus implies a structured system that gathers together institutions, social actors and private organisations in the planning and implementation of collective choices, capable of gaining the active support of citizens. In this environment, governance defines a way of designing and managing decentralised policies in which numerous public and private actors participate on different levels and whose diverging interests enter into play in a process of complex, dynamic and interactive bargaining and negotiating. This *procedural* connotation of governance is very important if we want to understand how the objectives of numerous different actors influence and characterise the results of a policy.

Within this framework, the concept of governance is characterised by:

- a plurality of actors involved in a specific policy (State, regions, provinces, local authorities, social partners, public and private executing agencies, etc.). The formalities for coordinating these different actors depend on formal and informal regulations that structure their relationships;

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<sup>1</sup> Bel M., Richiard A., Teissier J., “Evaluation et gouvernance régionale de la formation professionnelle?” in Baslé M. et Guignard-Hamon C. (ed. by), *Evaluation et gouvernance*. Actes du colloque de Rennes des 15 et 16 juin, Société française de l'évaluation.

<sup>2</sup> Baslé M., “Bonne gouvernance publique et évaluation: introduction à un débat” in Baslé M. et Guignard-Hamon C. (ed. by), *Evaluation et gouvernance*. Actes du colloque de Rennes des 15 et 16 juin, Société française de l'évaluation.

<sup>3</sup> Heinrich C.J. and Lynn L.E., *Governance and Performance. New Perspectives*, Georgetown University Press, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. working document “Governo del territorio e governance - Un confronto tra le Regioni Europee” (30 September - 1 October 2001, Rocca di Fontanellato, Parma).

<sup>5</sup> Cf., for example, the recent document of the European Union Commission *European Governance. A White Paper* of August 2001.

- the institutional decentralization and/or tendency to decentralise the policy in a multilevel framework (Community, national, regional and local) which creates the conditions and frame of reference for the action of the aforesaid actors. Since the State, for example, is no longer the only one to define the guidelines of a policy and what tools to use, the sub-national space becomes the level in which the other policy-makers involved in the decentralization of that policy are defined and required to act;
- the possibility for different actors to construct their pathways inside the policy, on the basis of a participatory approach opposed to the authority of a single actor;
- an understanding not only of the implementation and/or putting into practice of a policy but also how it is conceived and its preliminary design (programming).

The concept of governance is now better suited to represent the functioning model of the State after the recent regulatory amendments in Italy. Hence we have a system for governing the country that is no longer hierarchical but divided into autonomous local units, all equally legitimised to represent their own interests.

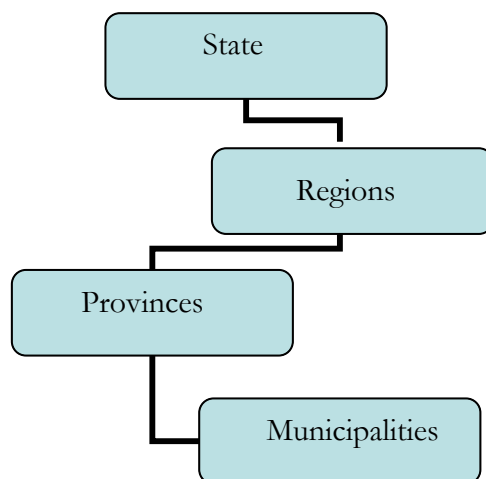
## 2. The new model of Italian *governance* after the recent legislative changes

The Community White Paper on Governance redefined the balance of powers between European Union and national and local governments, extending the network and role of the actors involved in policy-definition processes. Over the last years there have been numerous regulatory innovations in Italy, mainly regarding relationships between centre and periphery.

It should be pointed out that the regional organisation of the Italian State, that is the recognition of the regions as local and autonomous authorities with their own powers and functions, was introduced by the Constitution in 1948. Thus Italy, conceived as a unitary and centralised State in 1861, became a regional State in 1948.

