

The evaluation strategy: the “soul” of the plan

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The evaluation strategy

- Speaking with MAs and examining initial drafts of the plans we noticed generalised difficulties in defining an **evaluation strategy**
- Some plans are formally correct, respect the EC guidelines and cover all the main aspects (evaluation management, EQs, methodological approaches of evaluations, data required, etc.) but they are not fully convincing and their rationale is unclear. They have n “soul”!
- Why are some evaluations planned and others are not? What factors influenced the choice of planned evaluations? How are the findings and knowledge produced by the evaluations intended to be used?
- These questions are often not clearly addressed in the plans and for this reason we focus this presentation on the elements which determine the evaluation strategy.

In the past summer schools we already discussed how to build an evaluation plan, (whom are interested can see “Evaluation plan building blocks” attached at the end of this presentation)

From the individual evaluations to an evaluation strategy

- An evaluation plan is not a list of evaluations, but is a strategic organisation of different evaluations to support the implementation and understand the effects of the programme



- The evaluation strategy requires the general objectives of evaluation activities to be clarified in terms of the knowledge sought and the use of the findings to improve the programme. Accordingly, the different evaluations should contribute to these general objectives

The strategy in the 2014-2020 period

- In the 2014-2020 period CP Regulations was a major determinant of the strategy: at least one impact evaluation to be undertaken for each priority in all the programmes
- Was it a good strategy? Was it suitable for all the programmes? These questions are still to be addressed.
- It is quite evident that significant results were achieved, but some deficiencies remain to be resolved:
 - Impact evaluations increased significantly in number
 - The total number of evaluations increased after a substantial reduction in the 2007-2013 period when evaluation was not compulsory, and the coverage of policy areas was broadened
 - The general quality of impact evaluations remains to be improved and several impact evaluations carried out were not true “impact evaluations”
 - Some policy areas/programmes are still not sufficiently evaluated (partly because the plans were not fully respected)

The evaluation strategy in the 2021-2027 period

- Now, national authorities are responsible for defining the evaluation strategy; the CPR does not offer an immediate solution
- The obligation of covering the five evaluation criteria (efficiency, effectiveness, etc.) is very general and can be observed in many different ways. It does not “prescribe” an evaluation strategy.
- The EQs and the related evaluations do not represent by themselves a strategy, but only a sequence of more or less pertinent issues to analyse.
- How to deal with the definition of the evaluation strategy? Rules are not available and many strategies may be adopted in a plan, but some elements can support a reflection on this.

Defining an evaluation strategy

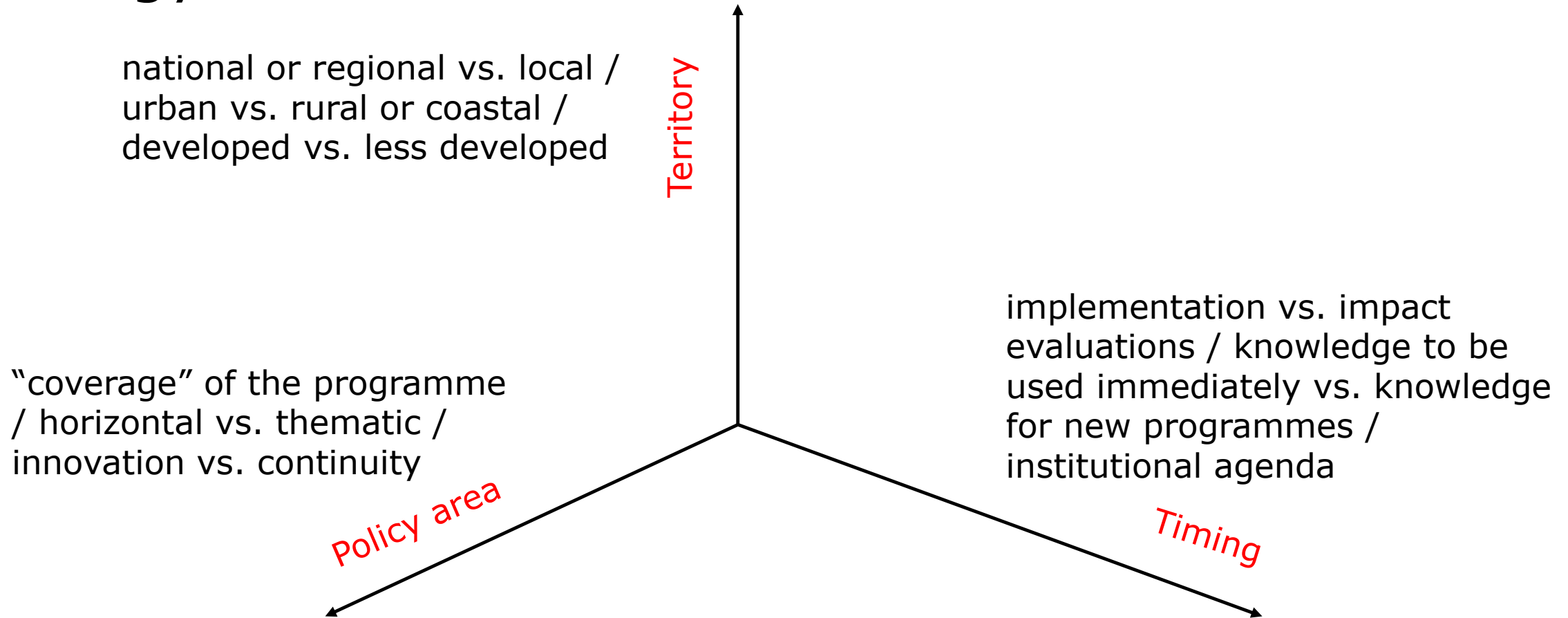
Defining a strategy means making choices

