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Evaluation Culture(s) in Europe: Differences and Convergence between National Practices

By Jacques Toulemonde*

Summary

Are there differences in the way that European countries practise and use evaluation? The answer to this question needs to be qualified. Evaluation developed during different periods and under diverse external and internal influences, in varying proportions from country to country. Identifiable external influences include the PPBS, international professional networks, European Structural Funds and development aid institutions. Within European countries the impetus came from parliament, national audit office or finance ministry, depending on the case. Marked differences persist in the way that evaluation fits into the administrative culture of each country. While in some parts of Europe it is still a bureaucratic exercise, in others it is already part of democratic functioning. These differences should not be seen as national models but rather as different paths converging on a single state of maturity and professionalism.

This article is the follow-up to a series of lectures delivered in Naples (*Associazione Italiana di Valutazione*), Paris (*Conseil National de l'Evaluation*), Strasbourg (*Ecole Nationale d'Administration*) and Copenhagen (*Danish Evaluation Society*). These lectures offered an opportunity to organise my ideas on the development of evaluation practice in Europe.

Information used is drawn essentially from the missions to which I have contributed over the past ten years, particularly:

- Two surveys carried out in 1992 and 1997 as part of the MEANS programme of the European Commission Directorate General for Regions (European Commission, 1999). The latter survey covered the 15 member States and comprised over one hundred telephone interviews and visits in most of the European capitals. It covered the field of the Structural Funds, which encompasses a significant number of policy domains in most member States.
- My own participation and that of my colleagues in the activities of several professional societies (the European Evaluation Society as well as the British, Swiss, Italian and, more recently, French, Walloon and Danish societies), and my participation in the interesting French-British seminar in January 1998 (*Conseil Scientifique de l'Evaluation*, 1999).

- A series of quality assessments undertaken for the European Commission, which enabled us to examine and compare evaluation reports originating from various European countries.
- My participation in an edited book, the *International Evaluation Atlas*, to be published shortly (Furubo, Rist, Sandhal, forthcoming). This book is the follow-up to a first international comparison published ten years ago (Rist, 1990). It consists of 23 chapters covering the state of evaluation practice in the main democratic countries and in some international institutions. The European Union, its main member states, Switzerland and Norway are covered.

The process of editing an international atlas has prompted in-depth discussion within the International Evaluation Research Group (*see <http://www.inteval.org>*). The same questions emerged that we encounter in the scope of this article on the European continent. Does it make sense to speak of national evaluation cultures? If so, are national peculiarities identifiable over and above the multiple differences that prevail across policy domains?

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There are good reasons for a vaccination policy not to be evaluated as a research project or as a local development programme. Are there also good reasons to evaluate differently in Denmark, Germany or the UK?

The working hypothesis on which this paper is based is that specific national characteristics are both identifiable and sufficiently marked to allow interesting comparisons. Note that this is only a hypothesis; we shall see below that it is not entirely valid.

The subject is considered from two points of view, successively:

- Factors in the development of evaluation: how was evaluation born and how did it develop in the different European countries?
- Development of an evaluation culture: to what extent has evaluation changed the rules of the governance game in the different countries?

1. Evaluation: Import or National Initiative?

1.1 Evaluation Imported From the United States in the 1970s

It is well known that evaluation was born in the United States along with Planning-Programming-Budgeting-System (PPBS). It was imported in the 1970s into most northern European countries where agencies, units or commissions were created to carry out policy analysis. These institutions dealt with *ex ante* and *ex post* evaluation mission. They had an inter-ministerial scope and they clearly aimed at introducing some scientific rationality in the budgetary process. Countries such as the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and France imported the US model with enthusiasm — despite predictions by Wildavsky (1969) as to its inapplicability.

All countries that have known this type of evaluation have now gone beyond it or abandoned it. The most abrupt and complete change took place in France where PPBS was done away with in the early 1980s. However, “the baby was thrown out with the bath water”, to such an extent that evaluation lost all significant support at government level for nearly ten years.

In other countries the transition was far more progressive. For example, in the Netherlands the Finance Ministry made a smooth change from PPBS-based evaluation to a far more pragmatic system discussed below. In the UK the Policy Analysis Commission set up in the 1970s was dissolved when the Thatcher government re-launched evaluation with the “value for money” slogan.

