



Effectiveness evaluation of the ICE (Italian Institute of Foreign Trade) promotional programme: a case study

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Foreword

Evaluation and monitoring approaches and methodologies are spreading within the national and regional administrations directly involved in the management of the programmes co-financed by Structural Funds as well as within other institutional contexts where public policies are planned and implemented. The purpose of the present paper is to illustrate some results from a still ongoing training and consultancy project, on behalf of the ICE (Foreign Trade Institute), aiming at integrating ICE programming with evaluation and monitoring practices.

Indeed, during the last year the ICE Programming Unit has been engaged in training and consultancy activities involving the application of evaluation and monitoring methodologies to the activities promoting ICE. The recipients of such initiative belong to the ICE Programming and Control Unit and they already gained experience in the evaluation area in the past within ad hoc working groups. More specifically, the purpose of this activity is to provide the opportunity to develop the means for a more effective management of the projects and start a broader process leading to organizational change and improvement.

Work so far performed on behalf of the ICE Programming and Control unit specifically consisted of:

1. methodological approach for the evaluation of the effectiveness of activities promoting ICE together with the application of Customer Satisfaction survey, applied to fairs (project-level evaluation);
2. evaluability assessment of the program for ICE promotional activities through the approach of main evaluation indicators (program-level evaluation).

This document illustrates first results and critically discusses the opportunity to extend such practices to fields which are not strictly related to development programmes.

The methodological approach of the project was based upon an ongoing interaction between client and consultant, it allowed field training activities along with the redesign of methods in the utilization and organization of information and finally it allowed the operational adoption of the evaluation culture for a more accurate internal management of the institute programming activities.

First paragraph illustrates ICE activities, the second one includes an introduction to effectiveness evaluation, third paragraph describes main evaluation needs of ICE programming and control unit whereas last



paragraph presents a case study, describing innovative solutions devised both at programme and project levels and potential developments as for what concerns impact evaluation.

1. ICE Activities

The Italian Institute for Foreign Trade (I.C.E) is a public, non profit and independent government agency subject to the supervision of the Ministry for Productive Activities (MPA). It is entrusted with promoting trade, business opportunities and industrial co-operation between Italian and foreign companies, mostly by organizing the participation of Italian firms in fairs, exhibitions, workshops and bilateral meetings in more than 100 countries all over the world.

The Italian Institute for Foreign Trade, also known as Italian Trade Commission, operates through 16 offices in Italy and 104 branch offices in over 80 countries in the world and helps foreign and Italian companies to get in touch and develop business opportunities. Its personnel amounts to 1.000 employees and 650 hired locally.

Every year a “**Promotional Programme**” is set up in order to support enterprises, combining projects proposals from ICE foreign networks, embassies, MPA itself, associations, regions, etc...

A draft programme has to be approved by MPA after initiatives are ordered and selected and dialogue with stakeholders has been started. These initiatives must be implemented within the year of proposal or the following one.

Every year around 1.000 events are organised through public funding (and co-financing from enterprises and other entities, accounting for 35% of total budget) involving about 18.000 Italian participants and 28.000 foreigners (2002 data).

Such events have different nature: international fairs (112 in 2002); sector exhibitions (21); events promoting Made in Italy (7); seminars-workshops abroad (93); missions of foreigners in Italy-for example, during specialised fairs (151); activities related to distribution (8); ad campaigns (13); newsletters, catalogues, etc...(22-often on the web); training, websites (66), etc...

In the past years, Promotional Programme has been split in three kinds of programmes :

- **Ordinary Programme (or Base Activity)**, publicly funded- in 2004 accounts for 40% of public funds- aimed at sectoral promotion activities;
- **Special Projects** (20% of public funds) aimed at financing thematic events, that are cross-sector and involve strong communication and image impacts, thanks to logos such as “Life in I-Style” for consumption goods and “Italian Machinery” for instrumental goods (Progetto Speciale Moda, Abitare, Audiovisivo, Meccanica, Agroalimentare, Logistica, «Mediterraneo» e «Balcani»);
- **Agreements with Regions and other subjects** (40% of public funds): following Programme Agreements between MPA and autonomous Regions/Provinces, Chamber System, Sector Associations, CRUI

(Conference of Italian universities directors), during the year ICE-together with partners- sets up Operational Conventions/Agreements that involve several promotional initiatives.

