

How do the regional authorities use evaluation? Comparative study of Poland and Spain

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Abstract: Regional operational programmes (ROPs) financed to a great extent within European Union (EU) cohesion policy have become a crucial tool to boost up development of regions lagging behind. A proper evaluation should serve to effective and efficient implementation of these programmes. This article presents first cross-state comparative study on evaluation activity and the use of evaluation results by regional authorities in Poland and Spain. The results show that even though evaluation activity in studied regions differs, no significant distinctiveness in the use of evaluation findings exists. We conclude that both Polish and Spanish regions need to adopt strategies for better use of evaluation as a source of usable knowledge and reflections in managing regional development programs.

Keywords: Poland, Spain, evaluation, regional operational programmes, cohesion policy.

1. Introduction.

Along with the development of approaches connected with improving the efficiency of public interventions, which include new public management, new public governance and evidence based policy, evaluation has become an increasingly popular tool supporting public policy management (Osborne 2006; Vedung 2010). By definition, evaluation should serve to assess the quality and value of public interventions: policies and programs, and provide conclusions that improve their effectiveness (Patton 1997; Royse et al. 2001). However, evaluation may serve its purpose only if one is able (and willing) to use the findings issuing from evaluation, in other words, using the information obtained to modify the orientation and management process of the intervention (Johnson et al. 2009; Højlund 2014; Lieberman et al. 2014).

Johnson et al. (2009: 378) defined the use of evaluation as: “any application of evaluation processes, products or findings to produce an effect”. Since the beginning of the 1980s, the use of evaluation has become a key subject of discussion and research (Alkin and Coyle 1988) as a result of observing the disappointingly limited impact of many evaluations on the shape and method of carrying out public interventions¹. This phenomenon is widely documented in the literature (de Leon 1988; Greene 1994; Rist 1994; Weiss and Bucuvalas 1980; Dahler-Larsen 1998; Patton 1997; Pawson and Tilley 1997; Henry and Mark 2003; Johnson et al. 2009). Bearing in mind that the main aim of evaluation is to improve the effectiveness of public policy, the widespread failure to make use of its findings by decision-makers Højlund (2014) calls a peculiar paradox. As Henry and Mark (2003) observe, in past decades no other aspect of the evaluation process has generated such interest and such numbers of empirical studies as the subject of utilization. In Patton's opinion, the question of using evaluation is “a critical public issue”, since the way evaluations are used influences the spending of significant sums of public funds (Patton 1997: 4).

There are significant differences in the use of evaluation among European public administrations (Furubo et al 2002; Olejniczak et al. 2011). Nordic and Northern European countries have the longest tradition and culture in this field, dating back to 1970s, while in the other parts of the continent evaluation did not attract interest until the 1990s (Southern Europe) or after 2004 (Central and Eastern Europe) (Bustelo 2014). A special role in spreading evaluation practices in the European public sector has been played by EU cohesion policy (CP). Established in 1986 (as a consequence of signing Single European Act in 1986) it has evolved into the major policy tool of EU amounting to over one third of its budget (€350 billion in 2007-2013) and affecting all its member states and regions. The basis of CP

¹ As a good example of that situation we can offer a quote from R. Rippey (given in Alkin, Coyle, 1988:332) who said: *currently, there is nothing to indicate that evaluation has given rise to anything more in the field of education than a headache for researchers, a threat to innovators and depressing articles in periodicals dedicated to evaluation.*

constitute socio-economic programmes developed and implemented by member states and their regions. Therefore CP offers an interesting context of multiannual and multi level governed intervention as a subject of evaluation.

Adoption of evaluation in many of Southern, Central and Eastern European countries derived from the requirements that must be fulfilled by beneficiaries of Structural Funds (Toulemonde 2000; Bachtler 2001; Bachtler 2011; Bustelo 2014). In some of these countries CP still remains the main domain for implementing evaluation practices and their spread to other public policies must be considered as limited. As previous studies have shown, institutions engaged in implementing CP in particular countries differ in terms of their evaluation activity, indicated by the number and subject range of studies performed in addition to the obligatory requirements of external institutions (Furubo et al. 2002). One of the most important elements of CP, involving a significant share of the funds provided for realization of its goals (namely 213 billion euro in the years 2007-13), is regional policy realised in so-called Objective 1 regions. As no cross-state comparative studies on evaluation activity and the use of evaluation results have been conducted within the area of regional development programs co-financed by CP, we decided to concentrate on this subject, examining these phenomena in regions of two EU member states: Poland and Spain. There are few premises that lie behind the choice of these particular countries. First of all, the critical moment which spurred development of the evaluation of regional public policy in both cases was accession to the EU, as well as the fact that the regions of Poland and Spain became the greatest beneficiaries of CP (Toulemonde 2000; Summa and Toulemonde 2002). Second, although the evaluation requirements concerning operational programs implemented under CP are equal for all countries, the development of evaluation practices in this field in Poland and Spain has been completely different: while in Poland a vast number of studies were carried out, Spain remains at the end of the EU members evaluation activity ranking list (Olejniczak et al. 2011). And finally, the

selected countries adopted a similar system of implementing regional policy, leaving the regional authorities significant autonomy in preparing and managing their regional operational programmes (ROPs).

