

IMPROVING STRUCTURAL INTERVENTIONS THROUGH THE EVALUATION PROCESS. CASE STUDY - THE REGIONAL OPERATIONAL PROGRAM OF ROMANIA 2007 - 2013

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Abstract

This paper is part of a broader study that addresses the topic of the role of evaluation within the System of Structural Instruments in Romania. The main objective is to identify the mechanisms that can lead to the institutionalization of evaluation as an instrument of public interventions improvement. The study is based on several key assumptions: the current maturation level of the evaluation culture in Romania is still incipient, the development of the evaluation process is considered only under the framework of structural instruments, the low impact of the evaluation practice towards the interventions at stake and the waste of financial, human and time resources that is being generated when a system does not fulfill its main purpose. The current article presents a study case of the evaluation system developed under the Romanian Regional Operational Program during the financial cycle 2007 – 2013. The research is based on an analysis of the evaluation process that aims to highlight its strengths and weaknesses as well as to determine a set of main factors that influence the capacity of the process to achieve its purpose, namely to contribute to the increase of the efficiency and effectiveness of the Regional Operational Program. The article is focused on the analysis of the perspective of the stakeholders that are involved in the management and evaluation process. Therefore it is based on an exploratory approach, analyzing data collected from the hard core side of this sector, which includes the commissioners of the evaluation studies at the level of the program, the managers of the evaluation system at the central level and the

external evaluation experts that develop the evaluation studies and deliver the evaluation reports.

Keywords

Evaluation, evaluation utilization, evaluation capacity, structural instruments, Regional Operational Program 2007 – 2013.

1. THE RELEVANCE OF THE SUBJECT

First of all, in order to be able to explore the subject of evaluation utilization, it is necessary to clarify the importance of this phenomenon in the context of the evaluation of public interventions. The definition upon which there is a consensus among the theoreticians within this study field, developed by the Joint Committee on Standards of Educational Evaluation, says that the evaluation is “a systematic process of collecting and analysing data, that aims to establish the merit and the worth of the evaluated object” (Stufflebeam and Shinkfield, 2007, 9). As Maria Bustelo emphasizes, this definition captures only two of the characteristics on an evaluation, the type of the process and its finality (Bustelo, 2001, 7). But, in order to understand the specificity of this process there is a need to address also the topics of evaluation’s scope and the context where it emerges. Therefore, according to the aforementioned authors, the main role of the evaluation process “is not to demonstrate, but to improve” (Stufflebeam and Shinkfield, 2007, 23). Moreover, as Cummings emphasizes, when discussing about the difference between social investigation and evaluation, in the field of public policies, “the research activity has the purpose of enhancing the knowledge regarding a specific object, phenomenon while the evaluation process’s value is usually of an instrumental nature” (2002, 2). We can consider that the evaluation field is an eminently practical sector, which has to be focused on the most adequate manners of producing changes at the level of the intervention, in order to improve it. Furthermore, understanding the context of the evaluation is crucial for comprehending the role and the perspective from which this process should be approached. The context, which is by definition a political one, is important because it determines the need of the evaluation, creates the demand and generates the initiation of the process (Bustelo, 2001, 43). Because of the fact that the evaluation is part of the policy making process

(Profiroiu and Iorga, 2009, p 76), it should be designed, planned and conducted as a distinct stage of a public intervention cycle. Therefore, the evaluation exercises have to be orientated on the needs of those that commission the evaluation and be able to produce useful information for them. Therefore the results of any evaluation should not represent a goal in itself, but a means or an instrument. A more explicit approach towards the specificity of the evaluation process is the one of Cousins and Leithwood, that say “when social science methods are used to answer questions posed by decision-makers, the outcomes are typically called evaluations or evaluation studies” (1986, 332). As it was mentioned earlier, the studies on the evaluation utilization show that the use of this activity is rather lower than its potential. Taking into consideration that evaluation process requires the engagement of substantial financial, human and time resources, when an evaluation does not produce any change we can consider it becomes a waste of resources.

2. METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on the case study method, which provides the possibility to perform an in depth examination and analysis of the subject. Also, the approach allows to contextualize the analysis demarche and to adapt the conclusions to the particularities of the environment that are more difficult to be captured through other types of investigation methods. However, the case study, being a qualitative research method, does not provide the capacity to generalize its results to other populations than the investigated ones (Chelcea, 2001, 60). Therefore, this paper does not aim to develop a set of influence factors applicable to any evaluation system or type of public intervention, but to explore the case ROP 2007 - 2013 in Romania and to identify (according to the experience and perspective of the stakeholders that have been involved in the evaluation process) the potential influence factors. Based on the analysis of the secondary and primary data, this paper aims to emphasize the distinct categories of influence factors, the existing connections between them, the established relations developed between the factors and specific types of utilization and to propose a set of recommendations for the financial period 2014 - 2020 regarding the institutional design of the evaluation system and the current evaluation practice.

Table no. 1. Methodological framework

METHOD OF INVESTIGATION	PURPOSE	DETAILS
Literature review	Define the concept of evaluation utilization Develop an initial analysis framework for the case study, based on the current developments within the study field of evaluation utilization	- literature regarding the covered subject
Document review and analysis	Describe the evaluation system Identify the extent to which the conducted evaluations have determined changes at the programme level (instrumental type of utilization) Identify factors that can enhance the evaluation utilization level within the Regional Operational Program	- regulatory document (EU and national level) - programmatic documents - evaluation plans - annual implementation reports - evaluation reports - other reports - minutes of management bodies meetings
Primary data analysis	Explore in depth the evaluation process with a focus on the collaboration between the involved parties Identify the knowledge transfers and informal paths to change linked to the evaluation process (conceptual type of utilization) Identify ways to increase the role of evaluation in the management of ROP 2014 - 2020	- expert interviews at the level of three categories of involved parties: a) central management of the evaluation system (2 staff members) b) personnel of the evaluation unit of ROP 2007 - 2013 (2 staff members) c) independent evaluators that have been involved in/conducted the evaluation process (4 independent evaluators)

Source: author

3. DEFINING KEY TERMS

The research in this study field has been developed simultaneously in two main directions: understanding the evaluation utilization concept and its different perspectives and identifying the elements that can facilitate different types of utilization in the context of public policy making system.

The instrumental type of utilization, which is the first aspect that has been studied within this field, refers to “direct transfer of evaluation’s results into actions” (Vedung 2008, 269). The main characteristics of the utilization process defined as above, are the timing and the way in which the evaluation generates change at the program level. Therefore, the transfer must be immediate and unmediated. Cousins defines this type of utilization as “support for distinct decisions” (Cousins and Leithwood 1986, 346). In 1978, Pelz developed a new approach towards the utilization process and introduced the following two categories: conceptual and symbolic (1978, 348). The conceptual type of utilisation, which is also called “enlightenment” by Weiss, it is defined as a wider learning process which is caused by the evaluation or a “gradual sedimentation of theories, concepts and perspectives” (Mark and Henry 2004, 36). Therefore, the conceptual approach refers to changes that manifest at the cognitive level of those that get in touch with the evaluation results, rather than to a tangible modification at the program level. Nevertheless, this type of evaluation utilization can lead further to an instrumental use, which should be in fact the final purpose of any evaluative process. The conceptual type of utilisation has often been connected with the process of organisational learning. The second category of utilization, symbolic use, which was conceptualized by Pelz, refers to the invocation of the evaluation results in order to legitimate a decision that was made prior to the study. Therefore, the evaluation exercise supports those that want to apply a strategy and need a set of data that can legitimate it. Because of this, the evaluation can become an instrument in the political debates. Often, this type of utilization appears when the decision-maker is hiding the real purpose of the evaluation (Mark 2009, 61). Therefore, the symbolic use received a negative connotation within the studies that have been developed on this area. Most of the authors perceive this utilization as a false type of use because the evaluation, in this case, is not used in order to improve the intervention, but to legitimate a pre-existing decision.

We have to mention that there were also developed other types of utilization as: motivational, interactive or tactic (see Weiss, 1979 or Vedung, 1998), but these seem to be only variations of the aforementioned categories.