The basic principle of the regional State is that of the decentralization to the regions of a series of functions traditionally performed by the State. Thus, whereas in the **centralised State** all the powers are in the hands of the State, in the **regional State**, although the unitary nature of the State is assured, a certain degree of autonomy is granted to the individual territorial components.

*Diagram 1 - The governance model before the recent regulatory changes*



The new governance model that is shaping up in Italy introduces significant changes to the idea of the regional State conceived in 1948. This model has important references in a series of provisions adopted between 1997 and 2001, in particular :

1. law 59/97 called “Bassanini” and D.L. 112/98 on administrative decentralization;
2. the reform of Title V of the Constitution introduced with constitutional law 3/2001.

The first two legislative provisions regard the division of administrative powers among the various actors present in the system; the Constitutional law has instead changed how legislative jurisdiction is divided up between the State and local authorities. The new institutional scenario now has a horizontal instead of vertical organisation, in which State, regions, provinces and municipalities are all on the same level.

*Diagram 2 – The current governance system in Italy*



The local authorities have legislative power not only in matters of their exclusive jurisdiction, but also in those of the legislation concurrent with the State.

Consequently, the sphere of regulatory intervention has increased, as well as the administrative functions that art. 118 of the Italian Constitution attributes to the municipalities, unless they have conferred them to higher local levels (urban areas, provinces, regions and State) where

there is the need of united action on the basis of the principles of subsidiarity, differentiation and due proportion. Thus provinces, municipalities and urban areas possess with the regions the same institutional rank as the State.

The key points of the new governance model ensuing from the reform of Title V are:

- the equal institutional ranking of the various local authorities as autonomous State components; they are allowed to have their own statutes, powers and functions, as well as financial autonomy for revenues and expenditures;
- the division of responsibilities between State and regions, who find themselves with a substantially equal legislative power;
- the attribution of administrative responsibilities to the municipalities, in respect of the principle of subsidiarity. In addition, the State, regions and other actors foster the autonomous initiative of individual and collective citizens for performing activities of general interest.

These changes have also altered relations with the European Union. To respect the fundamental principles fixed by annual Community law, not only can/must the regions incorporate Community directives in their local legislation or regulations in matters in which they have exclusive power, but also in those in which they have a concurrent power with the State. The principle of subsidiarity is applied when the local authorities do not incorporate the directives in time.

Therefore local authorities are becoming increasingly involved in the programming and implementation of the European Union's policies. This polycentrism of decision-making makes it necessary to define the roles and responsibilities of each institution and, at the same time, the links between the various local actors. The governance model has thus still to be perfected and the problems linked to the coordination between State, regions and local authorities have to be overcome.

This new governance model has repercussions within the framework of the co-financed policies, in particular for matters falling within the field of the ESF intervention (education, vocational training and labour market, social inclusion) and in the relationships between central and regional authorities vis à vis the contents of the ESF national programming documents (Community Support Framework and National Operational Programmes). Art. 117 of the Italian Constitution lays down that education and vocational training are exclusively regional responsibilities, except for the general regulations on State education. More in general, there is the need for structural policies with particular emphasis on the regional and local dimension in the different programming, management and evaluation stages.

### **3. The repercussions of the new governance model on the evaluation**

#### **3.1 The evaluation of the European Social Fund in the new programme period**

Let us now see if and how and the Italian institutional architecture, that has been constructed in the last years and that is becoming more clearly delimited after constitutional law n. 3 of 2001, has changed the way of doing evaluations in Italy and has defined the role of the evaluator.

The changes involving the ESF for the 2000-2006 period will also be taken into consideration. In the new programme, the ESF has become a financial instrument not only for vocational training but more in general for active labour, education and social policies. Thus the areas of intervention of the evaluation connected to the new ESF-supported activities have expanded.