In this article we decided to examine to what extent the differences in evaluation activity observed at the member state level are also present at the regional level, with respect to implementation of ROPs. We also concentrated on identifying factors that determine the evaluation activity of authorities executing ROPs in the studied regions. Furthermore, we found it crucial to examine whether differences in evaluation activity translate into the degree of utilization of evaluation findings, and therefore may be considered as a factor influencing the effective management of regional programmes and, in consequence, regional development policies.

The findings of the analyses conducted bridge the gap in the literature on the subject. Existing comparative studies on evaluation activity, including regional policy area, focus mainly on national level (e.g. already mentioned Furubo et al. 2002 Bachtler 2011; Toulemonde 2000; Bachtler, Wren, 2006). On the other hand the literature on evaluation use is dominated by American authors, and their focus is mainly on use of single studies and reports and the perspective of evaluator (compare Cousins and Leithwood, 1986; Shulha and Cousins, 1997; Johnson et al., 2009). Our study focus on evaluation activity at regional level and analyze use of evaluation and its factors from the perspective of institutions commissioning studies and potentially using their findings.

The article has been divided into several parts. In the first section, we present the context and stages of development in the evaluation culture in Poland and Spain. In the second part, we analyse the shape and organisation of the system for evaluating ROPs implemented within CP functioning in both countries. In subsequent sections, we compare the evaluation activity of

the institutions involved in the process of implementing regional operational programmes in selected regions, and next, we describe the factors which cause the significant differences identified in this respect. Finally, we respond to the question as to whether greater evaluation activity relates to an equally greater degree of actual utilization of knowledge resulting from evaluation. This raises the question of whether differences in evaluation activity in implementing ROPs can influence the effectiveness of programme management in the regions of both countries.

Our discussion is based on the results of a literature review and studies carried out in 6 regions (in Spain: Andalusia, Castile La Mancha and Extremadura, and in Poland: Łódzkie, Dolnośląskie and Mazowieckie). The research method included: analysis of the literature and documents concerning the evaluation system for ROPs, and individual interviews with representatives of institutions involved in the management, implementation and evaluation of RPOs. Studies of the actual utilization of evaluation findings from Spanish and Polish regions differed in terms of the research approach adopted owing to the fact that the system for monitoring the implementation of findings exists only in Poland. For this reason, the case study of Polish regions took account of analyses of documents created in the process of performing evaluations as well as describing the system of implementing the operational programmes. Our studies were carried out in the period of September-November 2013.

2. Background: the development and place of evaluation in public policy in Spain and Poland.

The evaluation of public policies in Spain has a much longer history than in Poland. Although limited to cost-benefit analyses, and to conducting evaluations of selected public investment projects (Pazos Zapico-Goñi 2002:291), evaluation in Spain appeared as soon as in the 1960s or 1970s, with the so-called “first wave” of evaluation (Vedung 2010). At the same time (and up till 1989) Poland was a people's republic - a system which was far from providing rational

means of implementing public policy. The 1980s in Spain saw the establishment of the first institutions whose aim was to assist the government in implementing public policy by providing analyses of existing needs and the types of public services able to respond to them, as well as evaluations of the outcomes of government action (Ballart 1998:154; Pazos Zapico-Goñi 2002:292).

Among the authors dealing with the issue of evaluation culture evolution, there is complete agreement that the greatest stimulus (“essential boost” (Muñoz 2009), “*factor clave*” (Haarich 2005); “*principales agentes promotores*” (Rivero Recuenco 2011), “basic motor” (Fernández-Ramírez and Reboloso 2006) for the development of evaluation in Spain was connected with the nation's accession to the EU in 1986, as well as the increase in the significance of the CP, of which Spain became a main beneficiary (Furubo et al. 2002: 16–18; Viñas 2009; Muñoz 2009). Similarly, in Poland the initiation of implementation of evaluation in public policy practise did not come until the start of the EU accession process, as a result of introducing support programmes co-funded from pre-accession funds in the nineties (Górniak 2007). Thus, Poland's accession to the EU – which took place almost two decades after Spanish one – can in fact be treated as the starting point of the systematic use of evaluation in Poland (Bienias et al. 2009: 140). For the development of evaluation culture in this country the key importance fact is, that in 2007 Poland outclassed Spain's leadership and became the biggest beneficiary of EU funds ever.

Despite the convergence of factors that initiated the development of the evaluation in both countries, the process of institutionalizing evaluation into public policy management and the shape of the system should be considered as entirely different. While in Spain there are examples of transferring the evaluation practice to areas unrelated to cohesion policy, in Poland evaluation (up to this point) remained strictly the domain of policies co-financed by EU funds.