All the above categories have a common point that refers to the object of the utilization, namely the evaluation results. The perspective developed by Patton regarding the concept of process use has shifted the orientation from the utilization that takes place after the end of the evaluation to the utilization that appears during the process (Patton 2008, 88). The second one refers to the changes that influence the implicated actors and/or the implementation of the public policy or program being evaluated. Process use can also generate tangible changes at the program level and in this case can also be seen as a type of instrumental use.

Table no. 2 The development of the evaluation utilization concept

	First stage	Second stage	Third stage
Perspective	Unidimensional	Multidimensional	Multidimensional
The object of the utilization process	Evaluation results	Evaluation results	Evaluation process Evaluation results
Types of utilization¹	Instrumental	Instrumental Conceptual Symbolic	Instrumental Conceptual Symbolic Process utilization
Authors²	Scriven, Campbell, Alkin	Weiss, Vedung	Patton, Cousins, Henry, Mark, Kirkhart

Source: Author

As Mark and Henry argue, these “categories of use are distinguished by qualitatively different attributes” (2004, 36) and refers to the fact they do not use a single criterion upon which helps us to conceptualize certain mutual exclusive

¹ The table only covers the main types of utilization that were conceptualized within each stage and against which there is a consensus among theorists in this field of study.

² Recent work of the promoters of the first two approaches regarding the utilization of evaluation show the phenomenon from a broader perspective that can be framed within the third paradigm, such as: Alkin or Weiss.

categories. Therefore, in 2000, Kirkhart proposes the term “influence” (of evaluation) as a basic concept within the study of evaluation utilization. The evaluation influence is defined as “the capacity or power of persons or things to produce effects on others by intangible or indirect means” (cited in Cummings 2002, 4). The author criticises the previous approaches because they are very rigid and do not describe the reality in an accurate manner. According to Kirkhart the evaluation influence can be defined based on the following three dimensions: the object of utilization, the voluntary character of the utilization and the timeline. But, within each category developed by the author we find the utilization types that have been already conceptualized within this study area. Because of this I do not consider Kirkhart’s approach as a third change of paradigm, but a further development of the already existing types of utilization.

Even if, starting with Pelz, (1978) we can observe a consensus regarding the fact that the utilization process must be seen from several perspectives, we can also notice that this study area is still very heterogeneous when it comes to the classification of different types of utilization that have been identified so far.

4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

As emphasized above, the developed categories regarding the utilization types are inconsistent, because in all cases the determined categories weren’t mutually exclusive. Therefore, in order to address this matter and simplify the investigation process, without losing sight of important aspects though, I will further propose and use in the paper a single distinction between instrumental and conceptual utilization, as an analysis guideline. All the other types that have been identified through the literature review can be integrated in one of the two categories. This bidirectional perspective is grounded on the qualitative criteria of the type of change generated by the evaluation. The instrumental perspective defines the modifications of the program that occur as a consequence of the evaluation exercise, if this link is explicit and can be proven. The second type, that of the conceptual utilization, refers to knowledge transfers, exchange of good practice, therefore to a learning process that is facilitated by evaluation. Further on, in order to be able to analyse the evaluation process that has been conducted within the Structural Instruments System at the level of the Regional

Operation Program and to identify factors that have influenced the extent to which the evaluation exercises managed to determine changes regarding the addressed intervention, an important stage of this demarche is the establishment of the analysis framework. The latest research developments in this area have highlighted the predominance of several key factors that influence the role of the evaluation process within the policy making process, as the following: the context in which the evaluation is conducted, the importance of the broader learning aspect of the utilization process when speaking about the potential of the evaluation system to improve public interventions. The latest studies¹ emphasize the importance of participatory and empowerment evaluation models in the development of evaluation as an improvement instrument that is focused on determining change during the evaluation process. To stress this idea, Patton underlines that “the way in which the evaluation is carried out, starting from the elaboration of its design, will determine its real and final impact” (Patton 2008, 20).

In the development of this study field, a great importance should be attributed to research methods and specific measurements. Once the concept of utilization became a multidimensional one the research regarding the level of utilization and the mechanisms that can influence it becomes more complex and difficult to be done. Therefore, in order to measure the attitudinal change or the level of knowledge spread due to the evaluation process one does not only need to elaborate an adequate methodology that will validate results, but also, to spend a great amount of financial and time resources. Because of this, the studies that aimed to determine the exact level of different types of utilization that have appeared in a certain situation have usually been criticized due to the lack of consistency when trying to demonstrate the direct causal link between the evaluation and the observed change within the analysed groups of stakeholders. Nevertheless, the research upon the instrumental type of utilization remains the main focus in the literature regarding the factors that can enhance or impeded the role of evaluation within the policy-making process and each of its phases.

The following framework is based on the studies developed by Alkin and Daillak (1979), Cousins and Leithwood (1986), Shulha and Cousins 1997:

¹ Developed by authors as Patton, Fetterman and Cousins

Table no. 3 Analysis framework
Source: Author

CATHEGORY	VARIABLES	SUB-VARIABLES
THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE INTERVENTION	Specificity of the intervention	
	The implementation process	
THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EVALUATION PROCESS	Evaluation system	Regulatory framework
		Institutional design
	Evaluation process	Evaluation planning
		Running the evaluation
		Elaborating the recommendations
Quality of the evaluation studies		

Even if the context in which the evaluation system is established, that refers to the specificity of the public system, stability of the political environment, administrative tradition towards accountability and other, has an important role in the utilization process, this article will not address this issue. Due to its rather large implications the subject will be developed in a distinct article. Never the less, the main effects of the national current administrative context in which the evaluation practice has been conducted will be pointed out in the analysis section of this paper.

5. THE ROMANIAN REGIONAL OPERATIONAL PROGRAM 2007 - 2013

The Regional Operational Program (ROP) 2007 - 2013 is funded through the European Economic, Social and Territorial Policy, under the first objective "Convergence", designed to speed up economic development for the regions lagging behind, investing in human capital and basic infrastructure (Europe Direct, 2007, 13). The program is coordinated by the Romanian Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration, where is located the Managing Authority and it has been developed according to the European principle of subsidiarity from the regional development strategies and addresses NUTS II regions in accordance with Regulation EC no. 1059/2003 of statistical classification of territorial units.

In 1998, through the association of county councils from in Romania, there have been established 8 regions in order to coordinate the regional development, which was a conditionality for Romania in order to join the European Union. The administrative units do not have legal personality because they do not own a legislative council or an executive body. Their initial role was to allocate the funds of the pre-accession instrument PHARE. Since 2007, when Romania became a member of the European Union, the regions coordinate big infrastructure projects funded through the Regional Operational Programs 2007 - 2013 and 2014 - 2020.

Regarding the evaluation process, at the level of the Managing Authority there has been established an Evaluation Unit which is responsible for the following main activities: elaboration of the multiannual and annual evaluation plans, elaboration of the reference terms for each evaluation exercise, contracting the evaluation services, coordinating the evaluation process and dissemination and monitoring of the utilization of the evaluation results (Managing Authority of ROP, 2015, 191).

The strategic objective of the ROP 2007 - 2013 *"consists in supporting the economic, social, territorially balanced and sustainable development of the Romanian Regions, according to their specific needs and resources, focusing on urban growth poles, improving the business environment and basic infrastructure, in order to make the Romanian Regions, especially the ones lagging behind, more attractive places to live, visit, invest in and work"* (Managing Authority of ROP, 2009, 120).

The ROP 2007 – 2013 funds infrastructure investments in the following sectors: urban development, urban transport, social services, business environment and tourism. As the programming document states “it is clear that the solutions for the problems that have been identified during the socio-economic analysis [that grounds the logical framework of the program] cannot be developed only through the Regional Operational Program” and its actions “are meant to offer the adequate conditions in order to support the development of other programs” (Managing Authority of ROP, 2009, 117) financed through the public budget or through international instruments (Sectorial Operational Program Human Resources Development which has a strong educational component, Sectorial Operational Program Transport, Increase of Economic Competitiveness and other).