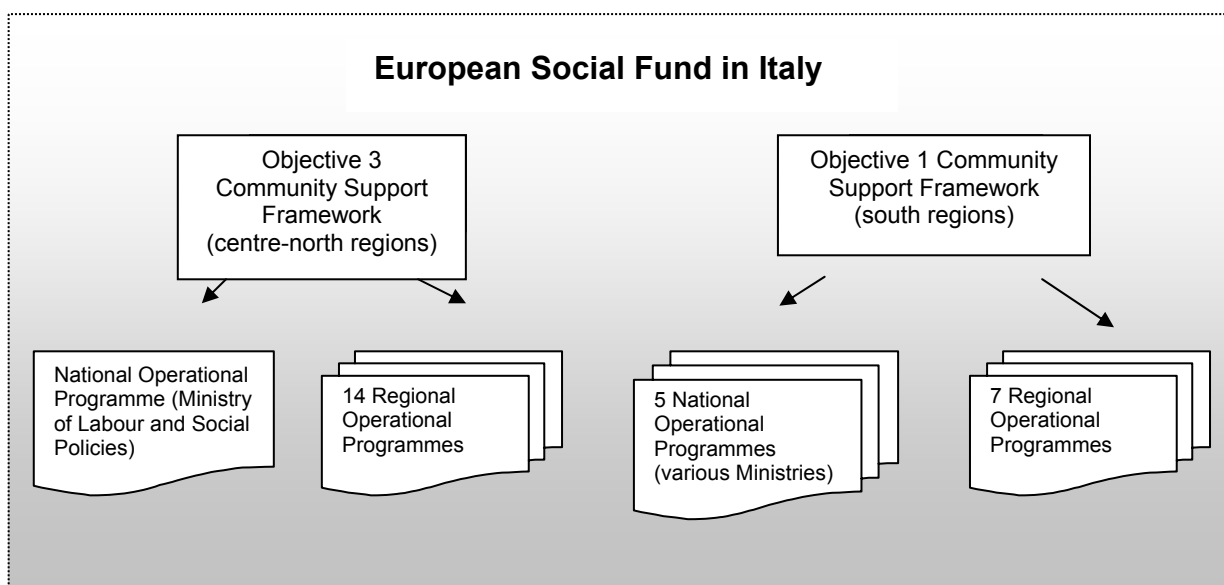
The myriad of actors on the institutional scenario, coupled with the enlargement of the ESF's areas of intervention, require an evaluation system that is more structured and pervasive than in the past. In this system, the various stages of the evaluation should converge and interact in a coordinated manner, as well as the evaluations of the individual Operational Programmes (OPs) and of the Community Support Framework (CSF). This means that evaluations have to be increasingly targeted at the reference area, conducted by evaluators assigned by the Managing Authorities after public calls for tender. This guarantees external and impartial opinions on the efficiency of the interventions and on the achievement of the objectives spelt out during the programming.

#### **3.2 The structure of the European Social Fund programme in Italy**

Introduced by the Treaty of Rome in 1957, the ESF is defined by the new regulation 1784/99 as the financial instrument that "shall support measures to prevent and combat unemployment and to develop human resources and social integration into the labour market in order to promote a high level of employment, equality between men and women, sustainable development, and economic and social cohesion." On a national level, the interventions financed by the ESF are planned on the basis of negotiations with the European Commission and the Member State after which the Commission approves the CSF, the outline document of the ESF co-financed policies.

In Italy, the Objective 3 CSF on the centre-north regions is broken down into 14 Regional Operational Programmes (ROPs) and one National Operational Programme (NOP) managed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies. The ESF programme in the Mezzogiorno has its own specific CSF (Objective 1), split up into 7 ROPs and 5 NOPs managed by the various ministries.

Diagram 3 – The structure of the European Social Fund in Italy



This breakdown reflects the decentralization present in Italy where the regions are being increasingly entrusted with the formulation and implementation of regulations for training and active employment policies.