Initiatives related to the Ordinary Programme are included in the Programme since the approval of the Ministry (unless cancellations or additions occurred during the year, even through “adaptation planning”), whereas several initiatives of Special Projects-and even more- of the Agreements with Regions and other bodies, are selected later, during same year.

It must be noted that-since year 2000-mainly financial contributions to Agreements increased due to the ongoing federalist process and to the multiplicity of actors promoting the internationalisation of the enterprises. This has overall intensified the need to identify effective strategies for the coordination and synergy of programming activities.

2. Effectiveness evaluation

As evaluation is an assessment of the opportunity of an intervention with respect to its objectives, criteria and measures as well as management programming tool, the use of evaluation methods is consistent with and desirable for the ICE activities.

Evaluation of public intervention effectiveness assesses the degree of achievement of planned objectives and aims at identifying the main factors that influenced such achievement. Effectiveness can be internal, or managerial, and external.

As regards internal effectiveness, the latter concerns the performance of the institute in financial, procedural terms as well as the capacity of consistently managing the implementation. In the long period, the results of effectiveness analysis may:

- ❑ allow the supervision of single interventions along with programming and related achievements;
- ❑ make ICE activities more transparent to the external international agents interacting with the Institute;
- ❑ create know-how useful for future programming activities;

As for what concerns external effectiveness evaluation, the latter entails the following two features:

- ❑ Economic impact evaluation (general objective);
- ❑ Customer satisfaction assessment (specific objective).

Effectiveness evaluation activity is performed from the perspective of public policy analysis, according to which public resources must be invested with the aim to increase collective welfare. ICE mission is strictly linked to public welfare objectives, as, for instance, the creation of added value through the increase of export activities. Keeping this goal in mind and drawing from past experiences involving the evaluation of public policies, methodology and tools are suggested such as to provide quantitative assessments of socio-economic effects deriving from ICE-financed projects.

The objectives of following analysis are:



- ❑ firstly, facilitate the definition of programming activities strategies;
- ❑ assess the ongoing effects from intervention (monitoring);
- ❑ ascertain the actual contribute of intervention to the achievement of planned objectives (Effects and impact evaluation);
- ❑ assist, finally, the definition of strategies for future programming activities and guarantee the forecasts on impacts deriving from financial interventions (feedback on programming).

Such activities directly affect the operational framework of administrations implementing the intervention. More specifically, as regards the internal effectiveness we focussed on the evaluability of the programme and for the external effectiveness we dealt with the Customer Satisfaction.

3. ICE evaluation needs

ICE **Programming and Control Unit** (PCU) belongs to the Department for Promotion and (together with units for Instrumental Goods, Consumption Goods, Regional Activities, Special Projects and Cooperation). Whereas the latter are entrusted with organisational activities of promotional initiatives-together with the foreign and Italian network of branch offices-, PCU coordinates the formulation of the annual Promotional Programme through the interaction with various entities that intervene during the programming phase and sets up the documents needed for the approval from the Ministry. During the programme management phase, as Operational Agreements with other partners are being carried out, PCU monitors the available budget for the organisation of promotional activities, supervise various administrative phases and refers to the MPA on annual achieved results.

Evaluation of promotional activities, (already started within the ICE-MPA workgroups chaired by external experts) must be considered within this context, with the final goal to better allocate available resources. Indeed, MPA guidelines constantly refer to the fact that, due to their multiplying effects, promotion interventions should be selected with regard to the best possible resource allocation and encourage activities aiming at setting up the monitoring of initiatives in order to evaluate the actual impact upon the enterprises and thus **the effectiveness of promotional interventions**.

More specifically, in the past years a methodology for the assessment of the “**internal managerial effectiveness**” was elaborated: according to the latter, a macro-objective (selected among 12 predefined categories) is coupled with each promotional intervention and some numerical indicators are identified on the basis of grids resulting from the combination of the aforementioned objectives with the different typologies of initiatives. Numerical indicators are selected also on the basis of their relevance to the intervention itself.

Such numerical indicators (for example: number of Italian participants; number of foreign participants; number of contacts in fairs; number of visitors; etc.) are collected in their ex ante and ex post values and can be understood as quantitative “micro-objectives” that the Institute tries to pursue during the organisation of different typologies of promotional activities.



The capacity of the Institute to achieve the organisational objectives defined during the programming phase for each initiative and overall at programme level is assessed comparing the ex ante and ex post values.

