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Programme Evaluation
in the Federal Republic of Germany



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Programme Evaluation (PE), although sometimes traced back to the 1930s (Freeman 1977, 18), is a product of reform policies in the 1960s. The term was coined and the methodology refined predominantly in the USA, and the idea has mushroomed into European countries, among others into Germany, in the late 1960s.

The aim of this paper is to give an account of the emergence, spread, and hindrances, which PE still has to overcome, before it can be regarded as a regular institutional device in all policy areas.

1. The Emergence of PE in the FRG

PE can be regarded as an instrumental - as apposed to social, political and juridical - feedback mechanism, which public administration uses to judge its performance. It is usually defined as the systematic (scientific methods employing) investigation of the effectiveness and the actual (foreseen and unforeseen, intended and unintended) effects of public intervention programmes (Weiss 1972).

In the Federal Republic of Germany as well as in other countries, PE is closely linked to the emerging planning functions of the state (Derlien 1976). In the FRG until about 1965 public planning was neither acknowledged nor accepted for ideological reasons. Only after the economic depression of 1965 and the formation of a grand coalition between the Christian Democrats (in power since 1949) and the Social Democrats in 1966 public planning conceived as active intervention in economic and social processes and structures became gradually accepted as one of the functions of the state. Concomitantly the quality of meta-policy-making changed as well: planning staffs, social indicators, forecasting, cost-benefit-analysis and evaluation were gradually established in Bonn (Schatz 1973; Bebermeyer 1974). Following the policy cycle PE was institutionalized and practiced with a certain time lag after the first wave of reform legislations had been launched.

Traditional feedback mechanisms and monitoring procedures were bound to fall short of meeting the functional requirements of a policy conceived of as rational intervention in economic and social processes and structures, as they did not provide information, if programme goals had been met or not, whether positive or negative side effects or spill-overs occurred, and eventually what the causes of programme failures might have been and how programmes could possibly be amended.

Thus, there were first of all informational reasons for establishing PE as a regular function in the process of managing public affairs. Particularly with innovative reform programmes or even social experiments uncertainty about their effects and effectiveness increases. Uncertainty due to a change from incremental towards innovative and comprehensive, from medium to long-term planning is further enhanced, if the programmes cannot be logically derived from and the effects predicted on the ground of a valid scientific theory of the particular policy area. The less prediction of results can be accomplished, the less cost-benefit-analysis, conceivable as a feed-forward, can be employed, the more there is a need for ex-post-evaluation. We, thus, can assume that PE will be most needed in "soft" policy areas: social, educational and welfare policy, whereas, for instance, technical projects or economic policy can rather rely on prediction, cost-benefit-analysis, or, generally speaking, on feed-forward mechanisms.

The development of PE subsequent to enforced planning activities is, secondly, brought about by an increased need for re-allocating financial capacities from ineffective to effective programmes. As reform policies normally face financial restrictions, there is an additional need to legitimate new expenditures and/or the curbing of old programmes by proving them to be effective or ineffective, respectively.

Information function, allocation, and legitimation function were the arguments by which the institutionalization of PE was claimed and justified by those advocating a rational meta-policy. The actual reasons, however, varied from parliamentary pressures and budgetary enforcements to public criticism of existing programmes and internal administrative politics and predispositions of bureaucratic culture.

2. The Evaluation System in Federal Government

There are basically three forms PE takes on as a regular process:

- institutionalization of special evaluation units in individual ministries,
- institutionalization of PE with specific legislated programmes,
- institutionalization of PE with social experiments.

2.1 Evaluation units

PE involves socio-economic research and therefore requires know-how that is not easily available in the traditionally juridically trained federal bureaucracy. Therefore, some of the departments, which relatively often carry out evaluations, established special units for this task. This is not to mean, that the evaluation proper is carried through by administrative personnel; on the contrary, it is regularly accomplished by commissioned research, but one needs specialists for discussing research designs, providing data, keeping contact to the external research team, to comment on the research report, and, last not least, to contract researchers.

