

A DESIGN FOR THE EVALUATION IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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Abstract

The assessment of public policies is a step rousing interest both by comparison to the entire cycle of public policies, and related to the implementation of policies, especially seeing that the two steps were separately described in the specialty literature due to their specificity. The assessment assumes various actors, specific steps and sub-steps; it uses its own techniques, methods and tools. This specific framework of the assessment process will be followed at the level of this article and will be generically named the design of the assessment process. The design of assessment tries to define assessment related to the existence of assessment, its targets and functions, actors, steps and typologies. This study proposes to find the specificity elements of assessment and to outline what they have previously defined as being an evaluative design specific to local administration which can lead to good public policies as long as there is no assessment recipe.

Keywords: types of evaluation, stages of evaluation, public actors, public policies, public decision

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1. Introduction. Shaping the universe of discourse

The assessment can be defined as “an action to appreciate and capitalize goods, calculate and account values, assess or determine the value or estimate it” (Thompson, 1996). Relating to the cycle of public policies, it can be considered a step; however an exhaustive definition is not easily accomplishable as the implementation and assessment of public policies have also been considered as totally separate steps. The assessment is an action to “determine the merit, importance and value of things” (Scriven, 1973), a process “oriented towards intervention and administrative reform, which regarded ideas and measures oriented towards the good functioning of the administration itself” (Vedung, 1997). Out of an instrumental perspective, it can be seen as “an empiric, objective and systematic examination, by social research methods, of public policies, in the terms of the targets it has proposed” (Miroiu, 2001), and by relation to social sciences, the assessment type research works “are systematic applications of social research methods in order to perform a certain type of conceptualization, a certain *design*, in order to implement and determine the use of social intervention programs” (Popescu, 2005).

In its own terms, assessment is a distinct process of public policies cycle, which can intervene during its progress but not only, and which assumes the quantification of the obtained or desirable results related to a series of clear quantifiers, like work, expectations, targets, by a series of clearly set and delimited processes and methods.

The meaning of the term must be clearly set as it can be assimilated to that of monitoring, estimate, appreciation. If public policy assessment is a clear quantification of targets related to the desirable or reached results, monitoring “is the process following the quantification of results on the grounds of the measurement or exact search of the component of the relation between efficiency and effectiveness” (Popescu, 2005). Estimation quantifies the results of a public policy, but the relation between results and targets cannot be clearly measured in case one of the terms is approximated. Appreciation is far more ambiguous. We can talk about appreciation when “one amongst the denominator or numerator of the relation effectiveness/efficiency can be neither estimated, nor measured, as there are no proper methods or procedures” (Popescu, 2005).

The design of the assessment process becomes a continuous and complex process and is based on a series of sizes, which we can comprehensively-analytically denominate: targets, functions, steps, types and specific actors.

2. Sizing evaluation process

The targets of the assessment regard: strengthening the effects of public action by confronting the results of a policy to the initial targets, optimizing the allotment of financial, material and human resources, improving the transparency of public action in front of the citizens (as exigency of the democratic process), dissemination of good practices within the public administration and of a culture of results for the purpose of improving program management, altering current policies, if applicable.

The functions regard assessment as a tool of public decision making, as an economical management tool, as communication and identification method for the global action and as a training method, for changing the policies (Profiroiu, 2006). By assessment – as public decision making tool, any public authority can dispose of assessment projects which adapt to their action space, to the economical, social, local, national or regional territory. Assessment – as economical management tool supports the budgetary portion for a public policy. As managerial instrument, assessment assumes many involved actors, multiple decision making centres. There occur activity assignments as the policy goes forward and as well partnerships among various persons or institutions. As communication and identification method for the public action, assessment is an answer to the expectations of citizens, granting them information on the projects to be launched or the projects having been developed.

The assessment steps regard the succession of events developed to the moment when a final verdict is reached in case of a public policy. “The succession of steps for an assessment is poorly defined” (Waarden, 1992). The assessment steps regard: making the decision for performing (authorizing) an

assessment by which the applicant mentions its purpose, field of assessment, time and appoints the team manager to perform the assessment; building the team of assessors, which shall contain specialists from various fields, like: public management, accountancy, political analysis, sociologists, programmers, profile engineers, statisticians or computer experts; establishing the specific program to perform the assessment depending on the targets set by the decider; defining the roles of specialists in the assessment team; establishing the manner they are to communicate and the method to develop their activity; collecting sequential pieces of information, checking their accuracy, data processing and interpreting, organizing data communication sessions amongst specialists, in order for them to obtain synthetic information, making the final assessment report and presenting it to the decider.

The assessment of public policies is of various types and assumes various actors, involved in the process. We differentiate amongst: administrative assessment, judicial assessment and political assessment. The administrative assessment is that type of assessment performed by administrative bodies, agencies specialized on the issue of public policies (where there are such institutional constructs), of ministry or political assigned persons. This type of assessment proposes to “check the efficiency of public money use, with the observance of justice and democracy principles” (Marțian, 2008). Legal assessment is that type of assessment focused on the legal aspects of the program implementation. This type of assessment is performed by the courts of justice and “analyzes all the possible conflicts between the programs of a government and the constitutional provisions or between the administrative conduct standards and the rights of private persons” (Marțian, 2008). The political assessment tries to analyze the success or failure of public policy by its utility for maintaining or altering it. It regards the ideological orientations possibly impregnating certain projects of public policies, assessing therefore the concordance degree with the largest governing program of political formation.