As far as this paper is concerned, systematic collection of these data and their insertion in the Institute informatic systems was useful to reformulate the Synthetic framework and to present in chapter 3 the results estimated according to geographical areas, systems and “implementation modalities”.

Another topic is the monitoring of effectiveness of interventions implemented by the Institute by developing the analysis of “external qualitative effectiveness”, that is through the systemised and centralised collection of customer satisfaction data, thanks to questionnaires filled by participants to promotional initiatives.

To date, just one “official” questionnaire model has been used for fairs (typology), data are elaborated neither centrally nor uniformly. Moreover, it is easy to lose data that interest following programming of single initiatives and that indicate the degree of satisfaction of ICE users with promotion services (for example see ICE website).

Finally, it would be interesting to refine a methodology in order to assess the external impact of actions supporting internationalisation. Such attempt was already made in 2001 with regard to four fair initiatives: due to its participation to SISTAN (National Statistic System), ISTAT provided data related to the export of enterprises taking part to the fairs (thanks to a matching between the VAT of participants and ISTAT archives); thus it has been possible to compare ICE participants’ performances with market trends of enterprises that did not take part to initiatives.

4. Case study

PCU sets up six documents for the approval of the Promotional Programme: Synthesis Framework; list of initiatives sorted by segments-systems; list of initiatives sorted by countries-geographical areas; 2 volumes (instrumental goods/consumption goods and other multi-sectoral activities) with the description of single interventions and focus on sectoral/geographical context; list of initiatives including “effectiveness parameters” (numerical indicators).

In its previous version, the Synthesis Framework document sums up the objectives and main features of Promotional Programme to be approved, describing main planned activities by sector and pursued strategic objectives, as well as public fund sorted by segments, sectors, geographical areas, countries, intervention typologies; the estimated co-funding rate sorted in the same way; number of participants (Italians and foreigners) involved in different degree in different initiative typologies and, finally, the other effectiveness indicators” (micro-objectives) collected for the whole programme.

This document was thus mostly descriptive, lacking both a synthetic analysis of the future estimated operational context and an explicit and punctual link with policy objectives included in the guidelines formulated by the Ministry. Moreover, the micro-objectives identified through “effectiveness parameters” (and thus the estimated results) were not sorted by geographical areas or sectors, but aggregated for the whole programme.



Hence resulted a not very schematic structure of the document and the indicators considered more relevant for the following monitoring of results (participants, budget, co-financing rate) were presented with too much aggregation and/or in separated tables, thus lacking a unified vision.

Finally, the document was not expected to include a part dealing with Focus countries, indicated every year in the Ministry programming document.

Overall, it was difficult to infer a unified vision of the intervention, progressing from identified problems to the elaboration of a strategy, to the definition of a system of objectives, hierarchically set and to which indicators could correspond. Thus, verifying the effectiveness, but also the consistence and relevance of the whole programme risked to fail. In order to make the document more readable and make the progress status and actual achievement of several objectives more verifiable, it was necessary to design a unified vision of the intervention logic, achieved through the most common monitoring and evaluation tools.

4.1 Programme evaluability

What explained at this level is applicable to Programming Reports and Reports on past activities, as much as the latter are distinguished elaborations, for the following reasons:

- programming phase is strictly related to the evaluation phase: a document that adopts an “evaluable” structure, obviously facilitates a more simple and linear effectiveness verification.

- evaluation activity aims at providing useful elements for the following programming phase; it is therefore necessary that documents reporting analysis maintain consistence between each other.

- techniques and methodologies adopted are often the same.

To achieve this, consolidated experience of evaluation and planning of structural funds was a main source of inspiration, more specifically:

1. single programming documents and operational programmes
2. independent evaluation (interim, in itinere and ex-post) indexes
3. monitoring reports on programmes implementation.

The new approach could support both the implementation and the ex-post evaluation phases.

Applied monitoring and evaluation methodologies are the following:

1) Context analysis structured through SWOT. The methodological decision to provide the document with specific context analyses derives from the need to:

- ❑ assess the opportunity of carrying out that specific activity, illustrating related sector and geographic context;
- ❑ during the review and ex post evaluation phase, provide a justification for possible changes in case events significantly affected the overall economic context.



MPA provides guidelines on sector and priority areas. Such guidelines have been enriched with updated information coming from several national and international bodies reports on economy (MPA guidelines, ICE-Prometeia study, Economist Intelligence Unit, etc.).