The complementarity of the Regional Operation Program with other public interventions may be outlined by the following table (Table no.3):

Table no. 4. The complementarity of the Regional Operational Program with other public interventions

PRIORITY AXYS	COMPLEMENTARY PROGRAMS
PA 1 - Support to sustainable development of urban growth poles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Operational Sectoral Program Competitiveness ▶ Operational Sectoral Program Environment ▶ Operational Sectoral Program Human Resources Development
PA 2 - Improvement of regional and local transport infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Operational Program Transport ▶ National Program of Rural Development
PA 3 - Improvement of social infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Operational Sectoral Program Competitiveness ▶ Operational Sectoral Program Human Resources Development ▶ National Program of Rural Development
PA 4 - Strengthening the regional and local business environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Operational Sectoral Program Competitiveness ▶ Operational Sectoral Program Human Resources Development

PA 5 - Sustainable development and promotion of tourism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ National Program of Rural Development ▶ Operational Sectoral Program Competitiveness Operational Sectoral Program Environment ▶ Operational Sectoral Program Human Resources Development ▶ National Program of Rural Development
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Source: Interpretation of the author on the basis of the information presented within the Ex-ante evaluation of Regional Operational Program 2007 – 2013

As the Romanian System of Structural Instruments according to its design is structured so as to facilitate the development of synergies in several key sectors, the effects of the program must be considered from two points of view, one focused strictly on the outputs and outcomes of the program and a broader one, focused on the effects of the synergies created by the operation programs on the targeted sectors. The first approach is the one used in the current practice of evaluation and analysis within the System of Structural Instruments (SIS) from Romania. Even if the planning documents of each program include a section dedicated to the complementarity with the other public interventions in the field, the reporting on the progress and achievements of the programs and the whole SIS do not address the issue of the complementarity of interventions.

6. EVALUATION ACHIEVEMENTS

6.1 Evaluation system under the structural instruments framework

At the level of the Central Evaluation Unit, established within the Ministry of European Funds, Coordination Authority of Structural Instruments, it has been developed in 2006 a set of 3 documents meant to guide de evaluation process: "Procedural Guidance Manual for Evaluation of NSRF and Operational Programmes in Romania", "Proposed Model for Evaluation of the Romanian National Strategic Reference Framework 2007-2013" and Operational Programmes during their implementation" and "Evaluation Standards". It is important to mention here that these three documents represent a set of guidelines regarding the way in which the evaluation process should take place within the System of Structural Instruments and do not have legal mandatory

consequences. Therefore, even if the documents describe a set of standards and procedures, the failure to comply with them do not generate administrative or sanctions of any other nature.

According to these documents, each evaluation process has to be conducted by following 3 phases: a) planning the evaluation, b) conducting the evaluation and c) the follow-up and dissemination of the evaluation results.

As the Central Evaluation Unit states, the on-going evaluations, which represent the type of evaluation that is taken into consideration within this study, have two main functions. "The first function is a strategic one, with evaluations focused on assessing the contribution of programs to overall national and European policy goals (especially those related to the Lisbon process). The second function is an operational one, where performance-related evaluations are undertaken to support program implementation (one of the evaluation purposes discussed above). The intention is that the results of such evaluations produce direct feedback into the implementation process and thus help to improve the quality of the program" (Central Evaluation Unit, 2006a, 10).

Therefore, in order to meet the second function, the Central Evaluation Unit has elaborated a set of indicative procedures for the follow-up stage of the evaluation process. As a distinct phase of the evaluation cycle established within the national framework of structural instruments, the follow-up stage of the evaluation refers to the dissemination and utilization of the evaluation reports. Therefore, the procedures that have been proposed by the evaluation coordination body are (Central Evaluation Unit, 2006b, 50-51):

- ▶ Dissemination of the evaluation results;
- ▶ Elaboration of the Action Plan (AP) based on the recommendation from the evaluation report;
- ▶ Final decision regarding the AP's approval;
- ▶ Monitoring and reporting the stage of AP's implementation;
- ▶ Wider informing on the evaluation results.

The framework that has been designed through these procedures is meant to ensure that the evaluation reports will become an operational instrument for the correction of deficiencies identified at the program level and improve the management and implementation system. For each procedure there has been established a responsible body, as in the following figure (Figure no. 3):

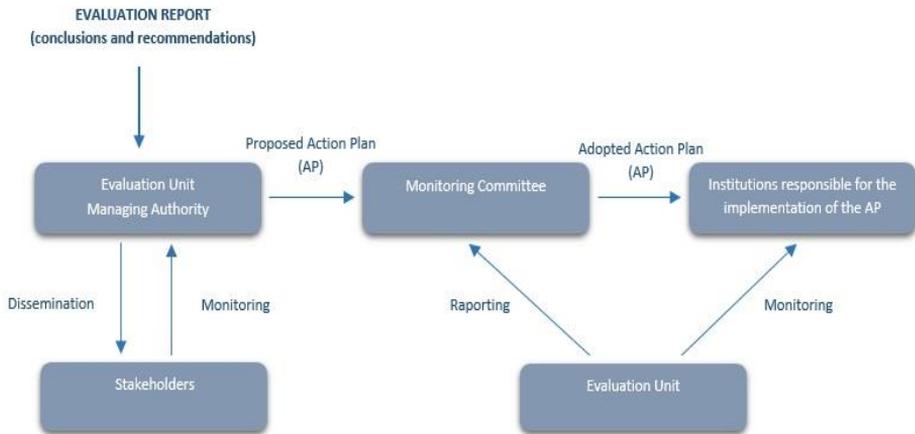


Figure no. 1. Utilization phase – institutional design

Source: Interpretation of the author based on the following reviewed documents: “Procedural Guidance Manual for Evaluation of NSRF and Operational Programs in Romania”, “Proposed Model for Evaluation of the Romanian National Strategic Reference Framework 2007-2013” and Operational Programs during their implementation” and “Evaluation Standards”¹

As it is shown in the figure above, after the report is finalized and approved, the Evaluation Unit and the Managing Authority have to disseminate the information to the stakeholders, in order to receive feed-back on the possibilities of implementing the recommendations. Based on the received input, the Evaluation Units have to elaborate an Action Plan that includes the recommendations, the status for each one of them (approved, rejected or partially approved), the actions that are going to be conducted, the responsible institutions and a time framework regarding the implementation phase. Then, the document is presented at the following meeting of the Monitoring Committee in order to be discussed and revised, if necessary, and approved. The

¹ This figure has been also used in the article Aioanei Mihaela, The need for change within the national approach on evaluating policies and programs, in Iordan Gheorghe Bărbulescu (Coord.), Conference proceedings. 25 years since the fall of communism, București: Tritonic, 2015.

evaluation unit has to monitor afterwards the execution of the plan and report within the next meetings of the Committee.

6.2. Evaluation planning and achievements

The Managing Authority of the ROP 2007 - 2013 has developed three multiannual evaluation plans. The first plan was published in 2008. The document has been revised for two times, first in 2009 and second in 2012.

The way in which the evaluation plans were adjusted and then followed show us that there were serious problems regarding the capacity of the evaluation department to elaborate a realistic proposal for the evaluation stage of the program cycle. From the 7 evaluation exercises that were planned in the final version of the document, the evaluation department conducted only 4, from which only 2 have met the established deadlines, the first interim evaluation and the evaluation of the projects and priorities of ROP addressed to business community. The other 2 were: the evaluation of the administrative capacity of the regions and the second interim evaluation, which were conducted in 2011 and 2014. 3 of the evaluations that were not developed by the MA of ROP and were focused on the evaluation of transversal principles like equal opportunities, sustainable development and partnership, were undertaken by the Central Evaluation Unit and extended to the whole system of structural instruments.

The several delays that were registered during the process were caused mainly by two factors, as the annual implementation reports of ROP mention: the reduced administrative capacity of the MA because of the overload of human resources and the public procurement legislation that led in several situations to procedures lasting for more than 8 months (according to the discussions from the meetings of several Monitoring Committees, as: the meetings of the MC from June 2012 or June and October 2014).

