

PROBLEMS OF TRANSFERRING KNOWLEDGE ON THE EXAMPLE OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM EVALUATION OF EUROPEAN FUNDS IN POLAND

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Abstract: This article presents the conditions of creating a system for implementing recommendations from evaluation studies which were conducted within the cohesion policy in Poland. The purpose of this analysis was to identify main problems and barriers related to the transformation of evaluation studies into practical recommendations, and to identify factors affecting the adoption and implementation of recommendations by recipients and stakeholders of evaluation. Conclusions were based on the desk research of such documents as: guidelines and procedures for the implementation of evaluation, evaluation and meta-evaluation reports, recommendation and implementation tables. The main barriers and factors favouring the transfer of knowledge from evaluation research to management practices in public administration and local governments were pointed out. The most common restrictions on use of evaluation results include: weak participation of stakeholders in the process of study planning; inconsistency between the subject of evaluation and the scope and content of recommendations; low level of knowledge of the nature and objectives of evaluation among decision-makers; lack of feedback regarding the implementation of recommendations for evaluators. The article gives reasons for the relationship among such features of the evaluation process as: openness, participation and communication skills, quality of recommendations. Evaluation studies and their social significance were shown from the perspective of dividing Michael Burawoy's sociological work into policy and public sociology.

Keywords: knowledge transfer, evaluation, recommendations, social participation, practical and public sociology.

1. Introduction

Striving for the usefulness of practical knowledge accumulated in social sciences has accompanied sociology since the beginning. The knowledge generated by social researchers is commonly viewed as less certain, offering weaker explanatory power than the one given by natural science. The practical application of social sciences is, however, identified mainly with "social engineering," which refers in its solutions to social psychology or microsociology,

and offers tips for effective action primarily for individuals and small social groups. The knowledge created by social science is often questioned also because of its implementation of ethical aspect, and practical recommendations are sometimes identified with manipulation. However, many social innovations are implemented in the world around us and within social domains, and there are further attempts to strengthen the position of applied sciences through such theoretical and experimental currents as social engineering, sociological practice, mode 2 knowledge production, action research, social machines (Afeltowicz, and Pietrowicz, 2013; Kołtun, 2015).

Evaluation is also a practical attempt to answer the need to value activities undertaken as part of social interventions. Implemented on a large scale programmes within the successive EU financial perspectives are a perfect example of this. Poland is to receive EUR 82.5 billion from the cohesion policy budget for 2014-2020 (Portal Funduszy Europejskich). It is difficult to find more spectacular activities, but their scope and role even more require a scientifically confirmed and socially responsible answer, whether the quality and efficiency of these projects meet their expectations in solving social problems, improving the quality of life, developing innovation, achieving other assumed results. In this area, as important as the answers are the questions put in evaluation studies, as well as stakeholders, i.e. the individuals (and groups) concerned on evaluated area and who have the possibility to influence or implement evaluation recommendations. They should be included in the evaluation process if seeking the knowledge transfer and usability of results is taken seriously by decision-makers and evaluation contractors.

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2. Evaluation as knowledge transfer – literature references

The effects of the transfer of knowledge from research to practice depend on many factors that can constitute barriers or stimuli supporting this process. Sławomir Ziółkowski (2007) made a review of typology and presented a proposal involving four dimensions:

- human (individual barriers: psychological, motivational, competency-based and social),
- technological (barriers related to IT infrastructure, knowledge and use of methods and tools, system integration),

- norms and procedures (barriers resulting from the management system: organisational structures, organisational norms, incentive systems),
- content and nature of knowledge (level of knowledge, its adequacy, relevance, form and location).

Michael Burawoy (2009) refers to the problem of tasks and values that science is to serve, specifically sociology. He distinguished four types of sociology, depending on the type of knowledge generated (instrumental or reflective) and the audience to which it is addressed (academic and non-academic). Academic sociology (aimed at scientists) provides theoretical and methodological framework within the discipline, and critical sociology questions the accepted theoretical dogmas and methodological approaches as well as problems undertaken. When it is directed to the non-academic community: policy, which goals and tasks are determined by practical public needs as well as by discussion on topics which are important to different audiences in society. Citing Burawoy's division into practical and public sociology, one can also point to policy evaluation and public evaluation to see the role these approaches play for each other:

In each of these cases critical sociology tries to make academic sociology aware of its bias, reticence, and thus promote new research programs based on alternative foundations. Critical sociology is the conscience of academic sociology as much as public sociology is the conscience of practical sociology (Burawoy, 2009, p. 535).