Analysis was structured using SWOT, a technique that allows the display of information in such a structured way to make its reading and comprehension immediate.

SWOT analysis is defined by geographical areas, priority sectors and the institutional implementation “method”, thus crossing institutional/procedural, sectoral and geographic data for the same information.

SWOT analysis, divided by axes, shall be used for the following evaluation reports because it:

- ❑ keeps consistent with socio-economic context analysis, during programming and evaluation phases.
- ❑ ensures the possibility to catch shifts along the three axes, that do represent not only operational but also strategic divisions (land, competitiveness, and environment).
- ❑ facilitates cross-view of the different programming and implementation phases, providing useful hints for final and ex-post evaluations.

2) Definition of Programme strategy through the logical framework methodology. The chapter on objective definition illustrates the ICE overall strategy emphasising the internal consistency of the document with the general objectives of the guidelines.

Drawing from SWOT analysis logic (Sector-land area-Method), objectives are described with regard to three contexts:

- ❑ Cross or “method”; those objectives that define implementation modality of activities, as, for example, “reciprocal coordination of entities involved in the promotion”;
- ❑ sectoral;
- ❑ geographic

The scheme adopted is more simple than that used for the logical framework and it reports specific objectives and related activities for each context (sectoral, geographic, “method”) according to the following figure:

3) Document evaluability through the introduction of indicators. In order to ensure the ex-post evaluability of the document, a series of result indicators could assure a check in terms of effectiveness of Ice activities and consistency in relation to the ex-ante forecasts. Indicators could be:

- ❑ physical realisations of single activities (for example: number of events organised in China);
- ❑ financial (for example: resources and expenses engaged for events in China);
- ❑ activities’ results (for example: number of enterprises involved in events organised in China).



The identification and elaboration of single intervention and their cross analysis will allow to initiate a constant process of evaluation and analysis of ICE activities.

4) Country concept for focus countries. Documents reporting current conditions, economic policies, evaluations on “risk country”, forecast for Made in Italy, ICE strategies and planned activities have been elaborated concerning “Focus countries”, mentioned in the Ministry 2004 guidelines (China, Brasil, Russia and Turkey).

For this purpose, programming documents of ICE foreign network, EIU Reports and ICE-MAE (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) Joint Reports have been used and consulted.

Example of the content of a country concept

Document lay-out		Content description	Possible sources
1) Country overview. This chapter is a brief introduction of the country and provides basic information on the socio-economic context.	1.1) Country profile: basic data	Contains a table summing up the country macroeconomic data.	The Economist Country Reports
	1.2) Country economic policies	Brief description of current policies.	
	1.3) Evaluation “Risk country”	Political situation, stability, human rights, etc.	ISPI: reports on “risk country” or other rating agencies
	1.4) Perspectives	Analysis of country trends	The Economist Country Reports
2) Opportunities of Made in Italy. This document part describes reasons why a certain country is particularly strategic for ICE.	2.1) Italian trade balance	In these paragraphs, a descriptive analysis of import export situation and of several productive sectors of the country (meant both as market and as competitor/partner for Italian enterprises) is carried out.	ICE promotional programme
3) ICE strategies	3.1) Planned activities: objectives and expected results	- Illustration of the general strategy and justification of the strategy with regard to coherence of financial assignments and of priorities verified in first two chapters. - Description of current activities sorted by sectors, together with the identification of budget, possible beneficiaries and specific objectives of the activity.	ICE Promotional Programme
	3.1.1) General strategy		
	3.1.2) Activities by sector		

4.2 Customer Satisfaction Survey

Moving from the programme to the single action, the specific objective is to survey, by means of questionnaires collected at the end of the events, the level of satisfaction for the services provided by Ice and the results, even if partial or only forecasted, connected to the participation to the initiative. This is an exercise for the measurement of the external effectiveness in terms of users satisfaction.

Data collected by direct surveys are processed by statistical and computerised tools, that show for each actions the final judgement in terms of satisfaction, with the possibility to aggregate for a whole year or sector/geographical areas.