6.3. The follow-up phase

As mentioned before, during the financial period 2007 - 2013 (including the n+3 rule), the Managing Authority of the Regional Operational Program has finished four evaluation exercises: The First Interim Evaluation of ROP 2007 - 2013

(2009), The Evaluation of the Projects and Priorities of ROP addressed to business community (2010), The Evaluation of the Administrative Capacity of the Regions in the Regional Development Sector (2011) and The Update of the Interim Evaluation of ROP 2007 – 2013 (2014). The way in which the follow-up procedure has been conducted for each evaluation exercise is summarized in the following table.

Table no. 5. The implementation of the evaluation utilization stage at the level of ROP 2007 - 2013

EVALUATIONS ROP 2007 - 2013	PLAN	EXECUTION	RECOMMENDATIONS (Accepted no. of initial no.)	ACTION PLAN	FOLLOW-UP
First Interim Evaluation of ROP 2007 - 2013	2009	2009	9 of 9 recommendations	Yes	7 - fully implemented 2 - partially implemented
The Evaluation of the Projects and Priorities of ROP addressed to business community	2010	2011	8 of 10 recommendations fully accepted 1 of 10 recommendations partially accepted 1 of 10 recommendations rejected	Yes	6 - fully implemented 3 - partially implemented
Evaluation of the Administrative Capacity of the Regions in the Regional Development Sector	2011	2011	0 of 0 recommendations for the period 2007 – 2013 (including the n+3 rule)	No	-
The Update of the Interim Evaluation of ROP 2007 – 2013	2012	2014	2 of 3 recommendations for the financial period 2007 – 2013 (including the n+3 rule)	No	2 - fully implemented recommendati ons

Source: Author

First interim evaluation of ROP 2007 – 2013

The first interim evaluation was finished in October 2009, according to the initial multi-annual evaluation plan. The final report has been published immediately

and the dissemination process has started. The general objective of this study was to “contribute to the successful implementation of the Regional Operational Program through the evaluation of the progress and performances that have been achieved in the coordination and execution of the program” (Managing Authority of Regional Operational Program 2007 – 2013, 2009, 2). The evaluation report and the 9 related recommendations have been discussed and analysed during the meeting of the Monitoring Committee of ROP from October 2009. At this meeting the action plan for the implementation of the recommendations was approved. The plan is constituted by the recommendations, the actions proposed for the implementation, the time framework and the responsible actors. From the analysis of the plan we can notice that Monitoring Committee has approved all nine recommendations. However, during the meeting there has been a discussion regarding the quality level of the report and the inconsistency between the analysis and the conclusions of the evaluation (Monitoring Committee of Regional Operational Program 2007 - 2013, 2009, 35). The main criticism was that the evaluation’s results are biased and very similar to the perspective of the Managing Authority. But, at the end of the meeting the report has been appreciated because it was the first evaluation exercise regarding an operational programme implemented in Romania¹. The Commission’s representative emphasized the fact that the weaknesses of the report have been mentioned in order to avoid repeating the same mistakes in the following reports. At the following meeting of the Monitoring Committee the level of the AP’s implementation has not been presented in detail, but the representatives of the evaluation department has specified that the follow-up procedure is in progress and the planned actions are being implemented according to the document. At the following meeting the Managing Authority didn’t consider that is necessary to present the implementation status of the Action Plan. Yet, the Evaluation and Programing Compartment within the Managing Authority of ROP 2007 – 2013 has planned the initiation of a new evaluation study called “The update of the interim evaluation of ROP 2007 - 2013”. In 2014, when the evaluation report was published, all the recommendations from the first interim evaluation were fully or partially implemented, according to the annex no. 51 of the report (Managing Authority of Regional Operational Program 2007 - 2013,

¹ Without taking into consideration the ex-ante evaluations, that are not analyzed in this paper.

2014, 366 - 370). Only two of them weren't implemented to their full extent because of administrative limits or technical limits.

The Evaluation of the projects and priorities of ROP 2007 -2013 addressed to business community

The second evaluation study at the level of ROP, The Evaluation of the projects and priorities of ROP addressed to business community, was finished and published in 2011. Its general objective was to "contribute to the absorption level of the allocated funds for the Regional Operation Program 2007 - 2013 for the development of the business community" (Managing Authority of Regional Operational Program 2007 - 2013, 2010, 10). This general objective was to be achieved through the following specific objectives: "analysis of the effectiveness of the implementation of regional business community priority", "the acceleration of the projects' implementation in order to facilitate job creation", "the identification and analysis of good practice examples" and "elaboration of recommendations in order to facilitate the absorption of the funds and the achievement of the specific objectives for the sector that is being evaluated and also for the improvement of the programming process addressed to the following financial period" (Managing Authority of Regional Operational Program 2007 - 2013, 2010, 10)

Because one of the specific objectives refers partly to the development for improvement solutions regarding the programming period 2014 - 2020, and the purpose of the analysis is to identify the factors that can enhance the use of evaluation exercised within the Romanian System of Structural Instruments based on the experience from the financial cycle 2007 - 2013, I will refer only to the recommendations that are focused on this timeframe. Therefore, the report includes 10 recommendations that address changes for ROP 2007 - 2013, from which the Monitoring Committee has fully approved 8, partially approved one, rejected one and developed the related Action Plan. The rejection of one recommendation has been justified during the meeting of the Monitoring Committee of ROP from November 2011 through the fact that the recommendation had been already implemented at the moment of the elaboration of the Action Plan. At the MC's meeting from May 2012, the Managing Authority reported that all the recommendations from the AP have been implemented. However, the 51 annex of the second interim evaluation

mentions the fact that only 6 of 9 approved recommendations were fully implemented (Managing Authority of Regional Operational Program 2007 - 2013, 2014, 371 - 370). This inconsistency of the reporting process comes from the perspective in which each authority chose to present the follow-up activity. The first information has been given by the

The evaluation of the administrative capacity of the regions in the regional development sector

The third evaluation exercise was the Evaluation of the Administrative Capacity of the Regions in the Regional Development Sector and it had as a general objective “ensuring the efficient absorption of EU funds for regional development in the programming period post-2013” (Managing Authority of Regional Operational Program 2007 - 2013, 2011, 6). The evaluation report was finalized in November 2011 and its results were presented at the Monitoring Committee meeting from the same month. Because the evaluation aims to contribute to the better execution of the ROP in the financial period 2014 - 2020, the recommendations did not address the 2007 - 2013 program. The current guidelines regarding the follow-up phase of the evaluation process, as shown in the section 2.1.2, address only the on-going evaluation that propose changes at the level of the current version of the evaluation program. The responsible institutions do not apply this mechanism for the recommendations that refer to a future programming period, because they propose mainly operational changes, that cannot be established in the programming phase. Therefore, the Managing Authority did not elaborate an Action Plan for the implementation of the recommendations.

The second interim evaluation of ROP 2007 - 2013

The last evaluation that has been conducted during the implementation of the program¹, The Update of the Interim Evaluation of ROP 2007 - 2013, was the second interim evaluation of ROP. The evaluation was finished in 2014, even if it

¹ We do not take into consideration here the ex-post evaluations that were initiated in 2015, when the program was still in the implementation phase.

was planned for the year 2012. The general objective of this study was to “contribute to the successful implementation and absorption of funds at the level of the Regional Operational Program 2007 - 2013” (Managing Authority of Regional Operational Program 2007 - 2013, 2014, 25). The final report includes 3 recommendations for the financial period 2007 - 2013, including the extent generated by the n+3 rule that permits the implementation of the program until the end of year 2016. At the following meeting of the Monitoring Committee of the ROP, which took place in June 2014 (Monitoring Committee of Regional Operational Program 2007 - 2013, 2014, 24), all the recommendations were discussed and only 2 were approved by the vote of the member of the committee.

7. THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE FOLLOW-UP PROCESS

This phase of the analysis aims to identify the extent to which the follow-up procedure had affected in a positive way the Regional Operational Program 2007 - 2013. The effectiveness of a process may be at risk when we can notice that there are no effects produced at the level of the intervention in comparison with the objectives of the analysed procedure. If the follow-up phase of the evaluation process aims to facilitate the direct utilization of the evaluation results in order to develop and implement solutions according to the recommendations of the evaluation, the effects should be seen in the areas that the recommendations were addressed to. Therefore, this section of the paper determines if the recommendations of the subsequent evaluation studies were similar and if the annual implementation reports of the Regional Operational Program 2007 - 2013 show progress in the concerned areas.