Surprisingly, Italy experienced similar developments ten years later. In the early 1980s *ex ante* evaluation developed rapidly when the government made cost-benefit analysis of all public investment projects manda-

tory. The idea was imported from the World Bank at a time when the Italian public administration was sorely discredited. Yet in Italy, like elsewhere, technical and economic rationality was unable to prevail over political logic. In Machiavelli's country consultants soon learnt how to produce positive cost-benefit analyses for any project. The practice turned into a bureaucratic ritual and was abandoned.

1.2 The role of International Professional Networks

In the late 1970s evaluation culture spread within policy networks that were open to international trends, especially those of research and development aid.

Most European countries and the European Commission itself started to build up an evaluation capacity in these two areas. For instance, the only real expertise in policy and programme evaluation in Italy was limited to research policy for nearly 15 years. Even today, at federal level in Germany the most comprehensive evaluation systems are those applied to scientific and development aid policies.

In both areas, the OECD has played a key part in spreading an evaluation culture by organising international work groups and publishing technical books and papers. The OECD Development Aid Committee has had an evaluation working group for many years.

Paradoxically, this broad diffusion of evaluation on a European scale has not been a strong driving force in the development of evaluation practice beyond the circle of the policies concerned. Professional networks have remained highly compartmentalised and hardly inclined to bridge the gap with other sectors. In each political field experts have formalised their own evaluation techniques (e.g. expert panels for research, logical framework for development aid). Each field has generated its own network of experts and literature, without helping to generalise evaluation practice throughout the civil service.

1.3 Evaluation Imposed by the European Structural Funds

A more decisive role was played by the European Union through the evaluation of socio-economic development programmes financed by the Structural Funds (ERDF, ESF, etc.). This policy was instrumental in getting evaluation off the ground in many European countries — which is why it calls for a more detailed description.

Since the Treaty of Rome, European authorities have had the mission of co-ordinating aid to less developed regions or those with problems of conversion. Spending related to this policy did and still does account for a

growing share of the European budget. In this context of increasingly heavy expenditure, the Single European Act, adopted in early 1986, introduced the first strong reference to an improvement in the effectiveness of public spending.

Regulations in 1988 concerning Structural Funds for the period 1989-1993 made systematic evaluation mandatory. They stipulated that "with a view to assessing the effectiveness of structural interventions, community action is subject to ex ante and ex post evaluation of its impact".

The obligation to evaluate was not immediately put into practice, for several reasons. First, Structural Funds were managed by means of co-financed programmes that were, in a sense, a revolution for many national and regional administrations. Moreover, an evaluation culture was foreign to most of the administrations concerned and even to the services of the Commission. As a result, during the period 1989-93 evaluation was neither systematic nor extensive, despite the Commission's efforts.

The need for economic and social cohesion was reaffirmed in the Treaty of Maastricht and a strengthening of budgetary support was accompanied by a second solemn call for guarantees of efficient use of Funds. At the Commission's instigation but also under the strong impulse of certain member States (the Netherlands and the UK, in particular), rules adopted in July 1993 for the period 1994-1999 substantially increased evaluation requirements. Regulations made ex ante evaluation, monitoring and ex post evaluation mandatory for regional and national authorities.

Regulations went as far as prescribing that aid should not be granted unless an ex ante evaluation has demonstrated the socio-economic benefits to be gained in the medium term, in relation to the costs. This strong requirement for prior economic appraisal, a Community variant of the British concept of Value For Money, was not unrelated to PPBS and cost-benefit analysis. It has yet to prove its applicability in practice.

Community regulations did nevertheless have a considerable influence on the development of evaluation, albeit in a more flexible form. To understand this influence we need to bear in mind that the obligation to evaluate programmes was imposed on several hundred regional authorities. Quantitatively, evaluation practice developed spectacularly. In the 15 member States over 380 evaluations were organised for the period from 1996 to early 1998. The number of programme evaluations in the context of the Structural Funds was multiplied by five or six, compared to the period 1989-1993.

Furthermore, regional development programmes were, and remain, directed primarily at the countries of southern Europe which are less familiar with evaluation. Since the field open to financing by Structural Funds is extremely wide, their management mobilises the majority of

administrative services in the countries and regions concerned.