The evaluation activity carried out dealt with the *fairs* initiatives. For the future development we think to expand the test to all the other typologies of initiatives (workshops, missions,..). This data could be useful, besides the annual reports, also to:

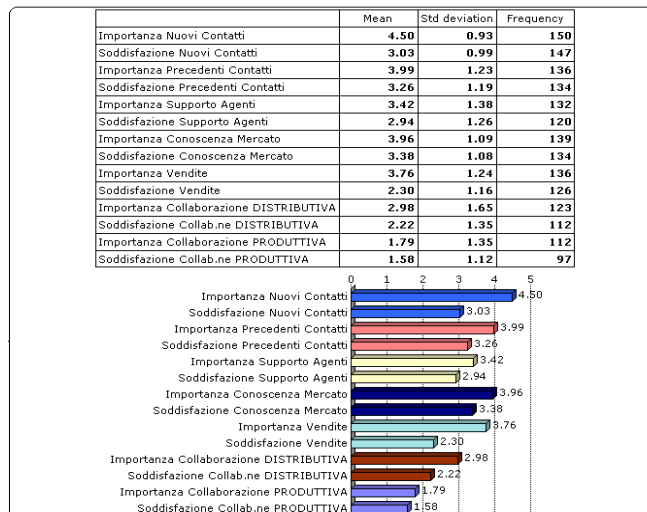
- know needs, expectations and perceptions of users
- stress critical or weak points perceived by the customers on the basis of which try and improve the services provided
- identify the standard performance level and pinpoint best practices as target to get better services and increase the users satisfaction
- communicate externally, also trough the website, the results achieved in terms of effectiveness and users satisfaction (marketing action).

For the implementation of the project we would need to:

- introduce standard format of questionnaires (as for different typologies of initiatives, e.g fairs, seminars, missions...);
- upload homogeneous data on a specific database for a centralised processing
- arrange standard statistical processing to report for each initiative and for the final programming document.

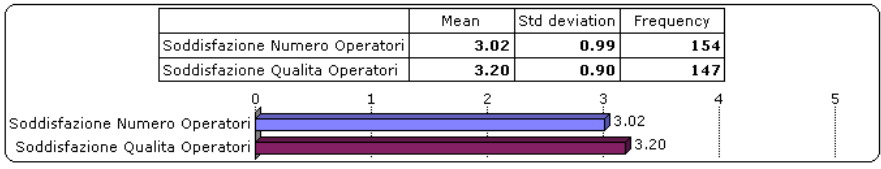
Example of a synthetic report on questionnaires

Raffronto tra importanza e grado di soddisfazione rispetto agli obiettivi che le aziende intendevano raggiungere in occasione dell'evento

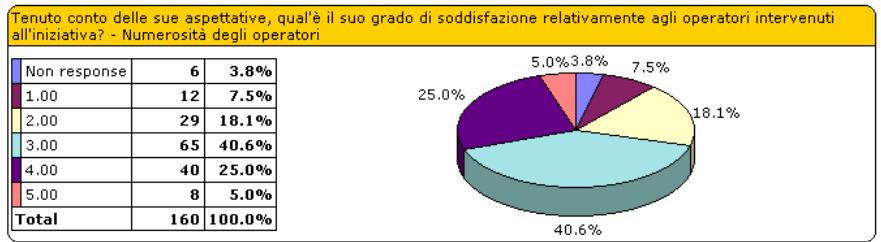




3.1 Grado di soddisfazione riguardo gli operatori intervenuti - Valori medi



3.2 Soddisfazione relativa al numero degli operatori



The specific activities we implemented are the following:

- we started from a previous experiences already developed in the past: we made minor adaptations to a questionnaire already tested;
- we proposed a synthetic measure for effectiveness obtained by the aggregation of the judgements on importance given to the objectives with the level of their achievement.

It is possible to measure the effectiveness for a single objective or for the total objectives by calculation of the deviation from the optimal value. Some automated processing and reporting (made by use of a dedicated software) are shown here. Given the data collected for a Fair in the year 2000, we proposed the following index: .

Effectiveness measure= √(Weight given to the objectives*level of achievement)

Effectiveness*- (scorse from 1 to 5, average value 3)

Which are you objectives in participating to a fair?	Weight (A)	Satisfaction (B)	Effectiveness √(A)*(B)
a. To make new contacts	4.64	2.68	3.53
b. To deepen previous contacts	4.35	3.05	3.64
c. To give support to agents and distributors	3.44	3	3.21
d. To get knowledge about the market trends	3.72	3.11	3.40
e. To sell	4.19	2.38	3.16
f. To start distributive collaboration agreements	4.12	2.61	3.28
g. To start productive collaboration agreements	2.2	1.93	2.06
Average	3.81	2.68	3.18

*We did not consider the item 'Other' (only one answer).