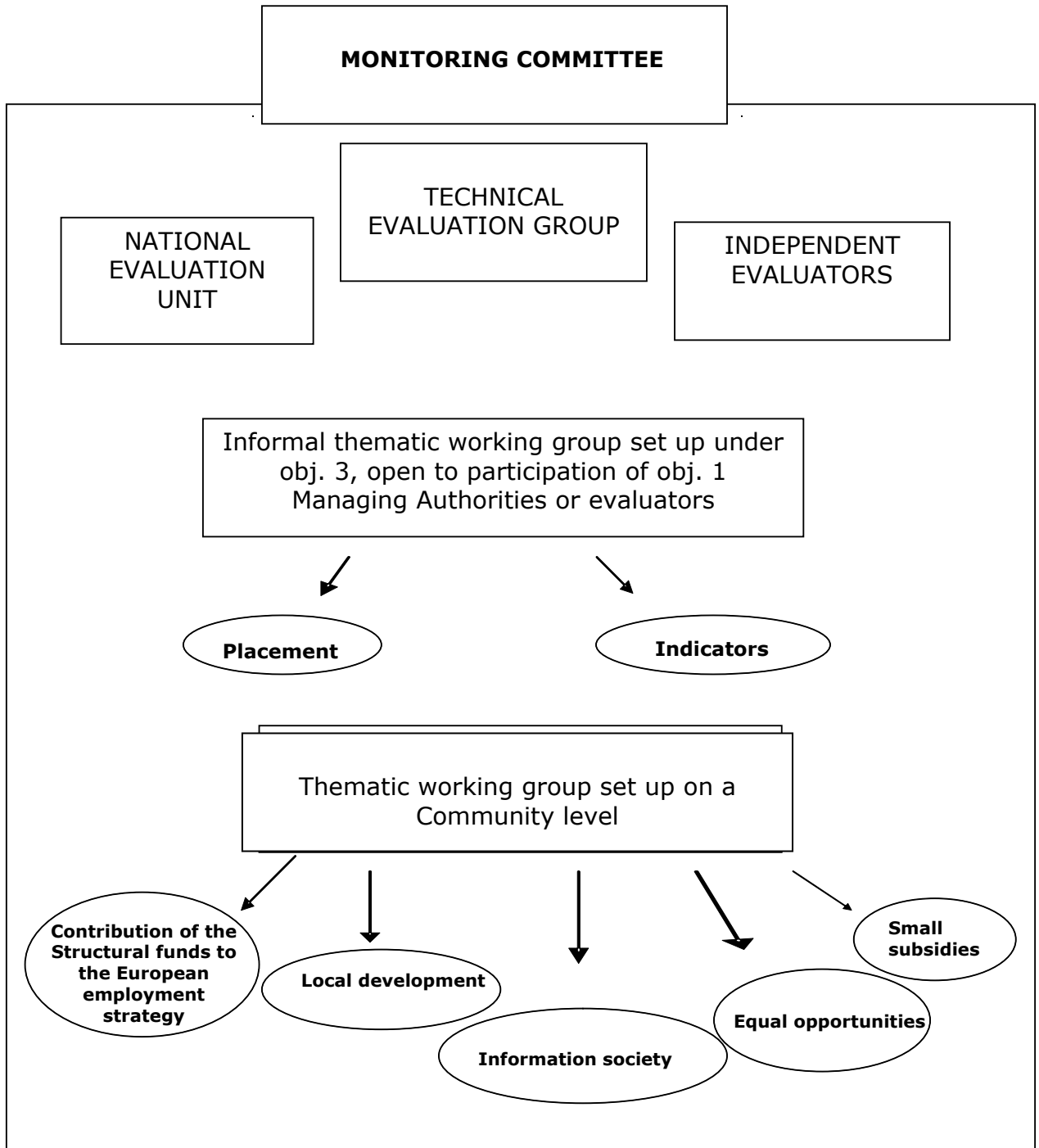
The training actions and, more in general, those for developing human resources, are thus implemented under the ROPs, whereas the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (with its OP within the framework of Objective 3) carries out national support actions for training and employment systems and their integration.