The formative assessment (Howlett, Ramesh, 2004) takes place during the implementation of public policies, with a focus on the extent the program reaches the target group, the degree the produced goods and services comply with the intentions and targets of that policy, and the summative assessment focuses on the manner that policy effectively touched the issues it had regarded and wherefore it had tried to find a solution. This type of assessment mainly regards the benefits, risks, costs of public policies.

Internal assessment is performed inside the institution coordinating the public policy project, with internal human resources, and external assessment refers to all qualified persons for such activities, coming from the outside of the concerned institution. They can be non-profit organizations, academic organizations, or organizations committed and specialized and mandated for the implementation or assessment of the public policy. “The purpose for external assessors to be employed is multiple: it is aimed at an objective assessment, increased trust from the public related to the obtained results, promotion of innovation and freshness, improvement of the image of the institution, a kind of credibilization” (Rist, 1990).

3. Assumptions and methodology

The study is prescriptive and proposes to identify a certain evaluative design at the level of the local public administration, starting from the hypothesis that the assessment of public policies is a special step, always fighting for perfectibility and trying to express a series of conclusions at a higher generality degree.

The questionnaire was applied in March 2010 in Iasi, and turns operational the dimensions of the relevance of the process, targets, functions, typologies, steps, involved actors and was applied to the employees of the local administrative sector.

The volume of the sample is of 82 persons, with a response rate of 100%, but we shall assume from the very beginning the limitations provoked by its size and implicitly, its representativeness degree.

The summary of the demographic data is the following: 51.2% of female 48.8% of male; 6,1%% aged between 21 and 30 years old, 46,3% between 31 and 40 years old, 28% between 41 and 50 years old and 19,5% over 50 years old; 58,9% married, 21,8% single and 15,4% single or divorced; last school graduated –26,6% high school, 7,6% post-high school, 15,2% college, 38% faculty, 12,7% post

graduate studies; at the time the questionnaire was distributed 34,1% declared themselves leading civil servants and 65,9% execution civil servants; monthly income – 34,8% from 500 to 1000 RON, 53% from 1001 to 1500 RON, 12,1% over 1500 RON.

4. Evaluative design features

The assessment of public policies is present at the level of the local administration. 92.7% of the respondents have signaled the existence of the process, but only 2.4% responded negatively, and the percentage of non-responses is of 4.9%. The pretty high presence of non-responses and of negative responses may be interpreted as a lack of information at the level of the employees, regarding this process, which may change the assessment into a specialized process.

The targets of the assessment assume the improvement of the public policy projects, (51.2%), transparency (47.6%), reaching the expected results, access to data (37.8%), the necessary volume of allotted human resources (13.4%) and the allotment of sufficient amounts for the assessed programs (6.1%). The only clearly affirmative orientation supports the target regarding the improvement of the already implemented project, except for human, financial, technical resources aspects.

Regarding the actors participating to the assessment process, 91.2% of the respondents declare that the assessment is made by persons in the institution, while 8.8% declare it to be performed by persons from the outside. 54.9% of the respondents declare that the assessments are performed by certain persons with this role in the institution, 35.4% declare that managers are directly involved, 8.5% declare that the assessments are performed by the applicants of the project, the rate of non-responses being of 1.2%. The hierarchic line is pretty clearly present at institutional level. Therefore, the role played by the internal assessment staff in the assessment process is strengthened even beyond external requirements. More than that, at the question “Is there, within the institution you work, an assessment department/office?”, 68.3% of the respondents declared there was, 20.7% declared there were only certain persons which have also the role of assessors depending on each and every project, 7.3% of the respondents declared there was not such a department, 1.2% declared there was not a specialized department, but there is however a certain group of persons dealing with assessments, and the non-response rate was of 2.4%. Assessment seems to be an internal process which has not been sufficiently drafted due to pretty different actors which get involved either periodical, or on each and every project.

Regarding the steps of the assessment, they assume the existence of evaluative reports (82.9%), while 3.7% of the respondents affirm that there is no such institutional step. The assessment process is resumed on different temporal intervals: biannually (24.4%), less than one month (22%), annually (26.%), monthly (14.6%), quarterly (3.7%), multi-annually (1,2%) or as often as it needs it (2.4%). It is outstanding that out of those declaring there are no such assessment reports, 66% declare that the assessment is an external process for the institution, 66.7% do not know when such reports may be performed, 33.3% declare that there is no office, within the institution, specialized for assessment, and 33.3% do not know if there is such an organizational structure.

67.1% of the respondents declare that a project is assessed during its development (assessment during progress), 14.6% declare that the assessment is only applied at the end of the project (final assessment), and 12.2% declare that the assessment is performed both during the public policy project and at the end of it. The assessment is mainly internal and is not only seen as a final step of the public policy cycle, but as a process developable during the development process of public policy processes: from defining the agenda to choosing a project option and to its implementation. Related to the types of assessment, we hereby present all the forms at institutional level: administrative (57.3%), legal (48.8%), political (11%).

Conclusions

The design of the assessment process has the following features: it assumes a mainly internal institutional assessment, but there are also external assessments, that is, by referral to external assessors;

the actors involved in the assessment are the main direct hierarchical chiefs, which makes the assessment pretty centralized; there are specialized departments/offices at institutional level but their activity is not sufficiently known to the employees; it is a planned action of reports developable at various temporal intervals; it has a mainly administrative and legal character, but its political shape is also present; its finality falls into justifying the results; its targets are based on the improvement of the results and on transparency (especially seeing that the administrative field has undergone such criticisms).

Therefore, the evaluative design becomes a contingent process, with particular character from one administrative institution to another, as there is no remedy assuring the success of public policy. The search of such process remains a challenge of the field per se and of the practice, as well, and an epistemic challenge.

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