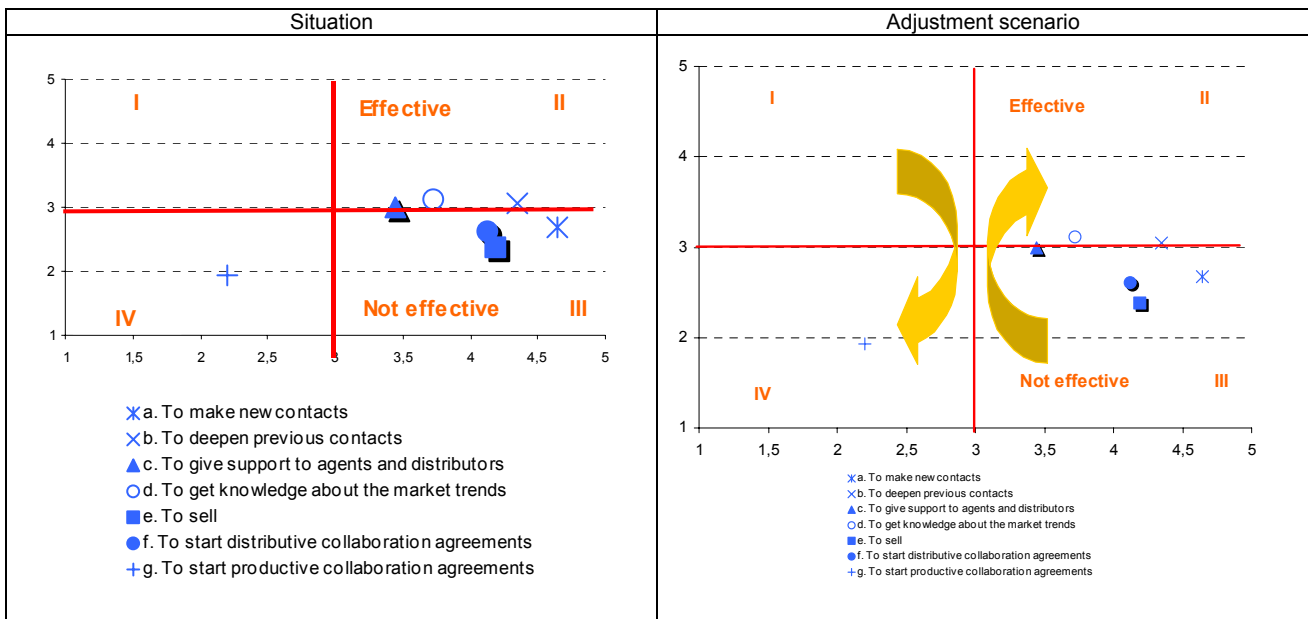
If we aggregate the importance and satisfaction values, the result could not distinguish among the weights given to each factor (the result is the same with importance 3 and satisfaction 2 or importance 2 and satisfaction 3, which give us quite different information). In order to consider simultaneously the two judgements, we proposed a graphical representation of results with a clear-cut distinction among:

- High importance-high satisfaction => effective action
- High importance and low satisfaction => not-effective action



In particular, the best scenario is with high satisfaction for important goals and save resources for not important goals. The optimal position could be in the second and fourth quarter of the graph, with the operative indication that if many goals are positioned in the third quarter the intervention is in general not relevant, as it deals with objectives not perceived as important by the firms.

Effectiveness matrix



This exercise briefly illustrated has a great potential for the discussion about the use of processing results.

Questionnaires collect three kind of information:

- context data (general information about participants);
- satisfaction about firms goals;
- satisfaction about services provided by ICE.

For an overall judgement about the **global performance** of the intervention (from the point of view of the Institute, not only from the firms' one) it would be better a more qualitative interpretation of the data collected, aiming at identifying, for each of the three factors (context, satisfaction about firms goals and satisfaction about services) the real Ice effect, that is to say the effect that would have not occurred without the participation in the Ice activities. For each measured effect or goal achieved we should imagine what would have been the value without the intervention (with and without the project).

As far as the **context data** are concerned, a useful analysis could be the one defined as the penetration capacity of Ice on the market. Some interesting indicators are the actual number of participants in relation to the potential one¹ and the number of new customers in each initiative. As for the other indicators

¹ Given that the capacity of satisfying the demand could be limited by the factors not dependent by the Ice action (for example budget constraint, inefficient fair structure and so on). In the interpretation of collected data it is necessary to assume a critical point of view in order to explain the reason for success or un-success beyond the mere data.