In 2005 in Spain the National Agency for the Evaluation of Public Policy and Service Standards (*Agencia Estatal de Evaluación de las Políticas Públicas y la Calidad de los Servicios - AEVAL*) (Garde Roca 2006; Rivero Recuenco 2011) was established. The country also decided to introduce into legislation special regulations to include evaluation procedures in implementing public policy in four areas: education provision, health care, social services and international cooperation (Muñoz 2009). A growing number of study courses have also been set up which anticipate issues relating to public policy evaluation as well as university degree courses (including post-graduate courses) specially dedicated to evaluation (Haarich 2005; Fernández-Ramírez i Reboloso 2006; Viñas 2009: 460; Weremiuk 2010).

The development of an evaluation system not strictly connected to the absorption of EU funds is also taking place at lower administrative levels in Spain (albeit to a limited extent). As Pazos and Zapico-Goñi (2002) point out, the quasi-federal political system, which was introduced in 1976, encouraged the development of an evaluation culture in city administration and regional governments. Starting in 2005, as was the case at the ministerial level, the first attempts at including evaluation - as a support tool - can be observed in the process of implementing public policy at the level of autonomous communities (Velez 2003). However, the development and institutionalization of evaluation use in public policy does not occur uniformly in all the Spanish autonomies. A positive course of development, in terms of introducing an evaluation system in selected areas of implemented policy, relative to the country as a whole is shown by: Catalonia, the Basque country, the Autonomous Community of Madrid and Andalusia, while “the rest of the country remains a white patch in the regional geography of evaluation” (Haarich 2005: 74-75). Considerable doubt as to the actual level of institutionalization and use of evaluation in the public policy of autonomous governments was raised by Lazaro who points out (2012:32): “It cannot be denied, that we possess a skeleton legal framework encompassing the norms which anticipate the requirement to use evaluation.

However, in most cases, this regulatory requirement has not been put into practice”.

In contrast to the situation in Spain, the evaluation system of public policies in Poland occurs solely as part of the widely understood CP implementation system, or is required and/or supported by EU structural funds. The need to transfer evaluation practices from the sphere of structural funds to other national public policies has been a subject of public debate for several years (Żuber and Bienias 2008). However, the only tangible effect of this discussion has been the introduction to legislation of the requirement to conduct ex-ante evaluations of strategies and public development programmes. There is no evidence however, of the development of a systemized approach to evaluation within the framework of any of the domestic public policies.

Yet although institutionalized only in the domain of CP evaluation culture in Poland has been developing so dynamically that it is indicated as a good practice. Among the significant signs of development in the Polish evaluation culture, we can name the establishment of the Polish Evaluation Society as early as in 2000, the growing number of post-graduate study programmes in the field of evaluation (currently around 15), annual nationwide evaluation conference as well as number of regional conferences, and the increasingly frequent appearance of publications (books, articles and handbooks) concerning evaluation.

To summarize this analysis of the context of evaluation use in public policy in both countries, we can state that Spain has, for over two decades, made attempts to create a system of evaluation, also in areas unrelated to the CP. The effects of these efforts are, however, fairly limited, and evaluation activity on a national scale is moderate. Although over 85 evaluations were conducted in the years 2007-2011 (Ruiz Martinez 2012:16), Spain did not elaborate coherent system of public policy evaluation. It manifests in the lack of a uniform methodology, the sporadic nature of research undertaken and the lack of policies for disseminating and utilizing research findings (Garde Roca 2006; Viñas 2009). The system of

evaluation is also clearly disorganized and lacks motivational stimuli for further growth, and there is also a low level of professionalism and readiness to share and learn from experience (Haarich 2005). Limited knowledge on the function and methodology of performing an evaluation, as well as the general attitude towards it, has discouraged (and continues to discourage) the development of an evaluation culture in the country. Evaluation is still mistaken among both civil servants and politicians as a form of control and/or financial auditing (Rivero Recuento 2011; Lazaro 2012).

Meanwhile in Poland, the development of an evaluation culture has occurred over the space of the last ten years, and has been very dynamic in terms of the number of evaluations conducted, although it is still limited to the sphere of EU funding. From 2004 to the present date, we can observe dynamic growth in the development of evaluation related to the implementation of policies co-financed under CP: the annual number of evaluations commissioned grew from 5 in 2004 to around 50 in the years 2006-2007, and to over 120 from 2008 (National Evaluation Unit and Skórska 2011). In total, in the years 2004-2013, over 750 evaluation studies were performed (Olejniczak and Author 2013).

3. The evaluation system for regional operational programmes.

Spain

Public policies that involve the implementation of CP indicate those in which the development of evaluation is the most advanced and systemized (Fernández-Ramírez and Reboloso 2006; Viñas 2009; Muñoz 2009, 2013; Rivero Recuento 2011). The current number of evaluations performed for regional operational programmes is hard to estimate due to the lack of a coherent evaluation report database. In accordance with European Commission (EC) guidelines *ex ante* evaluations are required for all 19 ROPs. The programmes were also included in thematic evaluations, although not all regions performed them according to the planned schedule in 2011 (Faiña et al. 2012). We could assume that at

least 95 evaluations concerning ROPs should have been carried out in the period 2007-2013². However estimates from other sources show that since 2000, around 100 evaluations have been performed relating to implementing programmes within the framework of CP (Weremiuk 2010).