A participatory approach in evaluation is not easy to implement, and strict competition procedures as well as a short time frame do not facilitate its implementation in public institutions, however, it is directly related to the transfer and usefulness of knowledge generated in evaluation studies. The need of scientific, professional knowledge to meet society's expectations is emphasised by the authors publishing in the STS (science, technology and society) trend: *Agora is therefore a space of negotiations and conflicts in which all interactions between society and science take place. It is assumed that both sides have equally effective tools of interaction, which is to prevent domination one side or the other. The knowledge arising in the agora is characterized by so-called social robustness, i.e. it is highly contextualized, local, thanks to which it is to enjoy acceptance from all stakeholders. It is the participation of various entities in creating knowledge that will make it gains validation. Finally, in the face of the multitude of needs, places and actors who influence the formation of knowledge, it is social accuracy that will become the most important criterion for assessing it* (Koltun, 2015, p. 306). Insisting on value and dialogue in evaluation, regardless of the audience to which it is directed, must be accompanied by practical evaluation. In the academic discourse, such voices were represented for many years by professor Leszek Korporowicz – a founder of the Polish Evaluation Society and an editor of one of the first books on evaluation in Poland (Korporowicz, 1997). However, in the non-academic forum, among the management, it is much harder to find the understanding for these ideas.

3. Methods

This article poses the following research questions: What are the main barriers to implementing evaluation research results? What features of the evaluation process and evaluation report contribute to their usefulness according to decision-makers and stakeholders?

The article is based on three types of desk research data:

- Guidance document on monitoring and evaluation. The EU Cohesion Fund. The European Regional Development Fund (Guidance Document, 2014), Guidelines for policy evaluation cohesion for 2014-2020 (Wytyczne w zakresie, 2018); Evaluation. Guide for public administration employees (Ewaluacja, 2012). Documents from the website of the National Evaluation Unit – the institution managing and supervising the evaluation system in Poland.
- Meta-analysis of evaluation: an analysis of recommendations from evaluation studies of the National Cohesion Strategy (Sobiech, 2017), an analysis of the language of evaluation reports (Maziarz et al., 2012).
- Documents and analyses regarding both the system for implementing recommendations and the usefulness of evaluation: assessment of the system for implementing recommendations by institutions involved in implementation of the Sectoral Operational Program of Human Resources Development 2014-2016 and the Equal Community Initiative Program (Borek et al., 2007).

The analysis focused on reviewing the procedures and documents on creating and implementation of recommendations and changes made in this respect in subsequent programme periods. The data was synthesised on the basis of collected analysis and meta-evaluation referring to different types of evaluation, characteristics of the research process and construction recommendations. The results were summarised on the basis of the typology of barriers to knowledge transfer in organisations (Ziółkowski, 2007).

4. Results

Evaluation research conducted under cohesion policy is aimed at determining which real values brings the implementation of European funds. The European Commission sets goals and standards (which should be met by various types of evaluation) as well as expectations regarding the implementation of evaluation results. In the Commission's document (Guidance Document, 2014), we can also find recommendations regarding the evaluation system in member countries.

The emphasis is put on, inter alia:

- dependence of the usefulness of the evaluation on knowledge and awareness of an organisation commissioning the evaluation, which requires time, effort and critical discussion,
- openness to adapt evaluation to the needs of its users,
- junior implementers,
- adapting an evaluation report (language, content, scope and form) to their recipient or many diversified recipients,
- preparing recommendations by engaging in a dialogue with evaluated entities and units, as well as stakeholders,
- providing feedback from the evaluator to the evaluated entities and units, and from the recipients of the report to the evaluator.

