

EVALUATION CULTURE AND CAPACITY IN ROMANIAN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

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Program evaluation, strongly related with European programs but having to be extended to all administration, is seen as being more and more important in the Public Administration Reform process. This paper is trying to take a look on the development of program evaluation in the Romanian public institutions.

Two dimensions are analysed: evaluation culture and evaluation capacity, the first one being at the core of the second. Based on our own observations and on some other assessments the existing evaluation capacity can not be improved without real commitment towards learning from evaluation.

Introduction

Romania heard about program evaluation mainly in the context of the programs and projects financed from pre-accession funds (PHARE, ISPA, SAPARD) which have had well-established monitoring and evaluation systems. This led to an initial development of the monitoring and evaluation culture in Romania. This has been an important step, even if it was more about reporting than it is about evaluating.

Evaluation culture is considered to be “the institutional commitment to learning from evaluation”¹. In practice, evaluation culture expresses itself through systematically assessing how well programs and projects are working, what changes need to be done in the design and implementation techniques. The evaluation capacity involves, beside a strong evaluation culture, other elements such as: monitoring systems, analytic expertise and good communication networks². Evaluation culture is sometimes seen as a pre-condition

¹ United States General Accounting Office, Report to Congressional Committees, *Program Evaluation- An Evaluation Culture and Collaborative Partnerships Help Building Agency Capacity*, 2003, p.3

² *ibidem*

to having a well developed evaluation capacity. According to this, the relationship between the evaluation capacity and the evaluation culture seems to be one of subordination as shown in Fig 1.

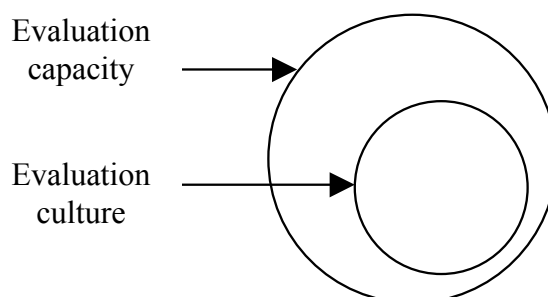


Fig. 1 The report between evaluation culture and evaluation capacity

In a recent study, „*Assessment of the Evaluation Culture in Romania*”³ Hilary Curley and Eugen Perianu tried to figure out the evaluation culture in Romania, from a different perspective. It is not necessarily seen as a key element in the constitution of evaluation capacity at country level.

Actions⁴ and studies⁵ investigating the evaluation capacity in new member states (Romania included) often compared to the old member states have been issued. The results of a questionnaire applied by EAG in candidate countries in 2003 have showed obviously that⁶:

- The commissioning of evaluations are rare and national demand is practically nonexistent;
- Evaluation expertise is mainly with external consultants;
- Phare interim evaluations are not usually disseminated outside the “management group;”
- Evaluation findings do not get exposure and attract debate;
- Evaluations do not make a significant impact on the accountability debate or through “lessons learned” improvements in planning;
- Institutionalizing factors (e.g. regulation) are poorly developed and there is an absence of strong non-formal drivers (e.g. civil action groups).
- Program/project monitoring is heavily focused on the EC Phare evaluation process.
- Outcome/result based monitoring (as opposed to financial and contractual monitoring) is not well developed.

Another study benchmarked in 2004 the evaluation capacity in the new member states⁷ as compared to the 15 older member states. Jack Malan a researcher in the Centre for Strategy and Evaluation Services reached a series of conclusions relevant for the Romanian public institutions:

- Evaluation capacity is still widely considered to be underdeveloped in the new Member States;
- There is a shortage of evaluators with the necessary skills in the new Member States;

³ Hilary Curley, Eugen Perianu (2006)-*Assessment of the Evaluation Culture in Romania*

⁴ The Evaluation Advisory Group (EAG) initiated by the European Commission’s Directorate General for Enlargement in 2002 as a forum for the exchange of good practice in monitoring and evaluation capacity building between Member States and Candidate Countries.

⁵ Jack Malan, (2004)- *Benchmarking Evaluation Capacity in the New Member States*, Centre for Strategy and Evaluation Services

⁶ apud Hilary Curley, Eugen Perianu (2006)-*Assessment of the Evaluation Culture in Romania*

⁷ Jack Malan, (2004)- *Benchmarking Evaluation Capacity in the New Member States*, Centre for Strategy and Evaluation Services

- There is a perception in the new Member States that public authorities are not supportive enough in helping to develop evaluation capabilities;
- An evaluation culture does not exist in Lithuania, Hungary, Romania, Cyprus and the Czech Republic;
- In the older 15 Member States, it has taken the best part of a decade to develop a generally robust evaluation culture (accepting that not all “old” Member States have a generally robust evaluation culture);
- New Member States require more information and support on evaluation, such as guidelines, methodologies and best practice examples;
- Commercial incentives to improve evaluation capacity and expertise are likely to be the most effective drivers of change;
- The failure to ensure that evaluation results feed into policy making is seen as one of the most serious practical problems;
- In new Member States, lack of baseline data and poorly defined targets and performance indicators are the most challenging methodological issues;

A third of respondents in the new Member States said that the quality of evaluation studies in their countries is “poor” with a further two thirds saying that they are only “acceptable” with none arguing that the quality is “acceptable” or “excellent”.