With the reinforcement of European regulations in 1993 evaluation was imposed and recognised as unavoidable for obtaining Community support. As a result it developed substantially, especially in the form of mid-term or intermediate evaluation. One can safely say that by the end of 1990s no European country was unfamiliar with evaluation, and that the quality of this practice had increased considerably.

Yet the strategy of making evaluation systematic and compulsory calls for questioning. In the framework of the Structural Funds the obligation theoretically encompassed all interventions and all steps in the programming cycle (ex ante, intermediate and ex post, not to mention the recent addition of a "final" evaluation stage). I believe I am right in saying that an equally systematic obligation on such a large scale exists nowhere else in the world. A benefit of this strategy is unquestionably the very widespread diffusion of evaluation practices in Europe today. On the other hand, much evaluation work remains too formal, is performed too hastily and fails to include the minimum of empirical observation and impact analysis that would lead to sound conclusions about effectiveness.

1.4 The World Bank and Developing European Countries

During our 1992 survey we were surprised to find experts with good knowledge of evaluation in Greece and Portugal where the national administrative culture was largely juridical. It turned out that before joining the Community these countries had received loans from the World Bank and other international institutions. Like all aid to developing countries, this funding was systematically linked to ex ante and ex post evaluation. Although highly centralised at the head-office level of international institutions, these evaluation systems had started to spawn local expertise. The same applied and still applies to the eastern European countries.

That is the fourth and last exogenous factor in the development of evaluation practice. The following three factors are endogenous. They correspond to developments initiated within the countries concerned, by national promoters.

1.5 The Unequal Role of National Parliaments

Whereas Congress played a key part in the development of evaluation in the United States, very few national parliaments did so in Europe. Members of

parliament often consider that they have to assess public spending by their own. As a result, they often conduct evaluation-like exercises within parliamentary commissions through public and deliberative process but with a limited empirical dimension and small effort at making judgement criteria explicit.

No parliament in Europe endowed itself with an autonomous evaluation capacity enabling it to compete with the executive. To my knowledge, specialised units were set up to perform evaluations in the Swiss and European parliaments, but on a limited scale. To date these institutions have not been a driving force in the development of an evaluation culture.

By contrast, in Germany and Scandinavia parliament has had a determining influence, although without performing evaluations itself. In Germany members of parliament requested and obtained periodic reports from independent institutions on many major policies. Although this practice is not called evaluation its substance is often the same: empirical examination of effects, in-depth analyses, assessment of effectiveness, efficiency or relevance.

1.6 Initiatives of some Audit Offices

Most European Audit Offices are interested in evaluation and many of their members devote part of their time to it. On the other hand, very few of these institutions have set up a real evaluation capacity with a specialised team, appropriate recruitment and a collective capitalisation of experience.

As far as I know, exceptions are the Netherlands, the UK and Sweden, countries where "supreme audit institutions" have a sound evaluation culture and publish numerous analyses of public policy impacts, often called "performance audits".

It is in the Netherlands that the National Audit Office seems to have had the greatest influence. In the 1980s this institution created its own specialised team which performed in-depth methodological work, meta-evaluations and quality assessments on the evaluation work of different government departments. This can be seen as a significant contribution to the development of evaluation practice in that country. The influence of the Dutch Audit Office has moreover spread well beyond national boundaries since it was at the origin of the European Evaluation Society.

1.7 Pressure from Finance Ministries

In many European countries the finance ministry has promoted evaluation. The example that immediately comes to mind is the UK where "value for money" type

studies were supervised and encouraged by the Treasury from the 1980s.

More recently, the Ministero del Bilancio played a decisive part in the development of evaluation in Italy, through the impetus given by Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, now president of the Republic. At the European Commission level officials responsible for the budget also played a decisive part. It was Erkki Liikanen, Budget Commissioner, who launched the SEM 2000 (Sound and Efficient Management) initiative at the origin of the generalisation of evaluation beyond the precursor services.

It is easy to figure out how evaluation can develop in between spending ministries and the treasury, the rationale being to justify public spending. That is what led to the rapid and generalised development of evaluation in Australia in the 1980s. Why does the French finance ministry not play a similar role? Possibly because an evaluation imposed by finance ministers is assumed to revert to the past failure of economic rationality prevailing over political logic.