In the case of the FRG an additional cause contributed to the evolution of evaluation units in some of the departments: since in the 1969 budget reform cost-benefit-analyses were prescribed and could be required by the ministry of finance

in preparing future budgets (Derlien 1978), especially those ministries with big budget shares containing large investment programmes were exposed to pressure and inclined to establish these new units:

- The Ministry of Agriculture with its huge subsidy programmes in 1973 changed its organisation structure according to programmes and subsequently institutionalized a section in the planning unit in order to specialise on ex-ante-and ex-post-analyses. PE of less sophisticated nature are regularly required by the units being in charge of a programme to justify budget proposals within the department of agriculture.
- The Ministry of Transport, one of the big investors as well, initially created a section for cost-benefit-analysis in its planning unit in 1970, and extended its task to incorporate ex-post-evaluations in 1978. Furthermore, in one of the dependent agencies of the ministry concerned with federal roads there were also specialists occupied with the evaluation of a number of safety regulations, particularly of experiments with speed limitations (1971).
- The Ministry of Developmental Aid was the first ministry to establish an evaluation unit to survey its developmental projects - not so much for budgetary reasons, but rather because of particular control needs and because of the longer tradition evaluation has internationally in this policy area. To a certain extent it was also parliamentary pressure on the ministry that led it to have this unit in 1970.
- Also due to prolonged parliamentary pressure (1968-1974) the Ministry of Technology instituted an evaluation unit, which, however, is less engaged in impact research, but rather in reviewing research institutions and the implementation of funded projects.

- Information programmes are to be evaluated by special staffs in the Federal Agency for Press Relations (1968) and the Federal Agency for Health Information (1974).

The structural differentiation and specialization was grossly brought about by the frequency, with which evaluative reports were claimed by the ministry of finance and parliament, as well as by the prior existence of other planning capacities.

Interesting enough the Federal Accounting Office (Bundesrechnungshof), although obliged to check effectiveness, has abstained from engaging in PE. Traditional role understanding emphasizing cost minimizing in public spending and compliance to budgetary regulations (Tiemann 1974; Schäfer 1977), together with a neutral, non-partisan position in politics, which would conflict with any assessment of (policy) goal achievement (Battis 1976), as well as the training of its staff have contributed to the fact that the responsibility for PE, so far, has remained exclusively in the executive branch.

2.2 Evaluation of Specific Legislated Programmes

As might be obvious from what has been said so far, parliament played an important role in adapting the control structure to the functional requirements of planning. Uncertainty about the substantive impact and financial implications of new programmes are the predominant motives for claiming legitimation of programmes by proving their effectiveness and efficiency. Apart from political agreements to evaluate individual programmes parliament after 1969 increasingly obliged the federal government to report on implementation and impacts of programmes by instituting evaluations in the very programme legislation. Examples are the PE of

- joint federal-state programme to improve the regional economic structure (1970),
- labour market and employment act (1969),

- law to continue the payment of wages in case of illness (1969)
- amendment of the social subsidies act (1969),
- hospital investment programme (1971),
- postgraduate grants law (1970),
- general educational grants law (1969),
- legal abortion law (1975),
- legal protection of tenants against arbitrary notice (1971),
- reports on subsidies and taxes.

2.3 Evaluation of Experimental Policy

A special type of reform policy consists of carrying through social experiments; of course, experiments logically imply the necessity to evaluate them in order to learn from their results, before general regulations are enacted. Experiments have initially been carried out in house construction in the mid 1960s (Bohnsack et al. 1977); later on the idea of experimental policy has spread to other policy areas, in particular to education and health policy. These are obviously "soft" policies to which PE is most suitable; but it was also for a political reason that the federal government started to carry out experiments under the label "model programmes" in these areas: legislation in education and health is normally a task constitutionally assigned to the individual states. Federal government is merely authorised to regulate basic questions in so called frame legislations. Thus, launching experiments was a way to practice reform policy on "foreign territory" and, secondly, to do it without legislation, but by simple administrative (executive) agreements between federal and individual state governments; the justification being that experiences should be accumulated in order to clarify basic questions, which are within the jurisdiction of the federal government.

