



# A critical friend: Monitoring and evaluation systems, development cooperation and local government. The case of Tuscany



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 6 February 2014  
Received in revised form 16 January 2015  
Accepted 20 January 2015  
Available online 24 February 2015

### Keywords:

Monitoring  
Ex-ante evaluation  
Development cooperation  
Italy  
Local governments

## ABSTRACT

The role of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems in the field of development cooperation has globally increased in last decades. International and regional organizations, as well as states, local governments and NGOs have largely adopted the tools provided by M&E in order to enhance transparency, effectiveness and efficiency. The paper aims at verifying how and to what extent the implementation of M&E systems has affected the overall quality of international cooperation projects financed by a local government. After a literature review on M&E in development cooperation, the research analyzes the wide range of activities (evaluation ex-ante, mid-term, final, monitoring, consultancy) carried out by the Evaluation Team of the XY in the last eight years in behalf of an Italian local government: the Region of Tuscany. The paper reveals the strategic significance of adopting M&E systems in the medium-long term.

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## 1. Introduction

According to the Second Development Cooperation Forum (DCF) of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC): “The multiple global crises have increased the financing needs of developing countries dramatically. Development cooperation becomes even more vital and urgent in this context and should be used to play a countercyclical role” (2010, p. 2). Developed countries devoted significantly less financial aid as a percentage of GDP to development funds due to the global crisis. Italy, in particular, considerably reduced its funding (Viciani, 2011). In such context, the decentralized development cooperation increasingly appears as a suitable solution for filling the gaps of the traditional international cooperation. The UN World Summit pointed out the: “important role of local Authorities in contributing to the achievement of the internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals”.<sup>1</sup> According to

Smith (2011), the EU has finally adapted in 2006 its own general framework to support decentralized cooperation: the European Consensus on Development. The document states that the EU encourages a growing involvement of local authorities.<sup>2</sup> The Italian legislative framework gradually adopted the same prospective, emphasizing the role played by regions and local authorities in development cooperation.<sup>3</sup> At the same time the role of monitoring and evaluation systems (M&E) increased globally in latest decades, precisely for improving development interventions. Overall, international and regional organizations, as well as states, local governments and NGOs have applied the tools provided by M&E in order to enhance transparency, effectiveness and efficiency.

The present study aims to verify how and to what extent the implementation of M&E systems has played a role on improving the overall quality of international cooperation projects financed by a local government. The Tuscany Region allocates EUR 3.5

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<sup>1</sup> 2005 World Summit Outcome, Resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly – A/RES/60/1 General Assembly, Resolution. Paragraph 174, <http://www.un.org/summit2005/documents.html> (accessed February 2012).

<sup>2</sup> “In the EU’s vocabulary, the term *local authorities* is defined very widely – it includes all kinds of sub-national governments, from the powerful law-making regions (as German *Länders* or Spanish Regions) to small towns and municipalities” (Smith, 2011, p.6).

<sup>3</sup> On the National legislative framework, see: Laws, No. 49/1987, L. No. 68/1993, L. No. 267/2000, the constitutional reform of the V Title and L. No. 131/2003. See also the most recent L. 125/2014.

million every year to decentralized cooperation activities, financing around 25 initiatives per year.<sup>4</sup> Since 2004 the Regional Government of Tuscany entrusted the XY with conducting ex-ante evaluation activities in order to identify the best proposals to fund. Through such valuable knowledge, the paper aims to assess how the M&E designed by the XY has improved the overall quality of decentralized cooperation projects financed by the Tuscany Region. The paper refers to “quality” as the capacity of a project to provide a coherent framework of an intervention; to define realistic expected results; and to plan objectives and formulate quantifiable indicators for M&E. Has the Tuscany System of Decentralized Cooperation (TSDC) significantly improved in designing intervention proposals? Have Tuscan System and its actors capitalized lessons learned and recommendations? The paper answers these questions primarily through the analysis of the evaluation activities carried out by the XY from 2004 to 2011 on behalf of the Tuscany Region.

The research starts focusing on the twofold nature of the ex-ante evaluation as both a process and tool (Paragraph 1). In fact the ex-ante evaluation has the potential to generate learning. Secondly, the study presents the TSDC, examining the funding instruments, distinctive traits of the system, the ex-ante evaluation, monitoring and final evaluation activities. This section (Paragraph 2) explains the main changes that occurred in the system since 2004, emphasizing weaknesses and strengths. Finally, the third Paragraph illustrates the data collected by the Evaluation Team of the XY between 2004 and 2011. The analysis compares the results of the evaluation sessions, and reveals the strategic significance of adopting M&E systems in the medium-long term.

