

# The evaluation of a Complex Social Program: Lessons learned from the experience of the European Social Fund

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Received 11 October 2004; received in revised form 8 February 2005; accepted 27 June 2005

## Abstract

In 1999, the European Commission and the Italian Ministry of Welfare asked ISFOL's National European Social Fund Evaluation Unit to undertake the evaluation of the Italian European Social Fund Objective 3 Program for the period 2000–2006. This program is financed by European resources in all Member States. In Italy it supports training and labor market policies in 14 Centre-North Regions.

The mid-term evaluation, carried out at the end of 2003, faced some important challenges related mainly to: (1) the complexity of the program, implemented through continuing processes of decision and negotiation; (2) an institutional context of multi-level governance, linked to the decentralization process, which has increased the number of actors involved in the management of public policies and in their evaluation.

This article describes the Evaluation Unit's approach to the mid-term evaluation within the new multi-level governance context, describing the main methodological choices. The lessons learned will be discussed.

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*Keywords:* Meta-evaluation; Multi-level governance; European Social Fund; Education; Vocational training; Labor market

## 1. Introduction

Within the framework of Structural Funds, the European Social Fund (ESF) is the main financial tool for implementing the European Union's strategic employment policy. The ESF provides funding to all European Member States on a major scale for programs which develop or regenerate people's 'employability'. The focus is on providing citizens with appropriate work skills as well as developing their social interaction capacity, thereby improving their self-confidence and adaptability in the job marketplace.

In the Italian centre-north regions, the European Social Fund amounts to approximately 11 billions US dollars for the 2000–2006 program. Within the framework of Objective 3 ESF is implemented through 14 Regional Operational Programs and one National Operational Program managed by the Ministry of Welfare.

In 1999, the European Commission and the Italian Ministry of Welfare asked ISFOL's<sup>1</sup> National European Social Fund

Evaluation Unit (referred to below as the Evaluation Unit) to undertake the 2000–2006 ESF mid-term evaluation (referred to below as the mid-term evaluation).

In Italy, the first evaluation experiences in the field of training and labor market policies have been developed towards the end of the 1980s under the pressure of the European Structural Funds that made evaluation practice compulsory for programs financed by EU resources. The EU regulations stress the importance of evaluation during the policy life cycle as a mean to support the decision making process. Evaluations have thus been carried out on the basis of the indications and constraints defined in the European Commission methodological framework.

The theoretical debate on evaluating social policies in Italy has been speeding up in the last decade (Bezzi, 2001; Palumbo, 2001; Stame, 1998). The evaluation culture is rather fresh and is fed by much more mature academic studies and research started in the United States in the 1960s (Patton, 1978; Scriven, 1967; Weiss, 1972).

The mid-term evaluation started in 2000, when the methodological tools were prepared and the main evaluative research lines identified, and concluded in September 2003. The Italian experience of the ESF evaluation is described, retracing the most significant stages in the definition and drafting of the evaluation report, illustrating the main 'lessons' learned and the dissemination of results.

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This contribution is thus a meta-evaluative study, that is an evaluation of the evaluation, through an a posteriori rethinking of the work carried out. Since this kind of evaluation studies (Bustelo, 2003) is not often carried out, this self-evaluation exercise seems particularly significant in a perspective of learning and of improving the evaluation.

The aim of the article is twofold. First, to describe a concrete experience such as the Italian one to evaluators and other actors interested in improving and rationalizing program and public-policy evaluation. Second, to study the relationship between political decision-makers and evaluators, and thus between programming and evaluation, from the evaluation demand stage to the political decision-makers' utilization of the evaluation results.

The article is divided into four parts. The first part describes the reference context of the mid-term evaluation, where new and broader areas of ESF intervention and new actors involved in program planning and evaluation are emerging. In the second part, the evaluative approach is reconstructed. In the third part, the main lessons learned are proposed and analyzed. The last part examines the relationship between policy-makers and evaluators, focusing on the utilization and dissemination of results.

## 2. The mid-term evaluation reference context

Some specific features of the reference scenario of the mid-term evaluation have influenced the approach to evaluation in terms of both issues and methodologies. These aspects pertain to the plurality of actors involved in the programming and implementation of policies, the variety of objectives pursued, the multiplicity and heterogeneity of actions (new intervention areas with regards to the 1994–1999 program), and stronger links between the ESF and other concurrent or complementary national policies.

### 2.1. The decentralization process in Italy

The recent decentralization process in Italy has increased the number of actors designing and managing public policies. The regional organization of the Italian State, that is the recognition of the regions as local and autonomous authorities with their own powers and functions, was introduced by the Constitution in 1948. Over the last years there has been a gradual but continuous transfer of responsibilities from the centre to the periphery, designing a new model of governance with new responsibilities and new relationships (Lion, Martini, & Volpi, 2004).

This model results from a series of provisions adopted in Italy between 1997 and 2001, in particular:

1. Law 59/97 called 'Bassanini' and legislative decree 112/98 on administrative decentralization;
2. The reform of Title V of the Constitution introduced with constitutional law 3/2001.

The first two legislative provisions regard the division of administrative powers among the various actors present in the

system; the Constitutional law has instead changed the division of legislative jurisdiction between the State and local authorities. The new institutional scenario now has a horizontal instead of vertical organization, in which State, regions, provinces and municipalities are all on the same level. These subjects and other local authorities, to whom functions and tasks have been gradually transferred according to 'subsidiarity', differentiation and suitability criteria, have become increasingly involved in the definition of political strategies, shouldering leading roles in the implementation of the ESF interventions.

The institutional context in which the ESF policies are programmed and implemented is thus no longer hierarchical, but increasingly spelt out in autonomous local areas with equal powers to represent their own needs. Since the State is no longer the sole arbiter for a policy and the tools to use, it is in the sub-national area that the policy-makers involved in the decentralization of that policy are pinpointed and required to act.

The programs financed by the ESF are thus implemented through continuous processes of decision, negotiation and mediation, where numerous actors with specific, and often diverging, values and priorities take the stage.

### 2.2. The new ESF program

Concurrently with the institutional changes in the national domain, in the Community area the reform of the Structural Funds for the 2000–2006 period has considerably extended the ESF's aims and thus its spheres of intervention, in particular with reference to the previous 1994–1999 programming. The ESF objectives are laid down in the European Commission (EC) Regulation 1260/99 concerning the general provisions on the Structural Funds. It provides five key policy areas for the ESF:

- development of active labor market policies to combat and prevent unemployment, to avoid long-term unemployment, to facilitate the reintegration of the long-term unemployed and to support integration into the labor market of young people and persons returning to work after a period of absence;
- promotion of equal opportunities for all in terms of access to the labor market, with particular attention to persons at risk of social exclusion;
- promotion and improvement of vocational training, education and counseling in the context of a lifelong learning policy;
- promotion of a skilled, well-trained and flexible workforce, innovative and adaptable forms of work organization, and entrepreneurship;
- specific measures to improve access and active participation of women in the labor market (career prospects, access to new job opportunities, setting up businesses, etc.).

In general, three forms of assistance are eligible for ESF funding:

- assistance for individuals, which should represent the main form of aid, covering areas such as vocational training or

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