Although the system of implementing CP funds can be counted as decentralized, it should be emphasised that role of managing all the regional operational programmes is performed by the General Sub-Directorate for European Fund for Regional Development Administration (*Subdirección General de Administración del FEDER - SGA*), as the organizational body of the General Management for EU Funds in the Ministry of the Economy and Treasury (*Dirección General de Fondos Comunitarios del Ministerio de Economía y Hacienda*). On the strength of separate agreements with regions' governments, the Ministry awards them an intermediary role, delegating a wide range of tasks relating to programme implementation³. In practice therefore, the ROPs that are elaborated and implemented at the regional level are coordinated by the Ministry of Economy and Finance which is held responsible for this implementation by the EC. The way this system of implementing regional operational programmes is constructed is not, however, reflected in the system of evaluating operational programmes, for which a much greater degree of centralization was decided upon.

The adopted Strategic Monitoring Plan and Continuous Evaluation of European Fund for Regional Development, European Social Fund and Cohesion Fund (*Plan de Seguimiento Estratégico y Evaluación Continua de FEDER, FSE y Fondo de Cohesión*)⁴ for the years 2007-2013 outlines the entire structure of evaluating CP implementation, integrated with the process of implementing operational programmes in Spain. As the title suggests - the Plan is

² 19 ex ante and 4 thematic evaluations for each of the 19 ROPs implemented in Spain, as stated in the Plan.

³ The range of tasks defined in article 60, point a), b), c), d), e), f), g), i), j) of the EC ruling 1083/2006 means that in fact it is regions that act as the institutions managing ROPs.

⁴ Hereafter referred to as the "Plan".

common to programmes co-financed from all three CP funds, and therefore contains guidelines on the evaluation of regional programmes. In them, it is indicated that, according to EC guidelines, each operational programme will be evaluated ex ante. The document also assumes, that the evaluation process will consist of: strategic evaluation (mainly analyses and assessment of interventions at the level of National Strategic Reference Frame (NSRF) strategic objectives), on-going evaluation as well as evaluation of informational and promotional activities. The on-going evaluation anticipates two types of research. The first of these concerns strategic thematic evaluation. Responsibility for conducting the assessment of four thematic areas lies with the ministerial body (The Ministry of Economy and Finance as well as the Ministry of Labour and Immigration). The role of regional governments is limited in this case to cooperation, consisting in providing essential data (Plan:15). The second type of on-going evaluation is operational evaluation. The Plan anticipates that a on-going operational evaluation will be carried out in the case of exceptional circumstances. Two scenarios justifying commissioning such evaluations are: (i) a case where amendments are considered for operational programmes or (ii) where significant deviation from the set objectives transpire, appearing as so-called warning indicators ("*indicadores de alerta*")⁵. The monitoring of these indicators is the responsibility of the General Sub-Directorate for Spatial Planning and Evaluation of Community Programmes (*Subdirección General de Programación Territorial y Evaluación de Programas Comunitarios - SGPTEPC*) of the Ministry of the Economy and Finance (MEH). Depending on the area of implementation in which the irregularity arises, the evaluation should be carried out either by SGPTEPC or the regional government body acting as the intermediary or - acting in collaboration - both of these entities.

The Plan also provides information on the number of persons involved in conducting an

⁵ These regulations are modeled on EC regulations and cohere to national evaluation guidelines adopted by the Polish Ministry for Regional Development.

evaluation. In 2009, in the 19 self-government administrations, there were only 10 personnel dealing with evaluations, of which as many as 8 were employed on a part-time basis. In regions falling within the convergence target, only the Extremadura and Galicia authorities anticipated the employment of personnel dealing with implementing the evaluation process (and then only part-time). In Extremadura these were 4 employees from the General Directorate of Regional Finance and European Funds (*Dirección General de Financiación Autonómica y Fondos Europeos*), while in Galicia 3 people were employed in the General Sub-Directorate of Economic Planning (*Subdirección Xeneral de Planificación Económica*) (Plan: 20). In Spain there is no system for monitoring the implementation of recommendations resulting from evaluations (Weremiuk 2010, interviews).

