

The Evaluation Units Network: a note on a recent institutional innovation in Italy

Introduction

This note illustrates a recent innovation in the institutional framework for evaluation in Italy. It draws from the author's contribution to the feasibility study of the project¹.

Law n. 144, May 17, 1999, required all central and regional administrations to establish a network of the public investment evaluation units, supporting programming activity "with the aim to improve quality and efficiency of planning process for development policies at several levels". Subsequent procedural acts, more specifically a body of measures proposed by the State-Regions Conference as well as Financing Law and resolutions from CIPE (Interministerial Committee for Economic Planning) laid the basis for the unprecedented wide integration of the evaluation activity into the Italian public administration, leading to the creation of the evaluation units network.

The network represents an institutional innovation that gives evaluators the opportunity to improve their profile within the public administration, allowing them to constitute a professional community formally independent from their principals, politicians and bureaucrats.

The legal framework

Law n.144 revealed the will of the government to decentralize public investment policies and to raise the professional level of public administrations. It identified the tasks and functions of the evaluation units, which should aim at offering technical assistance during the decisional process, the management of public investment monitoring and the gradual extension of Structural Funds approaches to other local public policies. A directive issued on September 10, 1999, by the President of the Council of Ministers, after consultation with the State-Regions Conference laid down basic requirements for the establishment of evaluation units, differentiating between functions of the evaluation units within the context of regional administrations and those of evaluation units within national administrations. The directive expressly mentioned the constitution of the network as the functional link between several evaluation units allowing them to share best practices, know-how, methodological resources, evaluation and any other tools useful to improve the qualitative level and the reliability of public investment policies, in order also to make better use of available financial resources.

The State-Regions Conference was assigned the task to devise a more detailed definition of modalities for the realization of the network. The Conference approved a protocol on February 10, 2000, identifying common activities for each evaluation unit. It also promoted a more active role of the Technical Joint Committee (constituted by the Conference already on October 21, 1999) and delegated to it promoting, guidance and technical assistance functions for the constitution of the evaluation units, the programming and set up of the evaluation units integrated network and the supervision over professional training activities.

The network is thus seen as a "federal" structure whereby each evaluation unit shares coordinating and directing functions, albeit endowed with specific autonomy.

¹ The realisation of this feasibility study was assigned to a panel of experts including Massimo Florio with Paolo Rosso, Silvia Vignetti and Alessandro Valenza (CSIL-Center for Industrial Studies-Milan) on behalf of the NUVAl project, FORMEZ, sponsored by the Department of Development and Cohesion Policies and the Department of Civil Service.

Another fundamental step towards the creation of the network is the Constitutional Court's 2001 decision recognizing the crucial and innovative role played by evaluation units which, among others, may help closing the gap in the evaluation capacity between Italian regions.

A State-Regions protocol agreement was passed on October 24, 2002, containing the final guiding lines for the constitution of the integrated network. It specifically envisaged the set up of a General Conference of the evaluation units composed of a representative for each unit with decisional power and a representative appointed by the State-Regions Conference. The General Conference is responsible for defining the objectives as well as for approving and periodically following the network programming activities. It also plans annual meetings and supervises the good coordination and functioning of the network. A specific Steering Committee is set up to carry out coordinating and operational tasks.

The creation of the evaluation units

The Joint Technical Committee appointed by the State-Regions Conference issued a document with instructions for the creation and start-up phase of the evaluation units. During this phase a Technical and Scientific Committee was in charge of pushing local and central administrations towards the creation of evaluation units and of providing technical assistance to this end.

Regions could choose different paths launching the evaluation units. Some regional administrations opted for a more flexible approach, creating evaluation units through ad hoc legislative acts from their executive bodies. Other regions chose to integrate the project within their regional programming.

The positioning of evaluation units within each regional administration differs so that in some regions the evaluation units are excluded from decisional processes and carry out just consulting functions upon request whereas in other regions they are successfully integrated in the organisational structures, establishing a useful dialectic interaction with them. Yet, both positionings present shortcomings: in the first case the evaluation units lack administrative responsibility, a prerequisite for the modernisation of the entire structure; in the second case, evaluation units may become more subject to political pressures when producing evaluations.

Finally, the introduction of external personnel was generally perceived as an added value. However, its selection process and system of incentives should be regulated in some guidelines, in order to avoid tensions with internal personnel.

Already during the start-up phase, one potential risk emerged as a threat against the successful functioning of the evaluation units network. In fact, some of the regional administrations tended to perceive the evaluation units as entities created in order to patch the holes during the regional programming phase and asked them to perform advisory activities rather than evaluations. However, the status of the evaluation units was stronger elsewhere and overall it has been increasing.