Below there are emphasized the recommendations that are found in more than one evaluation study and show that even if the information regarding the corrective measures that had to be taken was available to the decision makers they did not use it.

Table no. 6. Recurrent recommendation at the level of the evaluation exercises developed within the Managing Authority of ROP 2007 - 2013

RECOMMENDATION	EVALUATION STUDY
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The Managing Authority of the Regional Operational Program should establish together with the Regional Development Agencies and local beneficiaries the needs and priorities regarding the projects that address local development in order to ensure the absorption of funds.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ First interim evaluation of ROP 2007 - 2013 (2009) ▶ The Evaluation of the Projects and Priorities of ROP addressed to business community (2011)
Change the evaluation system of the proposal projects in order to avoid delays and ensure the objectivity of the process.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ First interim evaluation of ROP 2007 - 2013 (2009) ▶ The Evaluation of the Projects and Priorities of ROP addressed to business community (2011)
Improve the monitoring system of Regional Operational Program 2007 - 2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ First interim evaluation of ROP 2007 - 2013 (2009) ▶ The Evaluation of the Projects and Priorities of ROP addressed to business community (2011)
Speeding up the payment system for the beneficiaries of the projects in order to avoid blockages in the implementation phase.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ First interim evaluation of ROP 2007 - 2013 (2009) ▶ Second interim evaluation of ROP 2007 - 2013 (2014)
Revision of the targets of the program indicators taking into consideration the current socio-economic context.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ The Evaluation of the Projects and Priorities of ROP addressed to business community (2011) ▶ Second interim evaluation of ROP 2007 - 2013 (2014)

Sources: Author

The above table shows that there are some recurrent themes or problems that have been raised through the evaluation process. Even if the recommendations through which these problems were addressed have been accepted by the Managing Authority and included in the action plans, the same difficulties regarding the implementation of the program have been registered after the corrective measures were conducted.

The information collected through the field work has shown that the proposed measures included in the action plans for the implementation of the

recommendations were not fully developed in several cases like: the improvement of the monitoring system, the development of the payment system and speeding up the payment process. In these cases, even if the Managing Authority managed to improve the situation, the lack of administrative capacity at the program's level have affected the overall success potential of the actions that have been conducted.

Also, the interviewees have emphasized that even if the recommendations were generally accepted, the logic of the measures proposed through the evaluation studies were not internalized at the management level of the program. Therefore, their possible effects were mostly punctual. In this context, the role of the evaluation is to identify problems at the level of a program, a priority axis or regarding the way in which a principle applied (transversal or thematic evaluations) and generate solutions for improving program management. However it can be seen that within the System Structural Instruments, due to factors both internal and external, there is a tendency to decrease the number of conducted evaluations (as in the case of ROP 2007 - 2013) and the extent of their use when program encounters major difficulties at the management at implementation level. This is caused by a lack of awareness regarding the utility of the evaluation for improving the management and implementation of structural instruments. The ways in which the evaluation process can develop an intervention will be further addressed in the following section.

All in all, the situations presented in the above table represent approximately 25 % percent of the total recommendations that have been developed through the evaluation exercises. Taking into consideration that most of the problems were not identified any more within the evaluation studies after the action plans were implemented, we can say that the follow-up procedure was effective in a good proportion. This is also sustained by the annual implementation reports of ROP 2007 - 2013 which identify the situations that have been improved during the previous financial period.

8. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EVALUATION SYSTEM

The evaluation utilization stage during the programming period 2007 - 2013 did not have a set of procedures that had to be applied at the level of all operational programs in a unitary manner. The Central Unit of Evaluation establishes in 2006

a set of guidelines regarding this process. They include the elaboration of the action plans for the implementation of the recommendations of each study, the approval of the plan and the monitoring of its enforcement.

The available data show that these guidelines have not been applied in all of the evaluation units, even if the Regional Operation Program have respected in most of the cases the recommended procedures. The way in which this stage has been conducted will be discussed in the section dedicated to the evaluation process. Nevertheless, for the current programming period the Central Unit of Evaluation has developed a set of 6 operational procedures, in a legal sense, that are mandatory and imply penalties if they are not met during the evaluation process¹. The procedures address only the ongoing evaluation. We have to mention here that, the new EU Regulation (1303/2013) regarding the implementation of the European Structural and Investment Funds, gives more importance to the evaluation process by changing several aspects from being optional to a mandatory practice (as the evaluation plans stipulated in article 56(1)). Therefore, the changes in the regulations of the national system of structural instruments has also been influenced by the new EU regulation. Nevertheless, the Romanian evaluation system established within the system of structural instruments had already decided, for the programming period 2007 – 2013, to develop multi-annual and annual evaluation plans for each program, to conduct two interim evaluation exercises for each program, to develop ad-hoc and theme based evaluation studies and to follow as much as possible the guidelines developed by the Central Evaluation Unit in 2006 regarding the follow-up stage of the evaluation process.

All the aspects regulated by the 6 aforementioned procedures have been established more or less in each managing authority for the period 2007 – 2013, through their organizing and functions regulations. However, they didn't have a unitary design. When it comes to the follow-up stage of the evaluation process, which is the main mechanism that can ensure instrumental utilisation of the evaluation exercises, some managing authorities chose a more lax formulation

¹ Operational procedure – Elaborating and Monitoring the Evaluation Plan, Operational procedure – The establishment and Functioning of the Evaluation Coordination Committee, Operational procedure – Ensuring Quality in the Evaluation Activity, Operational procedure – Dissemination of the Evaluation Results, Operational procedure – Analysis of the recommendations and Operational procedure – Monitoring the Recommendations.

that did not establish very clearly the responsibilities for the follow-up process. All the managing authorities have the responsibility to "inform the Monitoring Committee regarding the results of the evaluations and the proposed arrangements for the implementation of the recommendation"¹. Further, when it comes to the responsibilities of the evaluation units, only 4 of the 7 operational programs², among which is the Regional Operational Program 2007 - 2013, mention and detail the follow-up stage of the evaluation. The specific paragraphs that refer to this key issue stipulate the following:

- ▶ "the evaluation department disseminates the evaluation reports to the stakeholders, follow-up the implementation of recommendations and publish the results of the evaluations" (Managing Authority of OPTA, 2007, p.33);
- ▶ „elaborate the action plan regarding the recommendations implementation, based on the proposals made by the specialized departments within the managing authority" and „monitor the implementation of the action plan elaborate the progress reports" (Managing Authority of SOP HRD, 2007, 45);
- ▶ "the evaluation unit uses monitoring instruments that measure the way in which the recommendations are implemented" (Managing Authority of ROP, 2007);
- ▶ "the evaluation unit disseminates evaluation reports to all stakeholders and organizes debriefing sessions on the results of evaluations and a timetable for monitoring the implementation of recommendations, reports the progress of the implementation phase to the managing authority" (Managing Authority of SOP DAC, 2007).

The way in which the evaluation units are organized is an issue that has to be also discussed here. At the level of the Regional Operational Program, the evaluation unit is responsible only with this activity. But within the system of structural instruments from Romania this isn't a common practice. Usually these departments conduct also other activities, such as: monitoring (Competitiveness Program), programing (Human Resources Program and Environment Program)

¹ This phase can be found in all the Organizing and Functioning Regulations.

² Regional Operational Program, Technical Assistance Operational Program, Human Resources Development Operational Program and Development Administrative Capacity Operational Program.

or communication (Transport program). Taking this into consideration and the fact that at the level of UNDP, World Bank and also European Union we can notice a strong approach towards the monitoring and evaluation systems, that connect the two activities and advocate for the development of them within the same body as two interconnected phases of the cycle of an intervention¹, I have considered justified to explore this issue through the interviews that I have done with the experts.