The programme implementation also reflects this progressive devolution of responsibilities. In this new ESF programming period, the provinces and municipalities are taking an increasing part in the implementation of the co-financed policies by issuing calls for tender and public notices specifically aimed at meeting the needs of the local area.

### 3.3 The organisation of evaluation activities

With regards to the regulations for organising evaluations, Italy has chosen to develop an evaluation system that reflects the decentralised character of the institutions, with as many evaluators as there are OPs. All this is coordinated by a national evaluation unit on a scientific and methodological basis.

Diagram 4 – The organisation of the evaluation



In particular, the CSF envisages: i) a strong partnership, characterising the implementation of all the evaluation activities; ii) evaluators external to the Managing Authority for the interim and final evaluation of each OP; iii) the coordination of the evaluation activities and the evaluation of Objective 3 CSF by the National Evaluation Unit<sup>6</sup>.

The following are some of the tasks attributed by Objective 3 CSF to the National Evaluation Unit:

- to propose the indicators, strategies and methodological standards of the OP evaluations, also taking into account what the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund (EAGGF), as well as the European Commission and OECD, have designed and constructed;
- to conduct specific *in itinere* evaluations on themes and policies of strategic importance;
- to analyse the impact of the ESF, also in relation to national/regional human resource and labour policies, within the framework of the European Strategy for Employment and National Actions Plans;
- to carry out the evaluation synthesis of Objective 3 CSF (interim and final) on the basis of the OP evaluations and other specific analyses.

The evaluation activity is directed by the Technical Evaluation Group, set up under the Objective 3 CSF Monitoring Group. Its objective is to guide and coordinate the evaluation conducted by the various stakeholders and to check it continually and across the board.

The Technical Evaluation Group, with its common reflections, joint experiences and methodologies, is the partnership organ of the evaluation. Presided over by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, it is composed of representatives of the European Commission, Ministry of the Economy, Operational Programme Managing Authorities, Equal Opportunities Department in the Prime Minister's Office, social partners, National Evaluation Unit and evaluators of OPs.

The Technical Evaluation Group tackles numerous topics, including the definition of the standard minimum contents of the activities of independent evaluators; the analysis of the state of progress of the evaluation activities; the preparation of proposals for the presentation and dissemination of evaluation reports; the analysis of the relationship between monitoring and evaluation.

It should be pointed out that the Technical Evaluation Group, besides meeting at regular intervals to perform its function of guiding and checking the monitoring and evaluation activities, was launched even before the Objective 3 CSF negotiations concluded. This was prompted by the complexity of the programme and was also aimed at preventing any delays in defining the procedures and rules introduced by the new programme.

At their first informal meeting in July 2000, the members of this group had already set their priorities as the preparation and regular updating of common guidelines, models, methodologies and tools for the various Objective 3 Managing Authorities, for a uniform evaluation of the various OPs and the overall CSF evaluation; the drafting of Terms of Reference for defining independent evaluators, as a standard for Managing Authorities when issuing their relative calls for tender; the regular checking of actions needed to start up the 2000-2006 ESF national monitoring system designed by the Ministry of Economy.

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<sup>6</sup> The National Evaluation Unit was set up in ISFOL in 1995.

The preparatory actions were an initial benchmark for launching the evaluation system set forth in the CSF in cooperation with all the actors involved in this task. Within this framework, ISFOL's National Evaluation Unit - either in association with the Technical Evaluation Group or with an explicit mandate - promoted and/or participated in numerous working groups for developing and coordinating the evaluation of specific topics (placement, indicators of implementation, result and impact, OP implementation process, quality of training systems). The Unit also carried out the first evaluations on the net impacts of training interventions on the previous programme and on the contribution of the ESF to the implementation of the European Employment Strategy. It subsequently disseminated the results achieved with the objective of building up knowledge, competences and *benchmarking* in the field of programme and policy evaluation.