To turn this difficulty the Dutch finance ministry set up a flexible and original system in the 1980s, called the "reconsideration procedure" (Bemelmans-Videc, 1989). Every five years each spending ministry has to carry out ex post evaluations, including recommendations on programmes or measures that would need to be eliminated or reformed in the event of a 20% budget cut. It seems, however, that this system is still too ambitious. After several successive cycles of reconsideration, a review has shown that the proportion of evaluations with effects on the budget is rather small (Van Nisper tot Pannerden, 1994).

1.8 First Conclusion: Different Paths for the Development of Evaluation

After this initial overview we note that European countries have been subject to external influences which tend to converge: the influence of PPBS, that of the evaluation of development projects (for countries that receive aid and for donors), and that of European Structural Funds.

To these exogenous factors can be added internal driving forces peculiar to certain countries: pressure from parliament in Germany and Scandinavia, initiatives by the Audit Office in the Netherlands, Sweden and, more recently, the UK, and pressure from the finance ministry, as is presently the case in Italy.

It is surprising to note the extent to which the origins and ambitions of national promoters differ. How can we compare the "Financial Management Initiative" launched in the 1980s by the government of Margaret Thatcher in the UK, and the inter-ministerial evaluation system set up

a few years later by Michel Rocard, then French socialist prime minister? The former was intended to save taxpayers' money, while the latter aimed initially to enhance the democratic debate (Viveret, 1989).

By very different means the two systems helped to generalise evaluation culture in the civil service on both sides of the Channel. Will the roads travelled influence the political and administrative cultures of each of the two countries in the long run? I am not so sure. Even if there is a British style and a French style, it seems that differences tend to fade, as evaluation becomes more professional.

Our consultancy activities at the European Commission afforded us with the opportunity of studying the quality of many evaluation reports produced by consultants from most European countries. To date, differences of culture between consultants in the same country are huge and no correlation has appeared between the quality of evaluation work and the nationality of the evaluators. On the contrary, the authors of the best reports seem to share the same professional qualities, whether they are Spanish or British (Toulemonde, forthcoming).

My opinion is that evaluation experience is busy building up in the different European countries, that professionals are progressively learning from their experience, and that these lessons seem increasingly to be universal. If there are particular national characteristics, it seems that they stem from the way in which evaluation has developed and that they fade as the practice reaches maturity.

2. Evaluation: Administrative Exercise, Management Tool or Democratic Duty?

The following section is directly inspired by our surveys on the diffusion of evaluation within the framework of the Structural Funds. The original text can be found in Volume 1 of the MEANS Collection (European Commission, 1999). These surveys afforded us an opportunity to understand how deeply rooted is the evaluation culture in the different European countries.

In the context of Structural Fund implementation, Brussels imposed evaluation practice in a way inspired by the evaluation of development aid projects. Evaluation was conceived as an independent judgement on the relevance, efficiency and effectiveness of programmes, in relation to clearly stated objectives that are preferably quantified.

When imposed on all member States the obligation to evaluate encountered contexts and environments that were favourable, or not, to varying degrees. Newcomers in the evaluation field, whether administrators, academics or consultants, naturally referred to schemas that were familiar to them. Thus, national tendencies were initially to

conceive evaluation as a "value for money" exercise (UK), a strategic analysis (France) or an economic appraisal (Italy). At present evaluation methods tend to converge towards the model imposed by European regulations.

We nevertheless observed substantial differences in the integration of the exercise. Schematically, we can identify three levels in the evaluation culture of political and administrative actors.

2.1 Evaluation Experienced as a Bureaucratic Burden

Even if the obligation to evaluate is the result of regulations adopted unanimously by the member States, in certain countries it was initially experienced as a constraint. Many public officials saw it as an additional workload imposed on them by the Commission.

Judging by the overall picture that emerged from our 1997–98 survey, it appears that this mentality still exists in many southern European regions. For example, an Italian region asked a consultant to evaluate a programme of over one billion Euros in a few weeks! This tactic has often been adopted by those who want "harmless" evaluations that interfere as little as possible with their administrative management and political decisions.