According to the collected data, the majoritarian view reflects the need of establishing distinct departments for the evaluation process. Only one interviewee (independent evaluation expert) brought up during the discussion the subject of evaluation as a periodic activity and not a continuous one. In this respect, the expert considered that the evaluation activity can be conducted within a department that has also other responsibilities, preferable monitoring. The other interviewees argued their different point of view based on the current status of the evaluation within the system of structural instruments, which often leads to prioritizing other activities to the expense of evaluation. Therefore, taking into consideration the incipient stage of the evaluation culture and the lack of interest and understanding towards its role and utility we can say that it is important to develop departments or units specialized in evaluation, without excluding the importance of a close collaboration with the other departments within a managing authority.

The new structure of the system in which are implemented the operational programs follows this approach. As I have mentioned before, five programs are managed under the Ministry of European Funds and their evaluation studies are conducted under a single unit, which is exterior to the managing authorities. The other two programs, Regional Operation Program and Administrative Capacity Program, which are located within the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration, have maintained their initial structure and have separate evaluation departments within each managing authority. The latest developments of the system show that there is a need for strengthening the evaluation system.

¹ That is explored and recommended by documents like: The Handbook on Monitoring and Evaluation for Result, Evaluation Office of UNDP or Monitoring and Evaluation: Tools, Methods and Approaches, World Bank and Guidance Document on Monitoring and Evaluation for the programming period 2014 - 2020, European Commission.

Taking into consideration the above data the most suitable and efficient design of the evaluation units should follow the model of Regional Operational Program which consists in an evaluation department without any other responsibilities located within the Managing Authority. The new structure of the Ministry of European Fund may confer to this institutional body more strength in coordinating the evaluation process, but not on the influence that the evaluation exercises may have on the interventions that are addressed to. Taking into consideration that the interest of stakeholders is low regarding the evaluation results, taking out the evaluation units from the managing authorities may affect the potential of implicating them actively in the process and raising their interest towards it.

9. THE EVALUATION PROCESS

9.1 The planning process

The evaluation process starts with the planning phase. At a first glance, the available data show that the Regional Operational Program faces difficulties regarding the implementation of the multi-annual plan and not in the process of planning itself. But, the following paragraphs will show that a poor planning demarche caused several of the problems encountered during the evaluation process. In this respect, all the interviewees argued that the legislation regarding the public acquisition is one of the most important factors that generate delays and have a negative impact on the potential of an evaluation to generate useful information for the management of the program. Moreover, during the interviews, other elements linked to the planning process have been raised. The first issue refers to the fact that usually the stakeholders do not expect to find out new information about the program and better solutions for solving the encountered difficulties. The experts from the evaluation unit have mentioned situations where, during the implementation of evaluation exercises, at the meeting of the Project Coordination Committee for the presentation of the initial draft of the evaluation report, the experts from the implementation and monitoring departments didn't agree on the expected results of the study according to the terms of reference (ToR). Consequently, there is a need of involvement of the stakeholders in the planning process in order to raise their interest in the evaluation findings and conclusions. Second of all, the

independent evaluation experts have addressed the issue of data access, which has been a common problem during the execution of the evaluation exercises, and argued that the sources of information should be clearly established in the planning phase. Even though the evaluation plans include information regarding the data source, they are vague (for example: Ministry of National Education, National Authority of Employment or the National Institute of Statistics) and do not specify the exact indicators or variables that are available in the public databases. Even if the impact evaluation that have been carried out at the end of the financial cycle¹ are not the focus of this paper, it is important to mention here that in this case the access to information was also one of the main encountered problems. This becomes even a more difficult situation to be solved taking into consideration that the methodology of these studies has been based on the counterfactual approach and the needed data regarding the control group has not been collected previously.

According to the above information, in order to facilitate the further optimal development of the evaluation process and enhance the potential evaluation utilization, the planning phase have to take into account the following:

- ▶ The potential users of the evaluation results must be involved in the process in order to develop a common perspective regarding the information that will be needed and the possibility of providing it through the evaluation;
- ▶ The needed data should be clarified and the available sources should be identified or, if necessary, a process of data collecting should be initiated.

9.2. The elaboration of ToR

The next phase of the evaluation process is the elaboration of the terms of reference. According to the interviewees the lack of collaboration between the stakeholders in this process has generated situations like the aforementioned one where the representatives of the coordination and implementation of the program do not agree with the terms of reference and, in consequences, are not

¹ 5 impact evaluation were conducted in 2015, at the level of the regional operational program, when the implementation of the program was still in progress.

pleased with results of the conducted evaluation studies. Further, experiences like these deepen the mistrust of the stakeholders in the evaluation process in general. Even if in the elaboration process of the ToR are phases where other departments of a managing authority should be involved, when this happens, the debriefing sessions that are organized, according to the interviewees, are considered only a formality. We have to mention here that the development of ToR does not require the participation of other departments and their implication depends only on the practice adopted by the project coordinator. Therefore, this leads us to the issue regarding the evaluation capacity of the staff within the evaluation units. There is an intrinsic link between these two aspects, because if the capacity of understanding the process of elaborating the terms of reference is low, the commissioners' capacity to actively involve stakeholders in the process and raise their interest towards the evaluation process is also reduced. This topic will be further developed in the section addressed to the quality of the evaluation studies.

9.3. Carrying out the evaluations studies

The implementation of the evaluation studies raised problems in two areas. As I have previously mentioned the access to data has been a challenge for the evaluators because of the lack of transparency within the public system or because there were no data collected in certain areas of interest. As the independent experts confirmed, the databases of the public institutions were often outdated or could not be aggregated with information from other databases. For example, during the execution of second interim evaluation of the Regional Operational Program, the evaluators notice that the information regarding the achievement of the indicators weren't accurate. Therefore, the identified errors have led to additional work and delays in delivering the agreed deliverables. According to the representatives of the evaluation units, this problem have influenced the quality of the evaluation and the trust in the presented findings and conclusions. The second issue refers to the way in which the evaluation teams usually present the findings of their studies. The members of the evaluation unit of the Regional Operational Program mentioned that very specific and technical language used within the evaluation reports made the results less accessible than it was expected. Therefore, there was a need of several

meetings with the evaluation team in order to revise the texts and find a common ground. The way in which the results of an evaluation are presented have a great impact on the receptivity of the people that they are addressed to. This can affect the influence that an evaluation has, both instrumental and conceptual.

During the implementation of the evaluation exercise there are several meetings organised within the Project Coordination Committee. At these sessions participate representatives of the evaluation unit, representatives of other departments within the managing authorities, representatives of resort ministries that manage the sectors addressed by the program, representatives of the intermediary organisms, of public local administration, other national agencies and civil society. In order to facilitate the active participation of the members of the committee, the evaluation unit of the ROP have developed a system of comments and replies registered in the annexes of the final version of the report. Therefore, all the comments that are made during the sessions are noted and in the next version of the report the evaluation team has to present the changes in accordance with the comments or the justifications if the experts consider that the received comments are not well grounded. All this process is recorded and presented in the annexes. Also, all the participants receive previously the current version of the report and have to send a point of view regarding its contents. This isn't a common practice within the meetings of the Evaluation/Project Coordination Committees. The experts within the evaluation unit argued this approach on the basis of previous experiences. They have noticed that if the members of the committee are not implicated in a formal and mandatory way they do not engage the necessary time for reading and analysing the reports that they receive and they usually learn about the evaluation process in question during the meetings. This is another example which supports the argument that the current practice is characterized by an excessive focus on meeting the procedures to the expense of the obtained effects, which is specific to the national public administrative system. Nevertheless, we have to emphasize the fact that the system implemented by the evaluation unit still doesn't solve the problem of the types of actors that participate to this meeting. All of the interviewees considered that there are not enough decisional factors get involved in this process. Usually the members of the committees come from the implementation level and their capacity of influencing the decisions regarding the program is rather low.