These regulations have been reflected in the national guidelines (Wytyczne w zakresie, 2018) in which evaluation is defined as a socio-economic study that aims at estimating, in relation to clearly formulated criteria (usually effectiveness, usability, relevance and durability), quality and effects of public intervention. The recommendations, in turn, are defined as: *resulting from evaluation recommendations or suggestions, directly or indirectly indicating the need for specific changes, for improving public interventions* (2018, pp. 4-5). In the document, the need for increasing the relevance and usefulness of evaluation in the process management of operational programmes in Poland is emphasised by integrating the evaluation system with the process of planning and implementing programmes, and by improving the quality (especially reliability and usefulness) of evaluation studies. For this purpose, national and regional evaluation plans are created and coordinated by local Managing Authorities for Operational Programmes as well as the National Evaluation Unit. It is also responsible for the publicly available Evaluation Research Database [Polish: Baza Badań Ewaluacyjnych] and the System of Implementation of the Recommendation. The guidelines also specify the participation of partners from public administration in the evaluation process, i.a. consultation regarding evaluation plans and summary reports in relation to the results of the programme. All evaluation study results should be made public in an electronic form (this obligation is included in the Evaluation Research Database) and given to various groups of recipients, such as: decision-makers, institutions involved in planning and implementation of the programme, social partners, beneficiaries, the media, society. The guidelines also set out the admission rules as well as implementing and monitoring recommendations from evaluation studies. The procedures, functions of main entities, methods of formulating recommendations, as well as their classification, have been described therein. The system operates on the basis of an IT database that contains all of the approved recommendations that are the product of research conducted under the cohesion policy system in Poland. Firstly, the recommendations must be prepared by the contractor in a form containing such categories as:

- a. content of the application,
- b. content of recommendations,
- c. addressee recommendations,
- d. implementation method,
- e. implementation date,
- f. class category of recommendations,
- g. thematic area,
- h. operational programme,
- i. institution commissioning the research,
- j. baseline status of the recommendation,
- k. justification for possible rejection of the recommendation or decision on partial implementation,
- l. current status of the recommendation (Wytyczne w zakresie, 2018).

Procedures and documents that regulate the system of evaluation and implementation of recommendations in Poland meet EU standards and clarify the process in detail. However, a number of difficulties regarding the usefulness of evaluation studies are found in meta-evaluation reports and other analyses of the system's operation (Ewaluacja, 2012). Comparing the research from the years 2007 and 2017, not only the effects of institutional development of the evaluation system can be seen, but also recurring problems related to the implementation of recommendations that did not find a solution at that time.

In a report on the meta-evaluation study, conducted in 2007 on behalf of the Ministry of Regional Development (Borek et al., 2007), the main problems and restrictions on the usefulness of recommendations are pointed out. The study involved all evaluations carried out in the European Social Fund Management Department until 2007. Main conclusions from the study on barriers to the usefulness of evaluation include:

- reduction of evaluation relevance and usability due to the lack of system solutions defining the scope of evaluation at various levels and the lack of the use of data from monitoring,
- mismatching of research to expectations of sub-sovereign institutions,
- lack of sufficient participation of stakeholders (and employees of sub-sovereign institutions) in evaluation planning process, which resulted in low usability and contestation of recommendations,
- lack of perspective of project promoters and beneficiaries reducing the usefulness of evaluation on lower levels,
- too much detailed contract conditions, specifying detailed research questions and methodology, which – together with the rules of selecting the contractor (great importance of costs of the research) – hindered and discouraged contractors from their own initiative in this respect,
- considering the evaluation as an additional, secondary duty by administrative staff,

- identifying the evaluation with the control of sub-sovereign institutions,
- lack of a formal system of implementing recommendations and distribution of competences, thus a sense of low importance and usefulness of a given recommendation,
- lack of discussion about the legitimacy of recommendations in a wide circle of stakeholders,
- lack of information about the effects of the recommendations implemented, which led to the weakening of evaluators' engagement as well as policy makers and stakeholders in that process.