The feasibility study for the network

A feasibility study in 2001 laid down guiding principles that were substantially approved by the State-Regions Conference. Such principles included:

- ◆ Ownership of the network bestowed upon the units and public administrations responsible for their creation with a common central promoting function;
- ◆ A federal structure with full acknowledgement of the autonomy of the members;
- ◆ Sharing of management and coordination functions;
- ◆ Exchange of information including specific activities such as the evaluation of EU structural funds, public investment feasibility studies, and data monitoring analysis;

- ◆ Exchange of experiences, methodologies, data sources and research;
- ◆ Common IT platform to ease and accelerate information exchange.

The role played by the evaluation units consists of technical support to the whole decisional process of central and local administrations, with the goal to improve and balance the level of competences leading to the optimisation of programming, implementing and monitoring activities for public interventions and policies. As much as the feasibility study proposed a unitary structure for the network, it also prefigured “sub-networks” or “thematic networks” in order to better deal with the requests from each administration and to adapt to their natural evolution. Such segmentation in several “sub-networks” may also facilitate the development of links and synergies with other networks dealing with similar issues.

According to the same study, the network should not present a hierarchical structure; it should rather develop according to the real needs expressed by different stakeholders. The evaluation units should define their own operational content, stimulated by the promoting and coordinating activities of a central agency. On the one side the network should offer standard services in order to maintain a general level of “customer satisfaction”, on the other it should develop some flexibility in order to cope with different needs that each member may display over time. Eventually the network should develop into a “Knowledge Management System” whereby the informational and knowledge accumulated so far can be correctly acquired, structured, updated, classified, re-elaborated and used at the proper time and place, in the way that best meets members’ needs.

More specifically, the feasibility study suggests the following list of products that the network should be able to offer his members:

- ◆ Services related to the coding of projects for the public sector monitoring system;
- ◆ Search tools for legislation related to Programming, Monitoring and Evaluation (PME) activities;
- ◆ Search and update systems for bibliography related to PME;
- ◆ Database for statistical data relevant to PME activities;
- ◆ Shared information for network users;
- ◆ Database of working documents from network users;
- ◆ Online forum and virtual community;
- ◆ “Fairs” and workshop;
- ◆ Newsletter and alert services.

Whereas some of these products are “passively” enjoyed by users, like informational services, some others involve the “active” interaction of users, as in the case of online forums. The next step would lead to active collaboration between users who would share common activities and projects. Mutual trust and the will to contribute to the network are necessary conditions that can be further stimulated by the aforementioned promoting agency.

The network’s take off

On April 17, 2003, the State-Regions Conference operationally constituted the network of the evaluation units, already set up in 33 central and regional administrations. The same day the first meeting of the CGN was held in Rome. Few months later, on January 29-30, 2004, the first Conference of the evaluation units took place: representatives from central and regional administrations as well as experts from the ISTAT (Italian Statistical Institute) launched a discussion on first achievements and experiences in the field of public investment programming, evaluation and monitoring.

The Steering Committee is in charge of studying, elaborating and implementing the annual program. The same Committee provides consultancy on how to improve cost-efficiency and cost-effectiveness in the management of resources.

Since 2001 funds are assigned to each evaluation unit by the national budget according to their performance. Performance criteria include, among others: efforts put to improve the positioning of the evaluation units inside public administration; implementation status of the evaluation units creation; qualitative level of formation requested from officials; actual carrying out of functions.

Finally, a technical unit was set up with aim to implement the operational directives decided by the Steering Committee.

Final remarks

An accurate and participatory programming phase, the availability of adequate financial resources along with the approval of accompanying legislation, all contributed to the successful launch of the network. This advanced experiment could grow and give its important contribute to the development of an Italian and even European evaluation culture and practice.

Yet, major risks cannot be ignored. One of these lies in the trade-off between a network of experts integrated in the public administration and thus more subject to external pressures and a network meant as a professional community of evaluators that minimizes such pressures, but reduces its influence on decisional processes.

The idea of a professional community itself entails uncertainty: it can organize itself as a lobby within public administration, as an informal representative body, etc.

Heterogeneity of planning objectives, personnel involved with the creation of evaluation units together with indecisiveness of national and regional legislators in assigning task to evaluation units, on the one hand guarantees plurality of approaches, but on the other hand, it can ultimately shatter the network. There is not easy solution to avoid these risks.

The network is a political-cultural experiment, though within an institutional framework (“shell”). The framework cannot be mistaken for its content. It is a necessary condition for the successful outcome but not sufficient. The goal is to avoid the development of a closed technocratic élite, and rather to instill evaluation culture in the programming process, in keeping with similar trends occurring-not without difficulties and contradictions- in the European Commission and in other member states that may consider the Italian experience in this area².

² For more details see the website: www.nuval.formez.it