Yet it is unfair to present such an overall picture without mentioning the dynamics peculiar to each country. For instance, the Portuguese administration has gone a long way in familiarising itself with evaluation, and during the past few years significant progress has been made in terms of quality of evaluation work and use of conclusions. Similarly, the Italian government recently added its own pressure to that of the Commission to ensure that regional authorities take evaluation seriously.

2.2 Evaluation as a Public Management Aid

In the majority of regions benefiting from Structural Funds, evaluations carried out in 1996–97 aroused the interest of managing authorities and generated a new activity for consultants and academic research centres.

In most cases programme managers perceived the external evaluation team not as an additional layer of bureaucracy but as a source of management advice and as a mediator between public partners. Relations of trust were established, the quality of the information gathered improved and the use of conclusions increased.

Many regional managers performed more in-depth evaluation than was required by regulations. National administrations also took initiatives as regards thematic evaluation and methodological work. Finally, the Commission carried out a series of trans-national evaluations that were a source of keen interest.

During our survey we noted the integration, almost everywhere, of evaluation into management strategies and practices. In Finland and Ireland, for example, European requirements were integrated into national policies to a large extent. In Sweden, a country in which evaluation is widespread, several authorities took their first steps with the implementation of Structural Funds and soon adopted evaluation in their management approach. Several regions in central Italy also used mid-term evaluations as management and mediation tools.

2.3 Evaluation as a Political Act

Apart from this managerial model, evaluation can also be conceived as an instrument in the democratic game, for the purpose of informing citizens on the whys and wherefores of public spending and on the actual impacts, expected or unexpected.

Our survey showed that European practice rarely includes this democratic dimension. Only the Scandinavian countries and the UK, have integrated a small dose of democratic concern into their approach to Structural Funds evaluation.

It is at European level that the demand for “political” use of evaluation is strongest. The Council and Parliament constantly demand greater accountability from the Commission for the management of structural Funds that now account for over 30% of the Union’s budget.

As a result the Commission periodically publishes reports on the implementation of Funds and on their contribution to economic and social cohesion. From a methodological point of view these reports are largely drawn from syntheses of regional and national evaluations. This type of synthesis is hardly feasible since the Commission has to combine, in a political perspective, material that has mostly been prepared in a managerial perspective.

2.4 Second Conclusion: Evaluation Culture Remains Essentially Managerial

It is easy to understand that democratic use of evaluation is particularly demanding. The currently predominant managerial culture is easier to accept, for if the evaluator is seen as a management consultant or a mediator, the consequences of evaluation remain “under control”.

Yet managerial use of evaluation is rather limited. In this context the issues that are given priority are the most consensual and dominant points of view tend to prevail. Evaluation then runs the risk of dissolving into traditional administrative practices.

For the evaluation practice to fully produce its benefits, public managers should be prepared to accept and to publish reports that contain negative or disturbing conclusions (Toulemonde, 1999). This attitude has no chance of being adopted spontaneously on a large scale. It can be achieved only through a deeply rooted culture of democratic evaluation at all administrative levels. It also requires the media and politicians to use evaluation works without distorting the conclusions.

The creation of national evaluation societies or associations could contribute to achieving this goal. Professional societies are being formed in many European countries, including (in approximate chronological order) the UK, Switzerland, Germany, Italy, France, French-speaking Belgium, Finland, Denmark and hopefully Spain. There is also a club that has been meeting every month in Sweden for the past few years, and a European Evaluation Society.

The United Kingdom Evaluation Society (UKES) is particularly active and can be taken as an example. It has 200 members and organises an annual conference and workshops on various methodological issues. Participants include professionals from the public and private sectors and academics. Debates involve high-ranking policy makers and internationally recognised evaluation professionals.

The British evaluation society unquestionably helps to make evaluation recognised as an integral part of democratic functioning. The UK is one of the European countries where evaluation is used most often by government to account to citizens.

3. Is there Room for National Models?

As shown above, sharp differences are apparent in the way evaluation has been established and developed in European countries. Even greater differences persist in the degree of integration of evaluation in the politico-administrative culture.