In general, all the stakeholders envisaged by Objective 3 CSF (European Commission, Managing Authorities, independent evaluators, National Evaluation Unit) have participated in the evaluation activities the Unit has launched to date (with particular reference to those by the working groups) and they have also been "opened" to those of Objective 1.

The specific working groups meet the need of participants to discuss complex topics under a scientific and methodological profile giving priority to those which are particularly significant for the evaluation during the implementation of the CSF.

The following form part of the backup to the CSF evaluation:

- the working groups promoted by the National Evaluation Unit on "placement" (operative since 1997) and on "indicators", this latter specifically devoted to analysing the feasibility of the CSF and OPs' common indicators of implementation, result and impact for the Evaluability Reports to be written by the Objective 3 Managing Authorities;
- the seminars organised by the Unit for the evaluation of the implementation process and of equal opportunities;
- the Unit's participation in the Objective 1 National Evaluation System (with INEA, UVAL<sup>7</sup> and the network of regional and central nuclei ex law 144/99) for comparing evaluation methodologies and details for all the ESF co-financed policies.

### **3.4 The approach to the evaluation of the European Social Fund**

The evaluation can be defined as an analytical tool for the design, programming-reprogramming and management of policies. The objective of any evaluation activity is to be able constantly to check the progress and results of the policies implemented and to guarantee a continual supply of information, analyses and opinions on the implementation and their results to policy-makers and the various stakeholders involved in carrying out the interventions. The aim is to support the *in itinere* reprogramming of the activities.

In the 1994-99 programme, the ESF was an important instrument in Italy for developing the evaluation culture among policy-makers, thanks also to the coordination provided by ISFOL's National Evaluation Unit. But it is especially with the current 2000-2006 programme that the

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<sup>7</sup> INEA is the National research institute for agriculture; UVAL is the Ministry of Economy's evaluation unit.

Unit has managed to capitalise on the positive results obtained previously, within the framework of its mandate from the European Commission and Ministry of Labour.

The Unit's approach to the ESF evaluation is that of "a central evaluation in a decentralized system"<sup>8</sup>. This approach is characterised by:

- being a participatory evaluation on the basis of partnership;
- producing cognitive elements to support policy-makers' decisions;
- aiming at providing procedural guidance;
- targeting determinate evaluation levels and areas defined in the reference regulations and in the Commission's specific technical documents;
- being integrated and multidisciplinary with regards to the methodology and evaluation tools used.

The choice of the **participatory evaluation** has led to the construction of an evaluation system in which the process and responsibilities are shared among the various stakeholders and common conceptual references are developed. The idea is to encourage a CSF monitoring and evaluation system on a central and regional level that provides a standard reading of the co-financed policies albeit respecting regional specificities.

Between 2000 and 2001 the Unit was engaged in the preparation of a national evaluation system, basically involving the definition of **common and shared surveying guidelines, models, methodologies and tools**. The aim was to establish the conditions for the monitoring and evaluation of the CSF and of some innovative aspects introduced by the new ESF programme.

These activities prepared the ground for:

- obtaining information on the outcomes of the co-financed policies that are comparable on a regional, national and Community level;
- integrating the CSF evaluation activities with those of other policies and programmes linked to them (European Employment Strategy and relative National Action Plans, Equal Community Initiative);
- testing evaluation models that can be transferred to national and regional policies operating in the sectors of education, vocational training, labour and socio-economic support of the most disadvantaged population groups.

### 3.5 The monitoring system and classification of actions

The ESF 2000 – 2006 programme is a complex structure of policies that not only continues to implement the choices and interventions of previous years, but also introduces new actions, often breaking sharply away from the tradition and experience of training and labour policies in Italy (from integrated higher training to continuing training, new employment services, etc.).

The great number of evaluation frameworks and actors involved in the implementation of policies and their evaluation necessitates a central coordination to guarantee the comparability of interventions and a standard reading of policies nationwide. To achieve these goals, a

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<sup>8</sup> Bulgarelli A., Vergani A., *The evaluation of the European social fund in Italy: a central evaluation of a decentralized system*, 4th EES Conference, Lausanne, October 2000.

national monitoring system has been constructed and the ESF co-financed actions have been classified.