Poland

From the 2007-13 financial perspective, the system of evaluation for CP - NSRF in Poland became decentralized, as part of a wider decentralization of the whole system of implementing NSRF. Thus in Poland there are 16 separate regional operational programmes functioning, and the responsibility for managing and evaluating them lies independently with regional governments (National Evaluation Unit 2011). The system of evaluation is supervised by the National Evaluation Unit (*Krajowa Jednostka Ewaluacji - KJE*) - a designated unit of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Development (previously the Ministry of Regional Development), which manages the implementation of NSRF. However, the activities of the KJE are purely of a co-ordinating nature. They include: issuing evaluation guidelines (Ministerstwo Rozwoju Regionalnego 2007), preparation and performance of an evaluation plan for NSRO (*Krajowa Jednostka Oceny* 2007) (including performance of evaluation studies beyond the scope of a single operational programme), and running activities designed to develop an evaluation culture. The evaluation of ROPs is an independent duty of managing authorities – boards of voivodeships. They are responsible for

preparing an evaluation plan for ROPs and then commissioning, supervising, approving and utilizing on-going evaluation⁶. The evaluation of ROPs at the level of individual voivodeships is dealt with by varying numbers of personnel, although most often (in 90% of voivodeships) by a team numbering 2-5 staff (EGO 2011). In the majority of voivodeships (75%) these teams - evaluation units- are given distinct organizational status.

All ROP evaluation units work in accordance with a 7-year evaluation plan. Annual periodic evaluation plans are also created, containing the evaluations planned for a given year. As in the case of Spain, in the evaluation plans of managing authorities (MA) for Polish ROPs, there are entries about the need to perform evaluation in situations where: a) monitoring shows evidence of significant deviations from the set programme objectives, b) amendments are planned for operational programmes. However, the clear majority of evaluations performed do not meet the above criteria, and are non-compulsory studies responding to the current informational needs of the MA. The evaluation process is also formalized in the form of procedures in a handbook describing MA functioning. Research findings are communicated to the Monitoring Committee. In selected voivodeships there are also Evaluation Steering Groups which provide an evaluation discussion platform for the representatives of various MA units.

The activity of regional evaluation units has been growing year by year since the moment of their creation. The number of ROP evaluations performed in the whole country in subsequent years was: 2007 - 1, 2008 - 30, 2009 - 45, 2010 - 49, 2011 - 53, 2012 - 58. In total, up to the end of 2012, 236 evaluations were performed with a total value of around 4 million Euros (averaging 15 studies per voivodeship with a value of 250 thousand Euros). The most were performed in Kujawsko-Pomorskie voivodeship - 22, and the least in Podlaskie voivodeship -

⁶ Ex-ante evaluation as an exception was commissioned in 2006 by the national evaluation unit in all 16 ROPs, since at that time regional evaluation units were not yet functioning.

8. The most frequent subject of ROP evaluation is the quality of processes and procedures for implementing operational programmes (62% of studies). The effects of ROPs is the subject of 17% of evaluations, and in 21% of studies both the processes and the effects are analysed. Evaluations of processes were performed, above all, in the earlier stages of implementation - in the years 2008-2010. Meanwhile in 2011-2012, the share of evaluations on effects was seen to grow. The range of themes addressed in the ROP evaluations is very broad, owing above all to the extensive scope of these programmes. Besides evaluating the implementation processes of ROPs (including: the system for selecting projects, barriers to implementation, information-promotional activities), evaluations on the effects of ROPs are performed in the sphere of social infrastructure (e.g. education, culture, health), technical infrastructure (transport, environment), the economy (e.g. attractiveness for investment, SME's, employment), regional development (e.g. metropolitan areas, intra-regional diversity, macro-economic effects).

ROP's evaluation reports (as with all others in the framework of CP evaluation) are stored in a nationwide and open-access evaluation database, and the status of implementing recommendations from all evaluations is monitored by an integrated management system of findings and recommendations which is supervised by the National Evaluation Unit.

4. Evaluation activity in the studied regions.

Evaluation activity in the studied regions of Poland and Spain differ significantly. In all three analysed Polish regions, this activity has been relatively high. In the period 2007-2012, respectively 10, 14 and 20 ROP evaluations were carried out⁷ (not counting the compulsory ex ante evaluations which are carried out for each programme). Most of the evaluations performed are on-going studies serving to improve the ROP implementation process.

⁷ Which gives the average nearly the same as for the all 16 Polish regions, who conducted in that period 236 evaluation studies - 14,8 per region (Author, 2014a).

However, evaluations of the first effects of the programmes were also conducted. Voivodeships also decided on ex-post studies on interventions from the period 2004-2006, focusing recommendations for present needs as well as diagnosing the needs for programmes due to be realized in the period 2014-2020. With the exception of one study in Dolnoslaskie voivodeship, all the rest were external evaluations, and thus were performed by external contractors chosen by public tender.

Meanwhile in Spanish regions, not a single evaluation was performed which did not result from the requirements of the Plan, described above. The evaluations were thus limited to ex ante evaluations, 4 strategic thematic evaluations and, only in the case of Castile- La Mancha region: evaluations connected with amendments planned for the operational programmes. It is worth noting that responsibility for ex ante evaluations and thematic evaluations (regarding environmental protection, the knowledge economy, equal opportunities for men and women and immigration) lay with the central unit, and their execution was commissioned to external firms. Thus the institutions implementing the regional operational programmes in the selected regions have only a passive role in performed evaluations.