9.4. The elaboration of recommendations

Being part of the evaluation reports, the recommendation pass the same process of adjustment and validation. In this respect, one of the objectives of the conducted interview was to learn more about the ways in which the recommendations should be elaborated because there can be noticed important differences between the evaluation reports. The experts had a common understanding regarding the optimal number of the recommendations and said that the number may vary according to the specificities of the evaluation and the number of the evaluation questions. Thus, an average number may be 10 - 12 recommendations. The evaluation experts mentioned that they are often asked, not especially in the case of the Regional Operational Program, for very particular, operational recommendations even if the evaluation questions had a strategically nature. Therefore, the divergent perspectives within the evaluation system regarding the theory of evaluation and the evaluation process lead to misunderstandings regarding the outcome of the evaluation process and its role within the management of an intervention. Usually, the involved staff focuses more on the operational level and expect prefabricated solutions that can offer a rapid line of action. Even if the role of the recommendation is not this, through the revision process the final result is often composed of actions, and not of recommendations. This increases the implementation level, but decreases their importance to the strategic improvement of the program at stake.

In the case of the evaluations that have been conducted at the level of ROP 2007 - 2013, the recommendations are very specific and in accordance with the evaluation questions. As described previously, the four evaluations in question were operational evaluations that had as main objective the contribution to the successful implementation and absorption of European funds. The issues addressed by the recommendation cover the following main aspects: re-establishing the funded types of projects in order not to finance unnecessary activities, improving the system of data collection for the output indicators, speeding the process of contract attribution, offering support for the private beneficiaries to implement the projects, speeding the payment process, reallocation of funds. Further development of the subject can be found in the following section.

9.5. Elaboration and implementation of the Action Plans

The action plans for the implementation of the recommendations were developed in the case of two evaluations of the four that have been conducted. One of the evaluations only had recommendations for the programming period 2014 – 2020 and the regulations do not require the implementation of the follow-up stage in this case. Nevertheless, the constitutive document of the current Regional Operational Program, refers to conclusions of the evaluations that have been conducted previously. The other evaluation had only three recommendations for the previous financial period and two of them were implemented after the report has been finalised.

The recommendations that have not been accepted by the Managing Authority were the following: to limit the project extensions in order to lower the pressure in 2014 and 2015 regarding the absorptions level (The Evaluation of the Projects and Priorities of ROP addressed to business community) and to monthly monitor the risk of decommitment (Second interim evaluation). For the first one the managing authority argued that if they do not permit the extension of the implementation period at the project level there will be the risk of not achieving the indicator targets. The second rejection was based on the work load registered in that period of time within the managing authority and the fact that this process may aggravate the situation. Further, according to the representatives of the evaluation unit there were no difficulties in the implementation of the action plans that have been developed. It is important to mention here that evaluations have been very important tools when it comes to budget reallocations. The experts within the evaluation unit of the program and those within the central evaluation unit have emphasized the fact that the reallocation couldn't have been approved without being based on an existing analysis regarding this necessity. Therefore, all the reallocation that have been made were based on the conclusions and recommendations of the evaluation studies that were conducted. This aspect is important here, even if it is generated by the European regulation and it is applied at the level of all countries that benefit from structural funds, because of the general perspective of those involved in the implementation of the Regional Operational Program that emphasized, during the interviews, this specific and explicit role of the evaluation within the development of the intervention.

It is likely that when a recommendation addresses a specific change, usually related to the procedures or institutional architecture of a program, authorities show a callous attitude towards it. But the influence of this factor does not manifest itself directly. In this respect, it is necessary to take into consideration other factors like interest of the decisional actors in the recommended change. If the proposed measure is consistent with the view of policy makers, regardless of the level of difficulty that it involves, it is likely to be implemented¹.

It is important to mention that the practice regarding the elaboration of action plans for the implementation of recommendations have changed during the programming period 2007 – 2013 at the level of all operational programs. In the case of the first round of interim and ad-hoc evaluations the action plans were developed by the managing authorities of the program. Later, this activity became the responsibility of the external evaluators and it constituted a deliverable stipulated in the terms of reference for each evaluation study. Both the guideline developed by the Central Evaluation Unit (Central Evaluation Unit, 2006) regarding the specific procedures of the evaluation process and the new set of regulations that is enforced in the current financial period put the elaboration of the action plans in the responsibility of the managing authority. On one hand, the external evaluators who participated to the interviews agreed that it is more efficient to develop this document at the level of the program. On the other hand, the representatives of the evaluation unit of ROP said that this process is developed by the evaluators with the assistance of the managing authority and the results are agreed by them. Also, putting this responsibility in the hand of the evaluation team, has a positive effect on the administrative capacity of the authority, taking into consideration that its personnel is already overloaded.

The elaboration of an action plan may be considered a planning process that involves actions like: establishing the activities that can and cannot be put into practice, depending on the context, setting the responsible actors, setting the time framework and if necessary, allocating financial resources. Therefore, establishing the actions that can be conducted in order to implement the

¹ As mentioned previously, in the case POR First Interim Evaluation, where even if the recommendations of the study were inconsistent with its findings, all recommendations were approved and implemented. In this case, the representative of the European Commission argued that the way in which the evaluation was conducted is doubtful, because the evaluators' proposals are very alike to the already existing perspective to the Management Authority.

recommendations is not an analytical process which derives directly from the examination of the evaluation results. Not only that this activity is a distinct process that requires other resources and implies a new phase of collecting data from the actors involved in the program's management, but also if the plan were to be developed by the external evaluation the Managing Authority might not fully assume responsibility of implementing it which leads to lower chances of effectively using the evaluation in order to improve the program. Thus, I consider that this activity should be developed by the Evaluation Unit in collaboration with other actors that have responsibilities in the coordination and implementation of the intervention. Therefore, I consider that the normative documents established by the Central Evaluation Unit for the financial period 2014 - 2020, which settle in a clearer and mandatory manner that the actions plans will be developed by the evaluation units, manage to regulate in an optimal manner this part of the evaluation system and offer unity to the practice.

10. THE QUALITY LEVEL OF THE EVALUATIONS

In the literature there is no consensus regarding the link between the utilization of evaluations and their quality. In this respect, we should take into consideration another element, namely the credibility of the results, because the two of them are interdependent. But as I mentioned in the first chapter, analyses of authors such as Balthazar, Alkin or Cousins underline that the same level of quality could influence the utilization in two ways. On the one hand, an evaluation of questionable quality may lower the probability of the results being used and thus may become an inhibiting factor. On the other hand, however, if the results of an evaluation fail to achieve the official objectives of the evaluation, but they are in compliance with the overall perspective of the contracting authority, they can facilitate the use of the recommendations. In these circumstances, most often can be seen using symbolic, aiming to legitimize or justify certain decisions, without being able to contribute to the improvement of the program (like the case of the First Interim Evaluation of ROP from 2009).

Within the Structural Instruments System, each evaluation report has to be verified with a grid of quality validations. During the programming period 2007 - 2013, only one evaluation exercise did not pass officially the quality criteria and the report has not been approved (First Interim Evaluation of the Transport

Operational Program). The evaluation unit declared then that deliverable had met the quality criteria only to a 20% extent, after three extensions of the final deadline, therefore the contract had to be terminated (Managing Authority of the Transport Operational Program, 2010, 30). Thus, according to the expert from the two evaluation units that participated to the interviews there were other cases where the quality of the evaluation reports did not meet the threshold settled by the grid, but also did not have a very low level of quality. This had happened because the quality of the evaluation grid is poorly defined and do not have clarifications and standards of assessment for each item. Therefore, the evaluation process becomes a subjective one. Nevertheless, the reports were approved and submitted to the Commission. Thus, they are considered official evaluation studies, have been published and the results were disseminated to the stakeholders. The interviewees motivated this practice saying that the negative consequences were higher if the reports weren't approved because they couldn't use anymore the information provided by the study, they had to reinitiate the public procurements procedure and this could lead to further delays and also the absorption level of the program will be affected.

Further, the experts from the evaluation units have emphasized that they have encountered problems regarding the way in which the evaluation reports are written. They have mentioned that the language sometimes is too technical and the ideas are difficult to be comprehended. They have also addressed the problem of translation, because the evaluation teams often have foreign experts and this can lead to misinterpretation of the content because of the language adaptation. Nevertheless, the conclusion of the discussion was that the evaluations focus more on the content than on the format of the reports and this happens due to the fact that there is indeed a lack of correlation between the amount of work needed for the evaluation exercise, the remuneration and the allocated timeframe. We can mention again, as one of the causes of this phenomenon the awarding criteria that leads to the intention of the evaluation to bid more on the technical offer than the real possibilities (on an optimal level of quality) in the limits of the price and the time framework. Moreover, regarding the issue of the formulation of conclusions, the experts have said that often they face demands from the commissioners of the evaluation to change language style because it seems to "harsh" or it makes them seem "the guilty actors for the identified problems". As one of the interviewees emphasized "besides all the technical work, the evaluation process is a continuous negotiation process".