The **monitoring** is considered a tool for obtaining information on the programming, management and evaluation of policies. It involves the constant checking of the implementation and results of the interventions, including some of their effects, through the survey of variables and indicators.

The Unit has attempted to define some *common information standards* of the variables to survey for producing indicators. The idea was to create the minimum base of knowledge useful for checking the progress of the programmes as a whole and the effects generated by their implementation on a central and local level. The standardisation of the survey was seen to be a necessary condition in Italy, where programme implementation responsibilities are decentralised.

This is also why, besides a more general development of the monitoring and evaluation culture, the Italian CSF Objective 3 dedicates ample space to these topics. It proposes definitions and references with a strongly conceptual scope, aimed at creating interactive information systems and standard interpretations of what is observed.

The National Evaluation Unit has also been engaged in setting up a centralised national monitoring system in cooperation with IGRUE (under the Ministry of Economy) called Monit 2000. This provides a continual updating of the progress of the co-financed programmes and at the same time respects local specificities by permitting dialogue between central and regional systems

Along with the monitoring system, it was also necessary to prepare and define operationally a significant level of aggregation for the different ESF-financed activities whose variables of financial and physical progress had to be measured. As identified in the original documents, the programming measures constitute high levels of aggregation, covering various complementary policy interventions for achieving the programme goals.

The decision-makers and the public's need for information on the implementation of policies, along with the incomplete nature of the national monitoring system, parallel or complementary with those of the ESF, has prompted the construction of a classification and information system on a policy level.

Besides this, the **classification of projects** according to standard typologies makes it possible to compare the different types of ESF co-financed actions implemented on a decentralised level by the various OP managers. The monitoring and, consequently, the evaluation system was constructed on the basis of this classification. This system is broken down into four intermediate levels starting from the measure down to the individual project. It answers the cognitive needs of the various actors involved in the programming by proposing a breakdown of the programme implementation capable of providing useful information on different levels of aggregation.

The classification by project typology started with the contents of the regulations and programming documents (CSF, OP and Programme Complement) and was agreed on by all the administrations involved. It enables pinpointing the analysis units on which to construct a common and standard area among the OPs for the evaluation, providing a national reading of the surveys.

This classification was incorporated in the monitoring system. Moreover it makes it possible to produce information on the attainment of the European Employment Strategy and the implementation of the annual National Action Plan, according to the Eurostat “Labour Market Policy” classification.

## **Conclusions**

Three years after the conclusion of the negotiations on the Objective 3 CSF, some initial reflections can be made on the main results achieved during the 2000 to March 2003 period by the actors involved in the implementation of the evaluation design outlined during the programming stage.

To date, the evaluation system is:

- operational on both a central and local level (albeit to a varying extent);
- targeted at various policies, characteristics and innovations introduced by the CSF (e.g. with reference to the various policy-fields, to macrotypologies of action, to cross-cutting issues and to the priorities present in them) and to the different areas that the evaluation activities have to take into consideration (effects of the OP implementation process, outputs, outcomes and impacts achieved);
- based on a partnership, that is on the systematic involvement of all the stakeholders (Community and Managing Authorities, OP and CSF evaluators, social partners, etc.) in the various stages of the evaluation process;
- consistent with the need to strengthen the evaluation as a support for policy-makers;
- supported by intervention bodies and methodologies which, while respecting the province of each Managing Authority, integrate the double central/local level of the evaluation into a single design and link them with the Community level.

The new governance model that has been created is thus placed in a relationship of mutual dependence with the evaluation activity. The institutional structure both influences the organisation of the evaluation system and is influenced by it. This is because the evaluation is an instrument for highlighting the positive and negative elements of governance within a framework of institutional learning for the system as a whole.

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