## 2. Framing the debate

Over the past three decades, governments from developed world launched initiatives for improving effectiveness, efficiency, transparency and accountability of the public sector. They have initiated a process leading to “a global public management revolution” (Kusek & Rist, 2001, p. 14). In terms of engagement the process reached its peak after 2005. In 2005 the donors community (i.e. OECD DAC countries) signed the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and committed to make aid more effective through the adoption of five principles: ownership, alignment, harmonization, results and mutual accountability.<sup>5</sup> The attention on aid effectiveness increased in the following years. At the High Level Forum held in Accra (2008), it became evident that other actors, including local governments and civil society organizations were not taken sufficiently into account in the aid effectiveness debate. So, after an intensive international consultation process, in 2011 a new Global Partnership was launched in Busan.<sup>6</sup> The Busan Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation involves a larger spectrum of development actors compared to the past, that is traditional donors and developing nations. The new partnership includes emerging economies, providers of South–South and triangular co-operation and civil society; it also recognizes the fundamental role that local actors and their networks play as agents of development in their territories.<sup>7</sup>

At the heart of the revolution based on effectiveness lies the managerial concept acquired from the private sector – inspired by the principle that when the focus shifts from *processes* to results (goals or objectives), then the overall performance improves.<sup>8</sup> The new managerial approach to public policy implies that when a public actor is required to attain specific results, appropriated measurement instruments need to be adopted. Results-based or performance-based monitoring and evaluation systems emerged to satisfy this necessity and allow public actors to acquire performance evidences. A result-based M&E system supports governments and other public actors by demonstrating whether or not goals were achieved. Results-based M&E differs from traditional systems because it moves beyond an emphasis on inputs and outputs to a greater focus on outcomes and impacts (Kusek & Rist, 2004).

Among the traits on which basis existing types of evaluations are categorized, there is timing: it may occur prior to the project<sup>9</sup> implementation (ex-ante), during project implementation (mid-term), at the end of project implementation (final) or after its end (ex-post). The timing of an evaluation significantly affects also its purpose (OECD, 2003; Rossi & Freeman, 1993). Mid-term or formative evaluation examines the way a project is being implemented and its immediate consequences in order to improve its functionality, while summative or final and ex-post evaluation determine whether anticipated outcomes and impacts are produced. Differently, ex-ante or prospective evaluation “synthesizes monitoring and evaluation information from earlier studies” to assess whether the project is likely to reach the proposed objectives (Valdez & Bamberger, 1994, p. 61). As such ex-ante evaluation is not more useful than mid-term or final but it can say what course of action has best potential for success.

Since ex-ante evaluation occurs prior to project implementation and during project design, it can be used also for supporting project proposal preparations, defining objectives and ensuring these objectives can be met, guaranteeing that the proposed instruments are cost-effective (EU Commission, 2001).

Ex-ante evaluation has a twofold nature, that is, on one hand, anticipating the future answering the question “How well has the project individuated needs, costs, and consequences?” and, on the other, improving the future addressing the issue of “What course of action has the best potential for success and is the most appropriate to recommend?”. Ex-ante evaluation can contribute also to improve the quality of interventions, interfering in the planning phase of development projects.

Since the paper questions the capacity of ex-ante evaluation to improve project quality, it is then essential to state what do we mean with *project quality*. The concept of project quality lies at the centre of the major debates on development management theories (Thomas, 1996). Broadly speaking, project quality relates with the success of an intervention, which is the project effectiveness in producing positive changes in the context where it is implemented, including the complexity of unexpected results and secondary effects. According to the result-based approach (Wholey, Hatry, & Newcomer, 2001), project effectiveness mainly refers to the performance management system and it is evaluated by answering

<sup>4</sup> Regione Toscana, *Piano regionale della cooperazione internazionale 2001–2005* and *Documenti di attuazione annuali*; *Piano regionale della cooperazione internazionale 2007–2010* and *Documenti di attuazione annuali*.

<sup>5</sup> OECD (2005, 2008), pp. 1–13.

<sup>6</sup> A complete history of the High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness is available on the OECD web site at the following link <http://www.oecd.org/dac/effectiveness/thehighlevelforaonaideffectivenessahistory.htm> (accessed 23.10.14). For a reconstruction of the growing profile of regional and local authorities in development cooperation see: *Platforma* (2013), pp. 6–11.

<sup>7</sup> OECD (2011). Paragraphs 1, 21, 31.

<sup>8</sup> “Performance is meant to assume a measurable level of programme and policy effectiveness and efficiency. Improvements can come in different forms – for example, emphasizing more productivity, more public reliance on private markets, more decentralization from national to sub-national units of government, clear lines of responsibility and accountability, more responsiveness to citizens as clients, and an increased capacity to monitor and evaluate the performance of the public sector” (Kusek & Rist, 2001, p. 15).

<sup>9</sup> In this paper, we will refer to project evaluation since the empirical analysis is focused on development projects evaluation. However, it is worth to stress that broadly speaking evaluation can be addressed not only to project but also to programme and policy.

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