5. Reasons for diversity in evaluation activity.

Although representatives of the administrations involved in implementing regional operational programmes both in Poland and in Spain were keen to emphasise the importance and potential usefulness of evaluations as a support tool for managing public programmes, there are marked differences in evaluation activity (understood as the number of evaluations conducted which are non-compulsory⁸). Both - respondents representing Spanish regions as well as objective studies of literature - indicate a range of causes for the low level of evaluation activity in Spanish regions. At least in part, they cannot however be treated as

⁸ Not indicated in ruling 1083/2006 of the EU Commission.

differentiating factors, as the same phenomena occur in both of the countries studied. The identified causes for the limited level of evaluation activity include:

a. Pressure of deadlines for expending funds. According to respondents, the lack of interest in FEDER Operational Programme evaluation is due to experience of the previous programming period, when the Spanish regions were the largest beneficiaries of EU support, which meant considerable pressure to fully utilize funds within the deadlines, thus postponing questions of effective programme and project realization to a later date. Nevertheless, pressure for the efficient and timely use of allocated funds is equally great in Poland which, in the 2007-2013 period, outstripped Spain in terms of the amount of financial resources received within CP. It is worth noting that Poland (as one of only two beneficiary countries of CP) decided to apply the so-called National Performance Reserve⁹, which further increased the pressure on fast expenditure of funds.

b. Poor quality of evaluations performed. In the opinion of respondents this is due to the inappropriate qualifications of those conducting the evaluations, their limited commitment and interest in performing reliable studies. External evaluators most frequently do not bother to familiarize themselves with the specifics of programmes and their administration and implementation, research findings and resulting recommendations are obvious or unrealistic and are almost worthless to civil servants. As one of the respondents put it: “[evaluation results] are far from what we expect” [interview with representative of MA of ROP Extremadura]. The low-level usefulness of research findings is also related to problems concerning the limited availability of data (comp. Faiña et al. 2010, Faiña et al 2012) and - in the case of research into the impact of intervention on a given area - the applied methodology,

⁹ This mechanism awarded regions which in the middle of the period 2007-2013 had the highest levels of contracted funds by granting additional ROP funds which were ‘reserved for that purpose’. As indicated by the “Methodology for apportioning the national performance reserve within national and regional operational programs”: ‘the aim of apportioning the national performance reserve is to stimulate the pace of expenditure of community funds in the context of the so-called “n+2/n+3” principle’.

which in a limited sense brings together the complexity of the issue and allows for the credible identification of net effects on a macro level. Although in the case of Poland, we can see the beginnings of specialization among personnel and companies conducting evaluation studies, there continues to be a problem in terms of low quality of knowledge resulting from research. Conclusions from the evaluations mostly concerns matters which are obvious to the users or trivial. Reports seldom meet the users' information needs, since they fail to provide answers to at least some of the key research questions.

One of the factors identified as differentiating evaluation activity in Polish and Spanish regions is **available financial resources**. In the case of Spanish ROPs the quota allocated within the range of “Technical Assistance”¹⁰ in the studied regions did not exceed 1% of the programme allocation, while in Polish regions the level was about 3-4%. The low budget for technical assistance in Spain results in insufficient staff available for performing evaluations. On one hand, the lack of adequate funding prevents the employment of additional personnel, and on the other hand means that those that are employed are overstretched. The considerable work burden of civil servants involved in implementing FEDER Operational Programmes often means that evaluations are put off until a later date, since the staff's efforts are focused on priority areas resulting from various formal requirements. Moreover, civil servants in Spanish administrative regions do not have the appropriate education, which would enable evaluations to be conducted internally or which would be helpful in commissioning and approving studies conducted by external entities. Due to the limited financial resources there is little likelihood of funding their participation in training courses or post-graduate studies, which would allow them to improve their skills in this area. The problems of limited funding do not apply to Polish regions. The very large technical budget (on average above 10 million

¹⁰ Within ‘Technical Assistance’ EU funds are used to finance activities oriented towards the organization and operation of the system for implementing and managing ROPs, including monitoring and evaluation or employment of personnel engaged in implementing the program.

EURO) means that the decision to perform evaluations does not impinge on funds for other activities. Moreover, civil servants dealing with evaluation in Polish regions often take advantage of training courses and post-graduate studies, allowing them to increase their competence in the field of evaluation.

