

THE ROLE OF PROGRAM EVALUATION IN THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS*

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Abstract

The decision of not organizing a Program Evaluation System at country level government has many negative implications as far as the decision-making process is concerned. The lack of political responsiveness, fiscal discipline and institutional effectiveness are part of the effects. The government does not require a coherent, solid evaluation system and, in exchange, it gets 'Bleak House'- type reports. Program evaluation offers the adequate tools to do evidence-based decision-making on public policy priorities and public resource allocation.

* Funding for this research was provided by UEFISCU-CNCSIS, IDEI, grant no. 2595/2008, project entitled 'Decision-making models in the Romanian public institutions at local and county levels'.

1. Introduction

The lack of culture and capacity in program monitoring and evaluation involves the lack of tradition to assess performance in the public sphere. Romania has been characterized by an increased dynamic of legislative change during the past 20 years. But, willingly or not, the regulations concerning Program Evaluation field has been left aside. The Romanian National Evaluation Strategy is an important step forward in acknowledging the importance of Program Evaluation in the decision-making process. But further steps are required in order to turn strategic thinking into reality. The Government should strive to introduce Program Evaluation as a component of decision-making process. Internationally, Results-Based Management and Results-Based Reporting are presently on focus. Successful reform of public administration necessarily involves the evaluation of programs and performance. There has been no regime able to manage its fiscal resources effectively if its programs and its performance were not constantly measured, evaluated and improved.

2. The paradigm

This paper is conceived according to a paradigm proposed by Michael Quinn Patton and illustratively called ‘the paradigm of the practical use of program evaluation’ (Patton, 2002). It focuses on the diverse possibilities of using evaluation results by different types of actors. Without practical use, there is no aim for program evaluation. Evaluation process should begin according to Patton’s paradigm when the design of the intervention (program, project, activity) is being created. Decision-making at all governmental levels is one very important field where evaluation results could be of great use. The condition is that relevant actors in the decision-making process understand the multiple benefits of a solid evaluation system.

3. Data evidence

Evidence practically means data. And for the decision-making process there are two types of empirical data sources: systematic research and practical experience. There are several entities responsible for the accomplishment of systematic research in public administration: universities, research institutes (private or NGOs), other private organizations and NGOs involved in the delivery of public services and public administration institutions themselves. The data sources from the practical experience should be delivered by all the actors involved in the wide process of Public Administration, beginning with the government (national, regional and local), the private entities and NGOs involved in public policy and public services. A coherent and comprehensive data system for both research and practical experience is extremely difficult to accomplish. But, a Data Management System for the public sector should be considered and efforts should be made in building it. Presently, the data gaps in this area are tremendous. They are due partially to the lack of strategic orientation and partially to the lack of infrastructure and human resources. The problem with the human resource trained in data gathering and interpretation is severe. In 2007

we conducted an initial research focusing on the evaluation culture and capacity in Romanian Public institutions at regional and local levels¹. Among the results there were statements referring to the lack of legislation and institutional support. Evaluation capacity requires not only trained human resource in Program Evaluation, but also in Social Science Research Methods and in Statistics. Starting from this premise, we included in the questionnaire a few items that relate to the existence in the Romanian public institutions of personnel trained in Research Methods and Techniques and in Statistics.

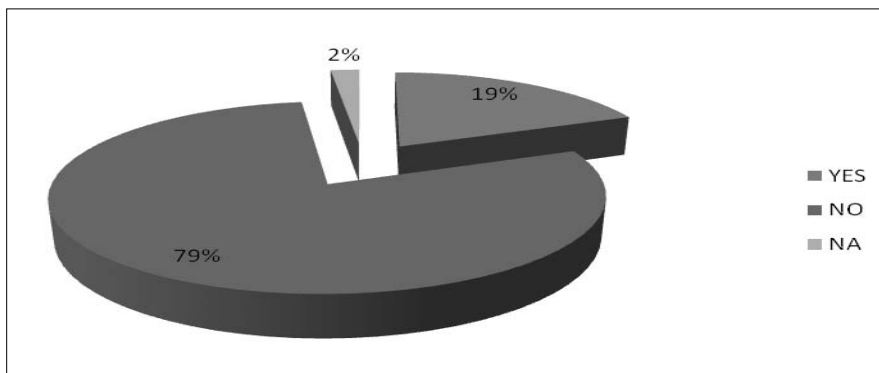


Figure 1: Personnel trained in Research Methods and Techniques

For the Research Methods and Techniques area, in 2007, 79% of the institutions admitted they do not have trained employees. This gap is even more serious when it comes to Statistics.