Therefore, the research studies conducted so far concluded that in Romania, as in other new Member States, evaluation culture is non-existent.

We are trying to take a closer look to the Romanian Public Administration institutions in order to identify specific elements - possible roots for a future evaluation culture. These elements are going to be referred to as the evaluation pre-culture.

Program Evaluation in the Public Administration Reform

The first reform efforts regarding the Romanian public administration began in mid 1990. In 2004 the Romanian government adopted the “Strategy for the acceleration of the Public Administration Reform” trying to hurry up the pace of the modernisation process. The Operational Programme for building Administrative Capacity under the 2007-2013 National Strategic Reference Framework identifies a series of existing problems, along with:

- Weak administrative capacity;
- Lack of trained staff, problems in selection criteria;
- Weak strategic capabilities;
- Poor coordination;
- Weak transparency.

An ex-post evaluation independently carried out for PHARE programme⁸ concludes that frequent changes of political leadership resulting in a discontinuous “political will” to promote the reform together with difficulties to separate the political and the administrative functions, the non-finalization of the process to establish a strong civil service impeded the emergence of evaluation practice was unlikely until now. As the practice of evaluation needs stable and coherent administrative processes and procedures, it was unlikely to be developed in problematic and unreliable institutional environment.

A thematic report⁹ prepared by an independent evaluator concluded that “much of what still needs to be done is basic, in the sense of (a) passing primary or secondary legislation; (b) creating *de*

⁸ MWH, (2006), *Ex-post evaluation of the PHARE programme in Romania*

⁹ ECOTEC, (2006)-*Thematic Report on Support to PAJC in Bulgaria and Romania*

novoo, or developing, administrative structures, standards and procedures, and (c) providing sufficient financial and human resources to ensure their sustainability.”

The legal basis for evaluation has been analysed by Local Short Term expert Victor Canghizer¹⁰. The main conclusion of the research has been that by comparison with EU evaluation regulations, Romanian legislation has specific provisions that explicitly require evaluation only for the co-financing budgets for EU and other donor funding and for research programs. As the other types of activities are concerned, even though mention is made of it, requirements to conduct evaluations are either not clear enough or not enforced properly.

The report sets out a number of recommendations:

- Romanian legislation related to evaluation needs to be upgraded in line with EU legislation and should address all of the areas and institutions that are managing public funds, as a tool for public administration management. New legislation should be supported by methodological guidelines that explain how to apply the law;
- Moving from the current annual budgeting cycle to a multi-annual budget programming cycle would nurture the development of the practice of evaluation;
- Furthermore, evaluation would be easier to conduct if budgets were allocated on the basis of identified programs and projects, as opposed to an allocation by type of expenditure only;
- The institutional capacity of public administration to manage programs and projects should be improved;
- There should be a clear distinction between monitoring, audit, control and evaluation.

In the Romanian public administration there is a strong culture of reporting to the upper levels or to the financing entities. But most often, these actions are highly descriptive, not explanatory enough, reporting the existence of activities, rather than evaluating them. The data collecting systems are not coherently and systematically organised in Romanian public institutions. The type of data collected for reporting purposes is primarily financial, and does not extend to non-financial measures of output, results, impact and other types of performance indicators.

Programs and projects financed from pre-accession EU funds have monitoring systems designed at central, regional and local level. The problem is that they tend to be perceived as a pure formal task and very little as an improvement lever. Naturally, this could be the first step for building a monitoring and evaluation culture and capacity. Though, at present, the culture for programme evaluation is very weak, if not absent in the Romanian public administration. This is due, firstly to the lack of tradition in having the activity organised on programs and projects. This would automatically increase evaluability and accountability of public interventions (activities, projects and programs).

A model for determining the evaluation culture and capacity

We will try to determine evaluation culture elements and evaluation capacity in the Romanian public institutions.

First, we have to mention the specific elements of an evaluation culture and those of an evaluation capacity that we consider during this specific research.