- The evaluation questions (*what you want to know*) remain the basis of the strategy, but EQs and different evaluations can be prioritised according to more general objectives in terms of:
 - knowledge to be produced
 - use of the findings to improve the programme
- This means , for instance, paying more attention to implementation than impact, or to national than local issues, to social effects than economic growth because the programme requires that types of attentions.
- These choices define the evaluation strategy

The main elements to design a strategy

- In cohesion policy, where multi-instruments and complex programmes prevail, three main elements determine the evaluation strategy:
 - **The timing** (the type of evaluation and when)
 - **The policy area** (the component of the programme)
 - **The territory** (the geographic scale and the places to be analysed)
- **Other elements** (methodological approaches, needed data, stakeholders to be involved) are consequences of the strategy but do not define it
- **Financial resources and evaluation capacity** may constraint the evaluation strategy, but do not determine it

The three main dimensions of the evaluation strategy



Policy areas: the coverage of the programme

Main issues

- Are all the components of the programme to be evaluated? Or, do only some of them merit an in-depth assessment? Do some policy areas (environment, SMEs, etc.) or policy instruments (subsidies, repayable financial instruments, etc.) require more attention than other?
- Do synergies between different policy areas and the value of integrated programmes need to be evaluated?
- How should strategic principles (green transition and sustainability, gender equality, employment, etc.) be evaluated?

Some basic reasons for deciding the policy areas to be evaluated:

- Financial allocation in the programme and in comparison to other policies (NRRPs or national policies)
- unknown or well known policy area effects,
- strategic role of some interventions,
- major interest in sectoral effects or for integrated effects
- strategic and institutional objectives to be reached

Timing

Main issues

- Do you need a quick feed back on implementation? Or do you want to know more about long-term effects and impact?
- Probably both, but how can the effort between the two types of evaluation and the knowledge sought be balanced?
- Are administrative capacity and involvement of stakeholders important/strategic factors to improve?
- Is the continuation of some policies uncertain and decision-makers need more evidence to decide?

Some basic reasons tfor deciding the type and timing of evaluations:

- Past implementation experience and existence of measures to strengthen administrative capacity
- Complexity and novelty of some interventions (JTF, urban policies, adaptation to climate change, etc.)
- Uncertain, or completely unknown, short or long term effects of some interventions (validating “pieces” of the ToC)

Territory

Main issues

- Does the area covered by the programme significantly involve different regions?
- Are the socio-economic conditions of the different regions converging or diverging? What are the challenges posed by these differences?
- Are specific territorial strategies in place within the programme?
- Do general interventions differently affect the various regions?