We can conclude that there is a general perspective among the experts within the Central Evaluation Unit and the Evaluation Unit of the Regional Operational Program 2007 - 2013 (at both, management and executive levels) that the quality of the evaluation studies should be improved, but also that there can be noticed visible progress since the first round of interim and ad-hoc evaluations. Because the quality of evaluations issue has been emphasized more times along this chapter, I consider important to summarize the elements that have been identified as influencing negative factors or causes, as shown in the below table. These factors that affect the quality of the evaluation exercises conducted within the system of structural instruments and especially at the level of the Regional Operational Program, can be ameliorated with measures addressed particularly to each of them, as follows:

Table no. 7. Factors that affects the quality of the evaluation studies and proposed solutions

FACTORS THAT AFFECT THE QUALITY OF THE EVALUATION STUDIES	POPOSED MEASURES	KEY ISSUES AND EXPLANATIONS
Vague terms of reference	Develop evaluation capacity at the level of dedicated departments through training sessions and experience exchange programs	This issue may also generate some other problems, like the one below. In order to be able to develop a useful evaluation process it is important to have the capacity of identifying the needed information and knowing how to define the terms of reference in order to receive it from the evaluators. Trainings have the role of developing this capacity, but the positive effects will be maintained only in combination with other factors, like stability of personnel.
Different understandings of what it is expected from	Enhance communication between the evaluation	This issue can be overcome only by organising several

<p>the evaluation between the contractors and the external experts and other</p>	<p>unit and other departments within the Managing Authority, as: programing, monitoring, implementation</p>	<p>debriefing sessions, informal if needed, with the evaluation team. The regular practice that includes the presentation of the initial report draft and the final draft are not enough if there is a case where the two parties cannot find a common ground.</p>
<p>Rigidity of the evaluators regarding the formulation of the conclusions and recommendations</p>	<p>Enhance the communication between the commissioners of the evaluation and the evaluation team</p>	<p>Constructive communication among the actors that are implicated in the process may lead to finding a common ground. A very important element here can be also the experience of the evaluators regarding the communication of the results.</p>
<p>Language errors generated by the translation process</p>	<p>Enhance the communication between the commissioners of the evaluation and the evaluation team</p>	<p>This problem can be overcome only if the commissioners of the evaluation organize several sessions with the evaluation experts regarding the content of the reports. This process doesn't have to be regulated per se, moreover it may be more efficient in an informal context, if both actors have the availability and interest to improve the final product.</p>
<p>Lower price criteria which is applied when the projects are awarded</p>	<p>Increase the weight of the quality criterion within the selection process</p>	<p>This issue may be considered in the context of the current study a constant, because this sort of changes cannot be influenced by the actors within the System of Structural Instruments, even less by the representatives of the Regional Operational</p>

		Program. This is a structural problem of the public administration system from Romania and its settlement will only be a results of consistent political debates, political will and pragmatic administrative reform.
Time limitations imposed by the contracts	Increase the weight of the quality criterion within the selection process	This is not a negative factor in itself, but it represents the perception that those involved in the process have regarding the available time in comparison with the amount of work and the available financial resources. Nevertheless, changes at the level of the public procurement legislation would solve the problem by breaking this multiple causal chain.
Limitations generated by the access to information	Increase interinstitutional communication Update and corroborate the existing data bases at the public administration level Clarify the needed information and identify data sources when planning the evaluation exercises	This is a problem signalled in also in other areas, not only in the evaluation sector ¹ . The most important action that can be taken and does not depend on actors exterior to the system of structural instruments or of the Managing Authority of the Regional Operational Program is to explore more the

¹ Currently, the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration, is developing a strategic project which is financed through the Operational Program Administrative Capacity, also funded through structural instrument, which aims to enhance the capacity of the public sector to collect and aggregate multidisciplinary data. More information regarding this project can be found at: <http://www.snsa.ro/cercetare/proiecte/item/832-starea-natiunii-construirea-instrument-inovator-politici-publice-sipoca-11>.

		availability of data in the phase evaluation planning. In this way the approach towards the evaluation exercises may be revised and also the collecting of new sets of data can be initiated.
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Source: Author

It is important to mention that the importance of this section is legitimated by the fact that the quality of the evaluation studies and also the general perspective regarding their level of quality, which is a different aspect, influence in a direct manner the interest of stakeholders, including decision-making actors, on the evaluation process, its results and their utilization. Therefore, we can consider that the above mentioned factors have an indirect influence on the utilization process.

As an example of a measure that has been taken by the representatives of the evaluation unit within the Regional Operational Program in order to ensure an optimal quality level of the evaluation exercises, we can mention here that project directors have settled weekly meetings with the coordinators of the studies, or a member team that is implicated in the evaluation stage conducted at that moment, even if they were not stipulated in the contracts. Through this they aimed to identify any misunderstanding, difficulty encountered by the evaluation team or delay according to the contract in order to find and implement optimal solutions as soon as possible. Nevertheless, the other evaluation units were not able to apply the same practice because while in the case of the ROP the evaluation unit has 5 employees, in the other cases the number of staff members vary between 1 and 3, and some of them have also other functions as: monitoring, programing or communication.

Regarding this approach towards the communication with the evaluation team during the process, we can consider that weekly meetings can constitute a burden for the evaluators, taking into consideration that contracts are usually very short compared with the amount of work and also the experts are implicated in more than one project. Even if the representatives of the Evaluation Unit of the program propose this approach as an example of good practice, this might not work in any context.

11. CONCLUSIONS

The experience of the Regional Operational Program 2007 – 2013, from Romania, portrayed on the bases of official reporting documents, other analytical reports and the perspective of the actors that have been involved in the evaluation process, has highlighted a set of main elements that have the potential of influencing the evaluation process and the extent to which it can generate change at the program level. The presented data has emphasized the following aspects:

- ▶ We can identify a category of **key influence factors** that can contribute in a direct manner to the capacity of the evaluation practice to enhance the efficacy and effectiveness of the concerned interventions;
- ▶ We can also identify a set of secondary influence factors, which have an indirect contribution towards the effects of the evaluation process, by contributing to the development of the key factors.

The key factors that have been brought into discussion several times are the quality of the evaluation studies and the interest of the stakeholders regarding the evaluative process. This two elements are interconnected, because they enhance mutually their effects regarding the capacity of the evaluation to generate effects within the Managing Authority of the Regional Operational Program. A high level of quality registered in the evaluation process does not ensure its utilization, but in the current context, that of an incipient culture of evaluation in Romania, the general perspective regarding the low quality of the evaluation has affected in a negative manner the perspective of the stakeholders towards the capacity of the evaluation exercises to produce useful information. The third factor that has a direct influence on this phenomenon is the design of the evaluation system, which includes the institutional framework and regulation of the evaluation process, mainly the aspects regarding the follow-up stage. The latest demarches conducted by the Central Evaluation Unit for the improvement of the evaluation practice by developing a general set of procedures, that include the follow-up stage of the process, show that the experience of the period 2007 – 2013 has proven the positive effect of this type of regulation.

As an indirect factor, there has been highlighted that an enhanced, constructive communication between the commissioners of the evaluation, the stakeholders and the evaluation team in this process has significant role in the quality of the evaluation results, the recommendations and can enhance the level of

understanding towards the evaluation process and generate increased interest in its findings. Further, the active participation of the stakeholders in all the stages of an evaluative process, beginning with the planning phase and ending with the elaboration of the action plans, facilitates the conceptual utilization and in this way increases the potential of instrumental utilization. In this communication process, it is most important the availability of the implicated parties to actively participate and learn, otherwise this remains a practice with no results.

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