The key elements of Evaluation Capacity can be described as follows:¹¹

¹⁰ Victor Canghizer (2006)- *Report on the existing legal framework for evaluation*

¹¹ United States General Accounting Office, Report to Congressional Committees, *Program Evaluation- An Evaluation Culture and Collaborative Partnerships Help Building Agency Capacity*, 2003, p.9

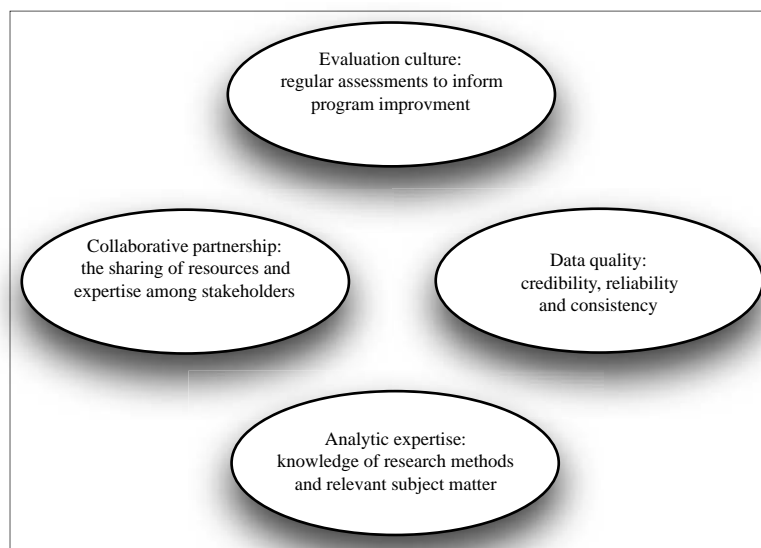


Fig. 2 Key elements of evaluation capacity

The specific elements of an evaluation culture we considered are: past experience in evaluation, the use of evaluation for learning and program improvements and the understanding of the need of evaluation. The specific variables we propose are:

- 1) the existence, at institutional level of detailed plans for interventions' implementation;
- 2) the measure in which the institution tries to find the best ways to perform program implementations;
- 3) the measure in which the objectives of their actions and interventions are concrete and measurable;
- 4) the measure in which for every intervention data is systematically collected;
- 5) the measure in which the information collected is perceived to help them to figure out how things work;
- 6) the measure in which the degree of accomplishment of the objectives is known for all interventions;
- 7) the measure in which at institutional level there are solid preoccupations to see the way things work;
- 8) the measure in which performance analysis are systematically accomplished;
- 9) the measure in which the results of the assessments are subject of the debates;
- 10) lessons indicated as possible to be learned from evaluation;
- 11) the number of program evaluation studies in which the institution was involved.

The observations we made concur with previous assessments. Romanian Public institutions are not concerned to learn from evaluations. The lack of detailed plans for interventions (meaning also lack of measurable objectives) leads to poor data collection and reporting and to restricting the discussions about the results only to those in charge.

By evaluation capacity we understand existing human resources trained in data analysis, statistics and evaluation, existing monitoring systems, analytic expertise and good communication networks. Beside the variables presented as measuring the evaluation culture, there is another set of variables that we need to take into account when measuring evaluation capacity:

For data quality:

- 1) activities specific to an intervention are permanently monitored;
- 2) the measure in which the expenses of an intervention are known every moment of the intervention;

- 3) completeness of data;
- 4) data accuracy;
- 5) data is up to date;

For analytic expertise

- 1) the existence of at least an employee trained in evaluation;
- 2) the existence of a person/a department responsible for strategies, policies, programs and projects design and implementation;
- 3) the number of employees trained in research methods/ statistics;

For collaborative partnerships:

- 1) the measure in which the information is accessible for all those interested in;
- 2) the degree of difficulty to collect information from other institutions;
- 3) the measure in which in performance assessments there are usually involved specialists from the outside of the institution;

The quality of data is not very good in most institutions. Apart from basic data about their clients and their dealings with the administration, there is little information. Very often data is stored in different databases, with no link between them.

Regarding the existence of a department responsible for strategies, policies, programs and projects design and implementation we have this in most of the institutions, but mostly we speak about departments writing programs (many of them under the title of European Integration). Recently, Public Policy Units were established in each ministry, having as primary task to write new draft of laws in the form of policy proposals.

The number of persons trained in evaluation or research methods/statistics is low. The Public Policy Units had to employ public managers (persons which were trained under a specific scheme – Young Professional Scheme, backed by the EU) in order to fill the ranks.

It is hard to obtain data from other institutions – all of them being used to work in an independent (sometimes rival) way. Also there is a high reluctance in trying to involve outside expertise. In general information is available only for some of those being in charge (partially due to a culture of secrecy).

The results from the evaluation capacity assessment confirm our conclusion so far. Romanian public institutions do not benefit yet from an evaluation capacity. There are certain good intents, but hindered by the lack of a real commitment towards learning from evaluation.

Further developments

The Ministry of Interior and Public Administration held consultations with the Ministry of Finance in order to seize the opportunity of the availability of the Administrative Capacity Development Operational Program funded by the EU in the implementation of a performance evaluation culture as the final step in the policy and programme implementation process.