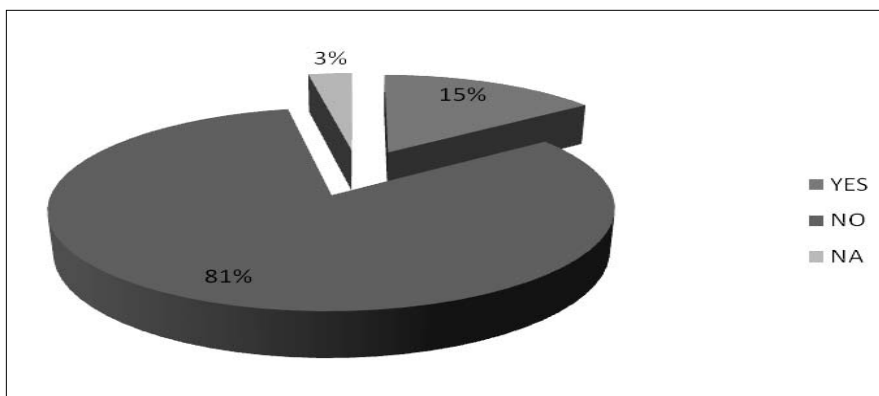


Figure 2: Personnel trained in Statistics

1 The research method was the questionnaire survey and the instrument, the questionnaire. In the pilot study the questionnaire was applied to five public institutions and the research itself, the sample was represented by 97 public institutions across the country, mostly mayors of cities, municipalities and county councils.

About 81% of the institutions notify the lack of such specialists. Without statistical expertise, there can be no program evaluation or performance measurement. The importance attached to the use of evidence in decision-making is beyond any discussion or interpretation especially when public funds are supporting the decision. Program Evaluation is a link between empirical data and the decision that is being made. It provides the necessary explanatory tools in order to perceive the different views towards administrative realities.

4. Strategic assumptions

The subsequent question to which this paper tries to provide an answer is what should be done at a strategic level in order to ensure that empirical data evidence of performance is systematically pursued and used as a guiding principle in governmental decision-making? Even if, in time, the benefits of program evaluation are sometimes under-estimated, the 'new public management models were seen as providing fresh opportunities for evaluation to become a more significant element' (Halligan, 2003, p. 80). Several questions should find their answers before our initial question can be given an answer. Some of those questions have been often transparent in the literature regarding public management or the governance reform. Some have already been given answers which are to be understood from the perspective they have been written in. For instance, to a question regarding the limits of Program Evaluation application in the decision-making process, Di Francesco finds an explanation in the political pressure: 'the onset of fatigue in the application of evaluation to policy advice finally acknowledged the external political constraints facing program evaluation at every level' (Di Francesco, 2000, pp. 45-46). Some questions are still waiting to be asked and answered. This paper will try to highlight some of these questions and their answer as perceived in 2009-2010, in Romania, during a research in the framework of a governmental research program we participated in. These questions are: 'Who are the actors at the origins of the decision-making process?' and 'Who influences the most the decision-making process?'

During 2009 and 2010 we have been involved in a research conducted by the members of the Public Administration Department of Babeş-Bolyai University trying to analyze the decision-making process in the Romanian public institutions. The questionnaires were applied to top level civil servants and public officials. Among the results there are several data that could provide answers to the above-mentioned questions.

Who are the actors at the origins of the decision-making process?

The answers to this question were given on a scale from 1 to 5, 1 meaning 'never' and 5 meaning 'very frequently'. We will present the results through the perspective of the Mean scores and the Standard Deviation.