(introduction and repositioning of the operators as the result of a single initiatives and in comparison with foreign competitors) it is much more difficult to distinguish the Ice effect from the other external effects.

It would be also useful to compare data on the total participation of Italian exhibitors with the previous year. It could be possible to determine the potential demand of the services provided by the Institute upon which design specific incentive actions.

As far as the **satisfaction of the firms** is concerned it is useful to discuss about the possible factors, directly related to the Ice actions, that contributed to the achievement of the firms objectives. There could be, in fact, some particular circumstances, concerning a sector or country (external effects not directly related to the Ice actions, such as, for example, a bad economic or political situation) that could influence the achievement of objectives.

As far as the **satisfaction about Ice** services are concerned, it is useful to identify which services provided to firms that record a high satisfaction, have been determinant for the choice of purchasing Ice services. In this way we identify the real effect of the Ice action (usefulness of the action, as the capacity to respond to a need the firms could not answer by their own).

4.3. Further development: impact analysis

As already pointed out the overall effectiveness evaluation should be assessed by the combination of the two aspects: users satisfaction and impact of the intervention compared to other macroeconomic aspects (employment, value added, etc.). Besides typical approaches of managerial sciences, such as the Customer Satisfaction, in fact, the approach of public policy analysis in a broad sense could enrich the effectiveness analysis by the collection of data on long term effects. Quantitative survey could provide punctual data on effects produced by promotional activities (turnover increase, export increase on the total turnover) that could be used for re-programming purposes. On the basis of this approach we think that the most appropriate methodology could be a direct survey focussed on the typology of impacts identified. These could be:

- employment in quantitative terms (created, maintained, involving woman or young people)
- typology of employment created (full time/part-time, professional profiles..)
- effect on the investing decision (the investment would have been made also without the promotional services?)
- income effects (added value or turnover trends)
- effects on competitiveness (trend of exports as a percentage of total turnover)
- effects on characteristics of market outlets (variations in the geographical distribution of sales, penetration in new markets);
- integration effects on enterprises (agreements on commercial or productive collaborations with foreign enterprises).

Direct survey to beneficiaries allows the identification of economic effects directly produced by the intervention and distinguish among different kinds of specific impacts. However it has also some limitations

in terms of resources and costs. On the other hand phone, postal or on-line questionnaires, even if they do not guarantee the same information quality, are much more feasible.

After the methodological framework the second step is the sample stratification, that could be based on localisation, sector, dimension (number of employee, added value..). In order to evaluate the net impact of the project, the methodology should include a control group, that is to say a sample made of similar firms (with homogeneous characteristics of sector, turnover, employees) that did not participated in the initiatives. This sample represents the counterfactual hypothesis, that allows to compare simultaneously performances of participants and not participants. However it has to be stressed that the control group is always very hard to identify according to strict criteria of homogeneity.

Our proposal about the questionnaire is to have three sections: general characteristics (economic information about the firm), general impact (employment, added value, turnover), specific impact (export increase, geographical localisation of sales..).

Concluding remarks

We think that the exercise developed so far within the Programming and Control Unit of Ice gave significant results in terms of operative and external effectiveness.

Innovations proposed for the Synthesis Framework, besides improving transparency of the Programmes and of its final objectives, allows to have, thanks to the divisions in Areas, Systems and Operating modes, an immediate vision of context, activities and forecasted results in terms of number of initiatives, budget need and co-financing rate. For the annual report it would be much easier to identify and measure the variations occurred in relations to forecasts made ex-ante and their reason, in order to re-address or correct the planned strategies. Moreover, actions implemented so far about the Customer Satisfaction survey, allowed us to start testing the methodologies and data processing that now is ready to be applied to all the Ice activities.

We believe that the added value of the effort made so far –as illustrated in this paper- and of the strategic choice of ICE about the implementation of a monitoring and evaluation system, is not only the improvement in the monitoring capacity and, hopefully, in effectiveness. We believe, in fact, that monitoring and evaluation approaches provides Ice with tools for accountability in relation to citizens and cofunding firms, which are often missing in public or semi-public institutions. Evaluation of programmes could give a good measure of the usefulness of an organisation, maybe more that the effectiveness and efficiency, allowing it to face in a transparent way with the public opinion and decision making judgement.