Evaluation is increasingly popular as an academic field and a focus on the topic of evaluation can be distinguished in various circles and at various levels. The language currently used to describe evaluation is sometimes confusing and, as a result, evaluation appears to signify different things to different decision makers. Part of the problem resides in the inter-changeability in the Romanian language of the terms “assessment”, “audit” and “evaluation.” And yet, there is not enough indigenous literature to clarify the different dimensions of evaluation: a control tool or a management tool, internal versus external, different types of evaluation. Evaluation is still regarded as a control tool meant to supervise and detect especially the errors in the system.

Evaluation and monitoring is increasingly popular within the public administration but it is contained within certain public policy makers: Implementing and Managing Authorities for the

PHARE programmes and for the Operational Programmes (particularly those launched by the Managing Authority for the Community Support Framework). There is a limited discourse on evaluation and monitoring taking place among the rest of the public administration.

In the mid 2005, the Managing Authority for the Community Support Framework¹² within the Ministry of Public Finance started work for elaboration of a national evaluation strategy under the framework of a technical assistance contract funded by PHARE 2003. The National Evaluation Strategy is an important tool that could bring together all of the disparate strands currently trying to drive evaluation in Romania, and represents an opportunity to develop an evaluation culture that will underpin more effective governance within the country. The ultimate aspiration, or overall aim, of the National Evaluation Strategy is that “there will be a functioning national evaluation system, the parts of which reinforce each other; encompassing the public and private sector and civil society; and contributing to the effective management of public intervention and the accountability of policy makers and public managers. There shall be recognition of the importance of evidence based policy making.” This Evaluation Strategy has been launched in November 2006 and tries to give a common trend to the evaluation Standards currently used in Romania. The Strategy is conceived as a step forward in the building and development of an evaluation Culture in Romania.

In order to implement this strategy, activities have been carried out to raise the awareness and enhance the evaluation capacity of Romanian public administration (policy and decision makers), potential evaluation commissioners, potential local evaluation companies and evaluators, academic environment and supporting organisations. Concerning the strengthening of the evaluation capacity in public administration, the activities have been focused on the structures managing the EU funds.

Interest in evaluation is growing but concrete demand for evaluation is still in its infancy. No examples are available where evaluation (*ex-ante*, *interim* or *ex-post*) was employed outside the framework of EU-funded programmes. Demand for evaluation is dependent on the existence of legislation requiring evaluation to be performed and on a general recognition of the necessity and usefulness of evaluation in the policy implementation, strategic management and budget formulation cycles.

At present, the problem is that there is a noticeable thinking stream in various circles that unless an adequate legal framework is in place, demand will not develop. Evaluation primarily takes place in EU-funded or other foreign donor funded programmes and is low within the public administration vis-à-vis national public interventions. There is no institutionalisation of evaluation in public administration, except in the structures managing the EU funds.

There seems to be certain disengagement between the monitoring and evaluation functions. The people setting up monitoring systems should have an appreciation and knowledge about evaluation as monitoring data is the building blocks for any future evaluation. Because of the low level of evaluations currently conducted, there is little scope for diversity at the moment.

Conclusions and needs to be addressed in the next stage

When analyzing the evaluation culture in Romanian institutions, it becomes obvious that the experience in measuring up and judging the outcomes, results and impact of interventions (i.e. evaluating strategies, policies, programmes and projects) is rather new. The poor evaluation experience in Romania is a cause of rather limited acquaintance among the potential users of evaluation's benefits. Evaluation managers and commissioners are the first people that must be convinced of the need for evaluation, especially concerning the facts that the benefits of the evaluation are higher than the costs.

¹² Which coordinates the evaluation and monitoring of PHARE and the Operational Programmes funded from EU structural instruments

Through a PHARE 2005 allocation, the Managing Authority for Community Support Framework will further continue the evaluation capacity strengthening by developing the general framework for enhancement the evaluation culture (e.g. evaluation standards) as well as both supply side (academia and private sector evaluators) through networking support, and the demand side through an evaluation facility that will encourage public managers to evaluate their interventions.

Both a public and a private network of evaluators has been established with the support of the Ministry of Public Finance and the EU funded programs.

The public evaluation network is coordinated by the Evaluation Central Unit in the Ministry of Public Finance. The public network also consists in evaluation units consolidated in the Management Authority of other Ministries.

A performance measurement system must be established (at program level inclusively), with coherent and unitary data basis. A monitoring system should also be made available for all Romanian public institutions. And the first step could be similar to GPRA in USA (Governance, Performance and Results Act). Evaluation should be brought at local level. A good possibility would be through the Public Policy Units. A particular care should be given to the development of the internal evaluation capacity and to the participative approach of evaluation.

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