I would describe these differences not as national models but as different paths in a movement towards maturity. In this movement some European countries have reached or are close to a certain form of maturity. I would define this stage of maturity by the fact that evaluation concerns all political fields, is used at all levels of government and administration, and is practised by multiple competent evaluators who exchange their experiences and define their best practice within a professional society.

Another form of maturity is probably at play. In the public sector this involves the progressive shift from evaluation as a constraint to a managerial use of the exercise — something which has largely been achieved — and then

to a democratic evaluation culture. The latter stage is still very far from being attained in Europe.

My view is that all countries in the European Union are in the process of reaching relative maturity in their evaluation culture. It seems that in the short term some universal lessons are going to be learnt and that specific national characteristics will consequently disappear.

I consider it a universal rule that a good evaluation is “custom made”; in other words, each evaluation is unique (Patton, 1986). A good evaluation is designed at a given time, for specific users and in a specific context. It is based on the set of knowledge that is actually available within given constraints of time and budget. Each evaluation warrants being built with an ad hoc method to answer specific questions. I foresee that as they progress in their practice, European professionals will perform evaluations that are increasingly well suited to the specific needs and context, and are copied less and less from national or sector-based models.

Does this mean that there is no room for national contributions in the corpus of evaluation methods, and that European evaluation practice is entering into an era of globalisation and uniformity, like for so many other things? I don't think so and I certainly hope not.

My hope refers to the fact that a good evaluation carefully adapts to its particular context. The diversity of our European nations is creating and will continue to create a wide variety of administrative settings. A pragmatic fit to these multiple realities is likely to generate multiple forms of evaluation. This will create numerous opportunities to innovate in the design, performance or use of evaluation. My contacts in the different European countries have enabled me to come across many innovative practices, some of which being extremely

interesting. Two cases in point are the citizens' juries in Denmark and *instances d'évaluation* in France.

It was the Danes who first used citizens' jury within an evaluation process. Although it cannot help collecting nor analysing data, this technique may open promising paths towards making value judgements. This new tool is now exported throughout Europe and some tests have already been performed in my own country. It seems clear that this innovation was not born in Denmark by chance, for the presence of a democratic culture in the Danish civil service is particularly strong.

The term *instance d'évaluation* was coined in France. It applies to an evaluation steering committee that is composed of top civil servants plus a few other stakeholders. Unlike the model of external independent evaluator, this committee plays an active part in producing the conclusions and recommendations. In some cases this setting has allowed for truly pluralistic deliberations to occur in the committee and this has enhanced the quality and use of the evaluation. It is clear that this innovation was not born in France by chance, for the top managers in the French public sector have a strong feeling of their own legitimacy.

By no way, I would a citizens' jury or *instance d'évaluation* to be appropriate in all cases. Nor would I call them a Danish or French evaluation model, for that would be clearly exaggerated. We can just be said is that specific Danish and French administrative settings have created original contexts in which interesting innovations have emerged, that might otherwise not have appeared.

This means that the diversity of our European cultures is a permanent source of enrichment and social innovation, and that evaluation practices, while getting mature, may escape from uniformity.

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Evaluationskultur(en) in Europa: Unterschiede und Konvergenz zwischen nationalen Praktiken

Zusammenfassung

Gibt es Unterschiede, wie europäische Länder Evaluationen durchführen und nutzen? Dies bedarf einer qualifizierten Antwort. Evaluation hat sich in verschiedenen Perioden und unter unterschiedlichen externen und internen Einflüssen von Land zu Land in verschiedenem Umfang entwickelt. Zu den externen Einflussfaktoren gehören PPBS, internationale professionelle Netzwerke, die europäischen Strukturfonds und die Institutionen der Entwicklungshilfe. Innerhalb der europäischen Länder kam der Anstoß entweder von den Parlamenten, den Rechnungshöfen oder den Finanzministerien. Erhebliche Unterschiede bleiben bestehen, je nachdem, wie die Evaluation in die Verwaltungskultur jedes einzelnen Landes passt. Während in manchen Teilen Europas es sich immer noch um eine bürokratische Übung handelt, ist es in anderen Regionen Teil der Demokratie. Diese Unterschiede sollten nicht als nationale Modelle angesehen werden, sondern als verschiedene Entwicklungspfade, die auf den gleichen Reifegrad und Professionalisierung hinauslaufen.

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