The second, equally important factor differentiating the administrations of Polish and Spanish regions in terms of evaluation activity is **the role and actions undertaken by the central units responsible for the coordination of evaluations at the regional level**. In the Polish evaluation system we are dealing with a highly active leader and driving force of evaluation practices. Following the accession of Poland to the EU, evaluations were taken on by a group of personnel at the Ministry of Regional Development, which was actively engaged in promoting the idea and development of evaluation culture. Initially the Ministry focused on evaluating shorter-term programs for 2004-2006. Then it focused on the systematic development of a culture and system of evaluating CP. Consequently, representatives of regional administrations, even before they were given responsibility for managing and evaluating operational programmes, took part in numerous meetings organized at the Ministry which presented and discussed evaluation research findings. An important event, creating a platform for sharing experience among all institutions involved in implementing CP programmes, is the Evaluation Conference organized annually by the Ministry (currently the Ministry of Infrastructure and Development) and the Polish Enterprise Development Agency (PARP)¹¹. A post-graduate study programme called the Evaluation Academy co-financed from technical assistance funds has also been developed. For the last 5 years it has prepared regional staff teams in performing evaluations¹². The actions mentioned have not only prepared regional administrations in content-related matters, but above all raised the importance of evaluations, and helped convey the sense that it is an important tool which goes

¹¹ PARP is an institution actively supporting evaluation development in Poland.

¹² And equally representatives of central administration.

hand in hand with the process of managing ROPs. Meanwhile, in Spain, the central unit is more passive, and its activity is connected only with coordinating and controlling evaluations in the regions. There is a lack of common discussion on the utilization of evaluation, the methods applied, and so on. The development of evaluation studies in regions is further impeded by the lack of a common concept and guidelines on the purpose and methods of conducting evaluations, and on utilizing the findings¹³. One respondent from Andalusia drew attention to this issue, commenting that: “We must precisely define what we understand by the term evaluation, what methodology we use, whether we concentrate only on the results, and thus the impact of a particular action in a particular area?” [interview with representative of MA of ROP Andalusia]. The premise for the argument that the problem lies in not defining what we understand by evaluation, is the fact that respondents used the term “evaluation” variously for different types of analytical activity (e.g. the collection of data for the preparation of annual progress reports in implementing funds, activities relating to monitoring).

The last factor differentiating evaluation activity in the regions of the studied countries can be identified as the **shape of the evaluation and monitoring system of implemented programmes**. The decentralization of this system in Poland has resulted in a greater sense of ownership and responsibility for operational programmes and their evaluation process. The managing authorities of ROPs in Poland decide independently when and what kind of evaluation they want to perform and appear to understand that it is a tool which can assist them in the decision making process. The centralized system of evaluation in Spain, in the opinion of civil servants, brings evaluation closer to a control mechanism, distorting the proper purpose which it is supposed to serve - as a support tool in the effective, efficient

¹³ Here we should draw attention to problems in terminology: the word “evaluacion” in Spanish means “assessment” – a concept with a very wide interpretation, while in Poland the term is commonly understood and used to refer to studies evaluating public sector interventions.

implementation of EU funds, appropriate to the needs of the region.

6. The utilization of evaluation in programme management.

By definition, evaluations performed should provide evidence and recommendations, the implementation of which should improve the effectiveness of programme management. The differences in evaluation activity mentioned earlier would appear to place Polish regions in a more favourable situation. The number of evaluations performed, a large portion of which are oriented on issues concerning current programme management, should be a rich source of knowledge, which administrations can draw upon when introducing measures to improve the effectiveness of their operations. The limited number and range of studies as well as the lack of non obligatory on-going evaluation in Spain has meant that studies performed had little value as a tool which can improve efficiency and are treated simply as the fulfilment of formal EC requirements. Thus it is no surprise that our results show that in not one of the studied regions in Spain is the knowledge resulting from evaluations used in the strategic and operational management of the FEDER Operational Programmes. Respondents from Spanish implementation authorities admitted that, for them, the evaluation recommendations are practically useless. Meanwhile, an interesting conclusion is provided by the analyses of the actual utilization of recommendations aimed at improving ROP efficiency.

Between 100 and 170 recommendations resulting from an average 15 evaluation studies performed in three Polish voivodeships has led to around 25 actual changes in the implementation of ROPs. This large discrepancy between the number of recommendations presented and the number of actual changes made results from a number of factors. Some of the recommendations were rejected by the recipients as unfounded or impossible to implement. Many of the remaining recommendations were declared possible to implement but not at the current advanced stage of the programme. Furthermore, some of the recommendations, although purportedly applied, concerned activities which the MA had

already put in course previously, irrespective of the evaluation advice.

Additionally, modifications supported by evaluation have a limited range. They concern: training of beneficiaries (e.g. changes in methods of running training courses, reducing the number of participants), information activities (e.g. creating new web pages, creating FAQs), promotional activities (using ROP mascots, withdrawing short advertisements), information centres (e.g. better signposting, work monitoring), organization of work on payment applications, indicators (e.g. catalogue changes, improving definitions). In fact, all the changes made as a result of evaluations concentrate on improving the process of ROP implementation. No modifications concern strategic issues: ROP goals and priorities, allocated funds. Such decisions were taken in the course of realizing the programmes, but did not result from the evaluation findings. The impact of evaluations on changes in the level of knowledge and perception of ROP issues among MA representatives was also small. Only in one voivodeship respondents declared that they had learnt anything at all from evaluation.