Some basic reasons to decide the territories to be evaluated:

- Main territorial disparities and the extent they can affect the results of the programme
- Territorial strategy or financial concentration to be assessed
- How and to what extent do regions react to the stimulus of the programme
- What interventions need to be compared between different territorial contexts

A possible way to check the characteristics of the strategy

		Implementation and when (knowledge for short-term decisions)	Impact and when (knowledge for long-term decisions)
Policy area	Thematic evaluations and related policy area(s)		
	Horizontal or multi- priority evaluations		
Territory	Territorially focused evaluations		
	Evaluations without a significant territorial focus		

Fill in the table, but also reflect why you selected the evaluations and whether something is missing or redundant

Final remarks

- It is not possible to define 'a priori' a single strategy which is relevant for all programmes
- Careful reflection on the 3 proposed dimensions (policy areas, timing and territory) helps to outline a good evaluation strategy during the screening of the EQs and the definition of the evaluations
- An analytical overview of the 2014-2020 experience (what were the advantages, what was missing, what is still to be analysed, etc.) can be a useful starting point
- The evaluation strategy ("the soul") should be clarified, and justified, to the readers of the plan at the outset.



Evaluation Planning Building Blocks

1

Baseline Review & scoping

This would involve: reviewing the agreed programme – OPs and measures – in relation to EU, national, sectoral and territorial strategies/objectives and needs analyses previously conducted; and conducting an evidence review based on previous evaluations, other studies, published literature etc. so as to ensure existing knowledge is fully incorporated

Outputs: Baseline document that makes clear the scope of potential evaluations including concentrations and clusters in relation to programme and stakeholder objectives

2

Capability review

This would involve: reviewing the capabilities and preconditions that need to be in place to plan, commission and manage an evaluation portfolio including for example:

- Quality Assurance systems;
- Evaluation capacities both within MA evaluation functions and on the supply side;
- The state of data systems and their areas of weakness;
- Links with external experts including with specialists, consulting firms and relevant university units;
- Existing consultation and dialogue arrangements with stakeholders/partners and beneficiaries;
- And mechanisms for MA coordination

Outputs: identification of 'pinch' points and areas where remedial steps are needed

3

Map interdependencies

This would involve: identifying overlapping objectives and target groups; the prevalence of horizontal principles such as climate change mitigation, inclusiveness and non-discrimination and environmental sustainability; and points of overlap across national, territorial and administrative boundaries

Outputs: a first mapping of the scope for 'joint', 'thematic' evaluations

4

Prioritisation and budgeting

This would involve: Reviewing the outputs of the 'Baseline Review' and 'Interdependency Mapping' so as to identify candidate evaluations that should be assessed against criteria such as: centrality, risk, innovativeness etc.

Outputs: Identification of candidate evaluations ranked in terms of priority with indicative budgets attached to each priority area

5

Questions, criteria & methodology

This would involve:

- Identifying high level evaluation questions (HLQs) for each candidate evaluation (outputs of Building Block 4);
- Indication of the kinds of evidence needed to inform Better Regulation Criteria – i.e. Effectiveness, Efficiency, Relevance, Coherence and EU value added;
- An indication of the likely methodologies that would be needed to answer evaluation questions and generate required evidence.

Outputs: a 'template' that summarised HLQs, evidence requirements and outline methodologies for each candidate evaluation

6

Consultation and dialogue

This would involve: Preparing a 'scoping document' that indicated priority areas and main candidate evaluations to discuss with partners, stakeholders, users and beneficiaries; and with evaluation providers/companies in order to a) receive feedback from potential and actual 'users'; b) identify delivery and implementation issues c) mobilise support for positive engagement in Programmes and their evaluation.

Outputs: A summary of stakeholder responses and review of issues identified by stakeholders, users and beneficiaries and preparation of a response document that highlights implications for candidate evaluations

7

Defining Interim Plan

This would involve: collating the outputs from all other 'building blocks' so as to prepare a provisional list and timetable for evaluations indicating priorities, themes, budgets and outline methodologies

Outputs: A provisional plan to meet requirements of CPR Article 44(5)) submitted to Monitoring Committee

8

Systems strengthening

This would involve: Collating outputs of 'Capability Review' (Building block 2) and 'Consultation and Dialogue' (Building block 6) to identify which areas need strengthening. This might include for example: improved Quality Assurance systems; priorities for data 'cleaning' and inter-operability of databases; establishment of network meetings with evaluation providers; a plan to build links with relevant domain experts and academics; and training/professional development requirements for staff of evaluation function.

Outputs: A prioritised list of system strengthening 'actions' with time-lines and budgets attached.