Table 1: Actors at the origins of the decision-making process

		Mean (X)	Standard Deviation (SD)
INT.1.	Local/County Councillors	3.45	1.18
INT.2.	The Mayor/The President of the County Council	4.41	0.82
INT.3.	The Vice-Mayors/The Vice-Presidents of the County Council	3.32	1.11
INT.4.	Political parties	2.48	1.28
INT.5.	Civil servants and public employees	2.91	1.12
INT.6.	Other public institutions at the central or local level	2.48	1.1
INT.7.	Citizens	2.36	1.21
INT.8.	Mass-media representatives	1.8	0.92
INT.9.	NGO representatives	1.91	1.02
INT.10.	Civil servants and public employees	1.96	1
INT.11.	Unions representatives	1.96	0.96
INT.12.	EU and EU institutions	2.32	1.21

The results clearly show that the Mayor and the President of the County Council are the most prominent actors at the origins of the decision-making process in the Romanian public institutions, with a **Mean (X)** of 4.41 on a 1 to 5 scale. The next most important actors at the origins of the decision-making process are Local and County Councillors ($X=3.45$) followed very closely by the Vice-Mayors and the Vice-Presidents of the County Council ($X=3.32$). Therefore, in order to make sure that empirical data evidence of performance is systematically used in governmental decision-making these categories of actors should be made aware of the importance of using the data results of evaluation. Actors generally assumed as evaluation users and consumers are graded, unfortunately, as having among the lowest influence scores in originating the decision-making process: NGO representatives ($X=1.91$), private sector representatives ($X=1.96$) and unions representatives ($X=1.96$). These categories of actors should be encouraged to participate more at the origins of the decision-making process. Generally, the decision-making process should become more participatory, especially in the public field, where public money is involved. The participation of more actors usually adds value to the decision-making process, as more perspectives are focused on the same generally important issue. The importance and benefits of multi-actor decision-making is also highlighted by Pierre and Peter (2005) in order to develop a common set of priorities for society, coherence, steering and accountability.

Interpreting the **Standard Deviation (SD)** scores we notice that the highest agreement between the investigated subjects has been reached in the case of the Mayor and the President of the County Council ($SD=0.82$), while the lowest level of agreement is connected to the political parties being at the origins of the decision-making process. This indicates a high level of controversy towards the issue of the political parties' role. The low score of SD in the case of the Mayor and the President of the County Council stresses the importance of making these actors aware of the importance of using data and evaluation in order to make better decisions.

Who influences the most the decision-making process?

It is important to know whether the actors at the origins of the decision-making process are also the most influential. The answer to this question should tell us what other actors should be made aware of the importance of the practical use of evaluation.

Table 2: The influence of actors in the decision-making process

		Mean (X)	Standard Deviation (SD)
ILD.1.	Local/County Councillors	7.15	2.6
ILD.2.	The Mayor/The President of the County Council	8.81	1.89
ILD.3.	The Vice-Mayors/The Vice-Presidents of the County Council	6.58	2.69
ILD.4.	Political parties	4.83	2.89
ILD.5.	Civil servants and public employees	4.98	2.5
ILD.6.	Other public institutions at the central or local level	4.27	2.49
ILD.7.	Citizens	4.09	2.68
ILD.8.	Mass-media representatives	3.01	2.09
ILD.9.	NGO representatives	2.9	2.18
ILD.10.	Civil servants and public employees	3.12	2.21
ILD.11.	Unions representatives	3.12	2.13
ILD.12.	EU and EU institutions	4	2.93

The influence of actors in the decision-making process ranks again the Mayor and the President of the County Council on the first place with a Mean of 8.81 on a 1 to 10 scale. This is supported again by the lowest score of SD (1.89), meaning the highest homogeneity or the highest degree of agreement among the investigated subjects. The next score was obtained by Local and County Councillors ($X=7.15$), while the other categories of actors scored far less (Table 2). This data set confirms the importance of involving the Mayors and the Presidents of the County Council as well as Local and County Councilors into the evaluation process. It also reveals the importance of increasing the relative importance of other categories of actors in the decision-making process.

5. Conclusions

The Mayors and the Presidents of the County Council are at the origins of the decision-making process in Romanian public institutions and influence it the most. In order to make sure that empirical data evidence is used in governmental decision-making these categories of actors should be made aware of the importance of using evaluation toolkits. Actors generally assumed as evaluation users and consumers are graded, unfortunately, as having a very low influence in originating the decision-making process. The decision-making process should become more participatory and organizing a Program Evaluation System should be one of the priorities of governments at all levels for its improvement. It could mean an added value to political responsiveness, fiscal discipline and institutional effectiveness if designed and applied properly.

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