Referring to the most popular taxonomy of evaluation use types (Patton, 1997; Shula and Cousins, 1997; Henry, Mark, 2003), Polish regions demonstrate very low level of instrumental use, and signs of conceptual use only in one region. Additionally there were identified examples of misuse (decisions officially informed by evaluation but in fact opposite to the research findings) and symbolic use (MA conducted study designed in such a way that they served merely to justify decisions taken before).

It is worth emphasising that the reasons given for the lack of a wider usage of evaluation findings in decision-making in Poland are similar to those given for the lack of evaluation activity in the administrations of Spanish regions. Above all, it is evident that studies performed are of poor quality and consequently are of little use. Evaluations generally provide obvious knowledge concerning trivial issues. The reports do not meet the information

expectations of users, as they do not provide answers to key questions. This results both from the inadequate skill of evaluators, as well as from methodology which is ill-suited to the research objectives¹⁴. The fact that studies are still conducted in large numbers despite the above problems is also manifestation of symbolic evaluation use.. Evaluation units concentrate on producing studies, and not on useful knowledge, their effectiveness is seen in terms of the numbers of studies performed, and not in term of the real support that evaluations can offer.

Thus, the results of research show that, despite the significant differences in evaluation activity in Polish and Spanish regions, when it comes to actual utilization (or rather lack of utilization) of knowledge from evaluations, these differences are negligible. The high level of activity in evaluation “production” in Polish regions does not translate into decisions concerning the management and implementation of ROPs. Despite committing sizeable funds to conducting evaluation studies in Polish regions, the bases for decision-making are similar to those in Spanish regions, in which evaluation - defined as a tool assisting critical reflection on the value and quality of a programme - is practically absent. The main source of knowledge used in programmed management in Spanish and Polish regions are almost the same: national and EU legislation and its interpretation, own observations of the implementation process, the monitoring system and information gain from beneficiaries.

The differences in approach to evaluation do not, therefore, mean that the implementation process of Operational Programmes in Poland is better informed and evidence based.

7. Conclusions.

Although evaluation is used in various public policy areas in Spain, evaluation activity

¹⁴ It is worth noting that these problems – evaluation reports not meeting information needs, unreliable insignificant and obvious knowledge – are present in all sixteen Polish regions (Author, 2014b). Unsatisfactory degree of ROP evaluation use might be then the case of whole regional administration.

connected with implementing CP in the studied regions can be said to be marginal. In Poland the situation is exactly the reverse: while this tool is absent in national public policies, considerable evaluation activity can be observed in regions that execute operational programmes co-financed by EU funds. This activity does not translate however into actual utilization of evaluation findings to improve the effectiveness of these programmes.

Comparing activity in evaluating EU programmes and their effects in the regions of Poland and Spain, we could assume that, paradoxically, the situation of the latter is better, and the approach more rational. In Spain, very generally speaking, the same effects (that is lack of evidence based decision making) occur at a much lesser cost (that is resources are not wasted on performing evaluation studies which are of little utility and little used). The regional systems of evaluation for operational programmes in Poland appears to operate in accordance with the hypotheses formulated by Leeuw and Furubo (2008) - they provide mainly information of little importance, evaluation unit staff justify their role by continually producing reports, and decision-makers use them only (or above all) to give the impression that their decisions are rational and show evidence based policy. Every year a considerable number of studies are produced which do nothing to support ROP management and, at least until now, not much has been done in any of the analysed MAs to change this situation.

Aside from stating that the development of evaluation culture in Polish regions has gone astray, it is possible to offer a different interpretation which puts Poland's situation in a better light. First, evaluation practice in Poland has not evolved in vacuum. It was initialized, and shaped by CP regulation and we may assume that it conforms to EC expectations. As a major beneficiary of CP and a new member state Poland's performance with CP is an important issue. It is crucial for Polish administration to be regarded as effective and basing its policy decisions in evidence. In that context it is reasonable to show large number of evaluation reports supporting CP. This tactic seems to work, as the development of CP evaluation in

Poland is pointed as a best practice (compare Ferry, 2009; Olejniczak et al., 2011).

Second, and more important, we can assume that the current situation is a necessary, intermediate stage in the development of evaluation culture. It may be that it is not possible to learn how to obtain useful knowledge and utilize it without going through a stage of unused, poor quality studies. At this stage the MAs are acquiring skills in producing studies. The number of firms conducting evaluations and the level of their expertise is increasing, and learning how to perform evaluations. These are resources and potential which in Poland are already present.

In this context, despite the fact that Poland cannot yet lay claim to evaluation culture, it is easier to envisage its development than in Spain, where - in the administrations of the studied regions, there is generally no culture of collecting and analysing data and deeper reflection on actions taken. In Poland, the next desirable step should be to move from quantitative development into qualitative development, and to re-orient evaluation units from producing reports to providing knowledge which meets real needs. Meanwhile, in Spain, immediate stimulus is needed in the form of interest at the regional level and the will to perform evaluations, to spur the development of appropriate structures and skills of conducting and utilizing research findings. Assuming that Spanish regions follow the Polish model, we can expect that this process will be long-term.

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