Another meta-evaluation study from 2012 concerned the language of reports and recommendations (Maziarz et al., 2012). The study covered 300 reports (out of 414) available in the research database evaluation. The aim of the study was to assess the language and structure of reports from the perspective of communication skills. The most important problems identified are:

- Language mismatch between reports and recipients' (decision-makers, journalists, other stakeholder groups) communication competences: the majority of reports were syntactically similar to scientific texts, but lexically – to administrative texts of the European Funds.
- Text of the reports contained too long sentences and a large number of difficult words. Furthermore, the FOG study (determining the level of text readability) assessed the linguistic difficulty of recommendations at the level of the scientific language, i.e. 17.5 (typical text written in natural language is in the range between: 8-13).
- Reports often did not contain the correct summary, and the most important elements of the text (summary, conclusions, recommendations) were written in incomprehensible language.

A study conducted in 2017 (Sobiech, 2017) provided further information on the functioning of the evaluation system under cohesion policy in Poland. The study covered 56 randomly selected reports (out of 221 contained in the database). The analysis mainly referred to the content and form of recommendation used in evaluation reports and factors affecting their quality as well as possibilities of practical use. In this study, the authors have noted the following problems:

- The existence of significant discrepancy between the objectives and problems identified in evaluation, and the measures proposed in recommendations. Over 80% of evaluations concerned assessing of the effectiveness of interventions (accountability) or providing knowledge of mechanisms of success or failure, whereas the vast majority of recommendations concerned improving the communication process or managing the intervention.
- The lack of justification for changes proposed in a given recommendation (67% – no justification; 20% – too general justification).

- The specificity of the recommendation can also be problematic: 31% of recommendations were defined as vague and incomprehensible; 9% – as non-specific and incomprehensible.
- 13% of recommendations did not indicate the problem they referred to.
- Most recommendations did not specify resources (financial, technological, human) necessary for implementation.

One can also look at the problem of knowledge transfer and usefulness of evaluation from the perspective of the development of various currents of evaluation and their social reception. Institutional development has strengthened the bureaucratic approach to evaluation and emphasised its professionalisation. At the same time, it rejected its social currents, emphasising openness and participation in this process. Considering the voice of diverse stakeholder groups, evaluation becomes impossible in a rigid official system based on experts and administrative staff. The language of evaluation reports is moving away from natural language as well, because it is not expected to be widely understood anymore.

5. Discussion

Referring to the results of the presented analyses and to the above typology of meta-evaluation (Ziółkowski, 2007), it can be concluded that (in the 2007 report) barriers to standards and procedures (organisational weaknesses of the evaluation system; lack of its implementation) as well as barriers related to human factor (lack of motivation to engage in evaluation; weak knowledge transfer regarding evaluation and its objectives among decision-makers and stakeholders; lack of stakeholders' involvement; identifying evaluation with control) initially dominated. Since 2017, however, procedural barriers have mostly been removed by introducing new systems and regulations related to monitoring the implementation of recommendations. Nevertheless, barriers to the content and nature of the knowledge transferred by recommendations have appeared. The high or low level of adequacy and accuracy of recommendations is not only the result of the quality of the evaluator's work. It is the final effect of the whole process, from research planning to implementation. In documents and reports related to the evaluation system, the importance of involving stakeholders in the evaluation process is stressed (Korporowicz, 2008). This requirement is implemented to a very limited extent and mainly refers to the management staff and intermediary companies. No mechanisms or practices regarding inclusion of businesses, non-profit organisations (or other organisations) and social environment have been developed in the evaluation process. This also results in persistent barriers related to the human factor: the lack of knowledge of evaluation, low trust in recommendations. As evaluation stakeholders

are more than just officials, they cannot see the benefits – i.e. the evaluation study and usefulness developed in its recommendations – of knowledge transfer.

6. Summary

The development of evaluation research in Poland gives a large-scale opportunity to transfer knowledge from science to practice. Such activities take place in public administration through the development of an institutionalised system of evaluation and implementation of recommendations. Their weakness and simultaneously their main barrier are strict administrative procedures; low participation of stakeholders in the evaluation planning process; lack of feedback on the effects of implementing recommendations for evaluators; inconsistency of the evaluation objectives with the activities specified in the recommendations. The development of an administrative trend and professional evaluation is not balanced by strengthening the participation in the evaluation process, which would promote a wider transfer of knowledge from evaluation to society.

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