The Federal Government has recently reported to Parliament (Bundestags-Drs. 9/699), that between 1971 and 1980 only in educational policy 1368 experiments, subsidised with 736 Mio.DM

have been carried out; another 166 experiments in university education and 225 in vocational training were financed with 143 Mio. and 53 Mio. DM, respectively.

Very often, however, the evaluations in this area are in-house evaluations, at best standardized reports in the form of expert judgements. An exception to the rule are evaluations of experiments with comprehensive schools (Raschert 1974).

2.4 PE on the Länder- and Community-Level

Although there is no survey available of the situation in the individual states of the federation, it may be generalized, that the evaluation function has by far not developed so much as in the federal government. This proposition contradicts the hypothesis that there is a stress towards structural consistency of planning and evaluation, as the Länder generally practice developmental and in particular regional planning. But on the one hand, these planning systems lack control capacity (Fürst/Hesse 1981), on the other hand - and more importantly - the Länder dispose of most of the German administrative field offices and rely on administrative monitoring.

What concerns the community level, a recent survey (Volz 1980) found only 6 major cities, which practice evaluations. Again, it is the direct political feedback to local policy makers, which might sufficiently fulfill their informational needs.

2.5 Distribution of Functions in the Evaluation Process

The systematic ex-post-evaluation of experimental and reform policies is obviously a task which can hardly be accomplished by traditional external control institutions (parliament, general accounting office) nor by the ministerial bureaucracy. Even those ministries disposing of special evaluation units in general do not carry through the actual research work, i.e.

data collection and analysis. Evaluation research is basically external (commercial and academic) commissioned research. To conclude this chapter of the paper the question should be asked, which functions in the evaluation process can be attributed to the political and administrative institutions on the federal level (Derlien 1978a).

In an ideal-typical way the scenery can be depicted as follows: PE is primarily initiated by parliament and the Chancellor's office; however, relatively seldomly by the departments in charge of a programme. The function of the departments and their sections is rather to administer the external evaluation research and to write parliamentary reports on the basis of the evaluation studies, including normally suggestions for programme amendments.

The relative decentralisation of the evaluation function onto the departmental level can be explained structurally: first of all, the corresponding planning functions are not centralised in the FRG; the Chancellor's office rather confines itself to coordinating functions (Dyson 1975). Secondly, this decentralisation is supported by the constitution which gives the individual ministries a good deal of autonomy in initiating and executing their policies, whereas the cabinet is merely involved in programmes to be submitted to legislation and in fundamental policy questions. Departmental autonomy is particularly large in coalition governments with the ministers of one or the other fraction being in a veto position.

Centralising planning and evaluation onto the ministry of finance as an alternative would not be meaningful in the FRG, because budgeting and planning are not integrated, but can be conceived of in terms of the traditional two-track-system. A separate evaluation office has recently been recommended (Reding 1982), but certainly will not be institutionalized.

3. Boobytraps and Pitfalls

3.1 Imbalance in the Evaluation of Policies

From what has been reported so far, it should be clear that PE, even on the federal level, is far from covering all policy areas. It is closely linked to the fields of education, health, housing, and social affairs. This, however, means that new programmes in these areas have been under particular pressure to prove effective, whereas "old" policies, in particular subsidies in economic and agricultural policy are not scrutinized.

Thirdly, "hard" policies, e.g. technology policy or infrastructural projects (highways and canals), are judged on the basis of ex-ante cost-benefit-analyses with their somewhat shaky methodology. Reliance on predictability of effects and calculability of benefits and even monetary costs, for instance of unclear power plants, has, however, increasingly been undermined in recent years, and in 1981 the parliamentary committee for technology policy has claimed experts for a subcommittee to carry out technology assessments (BT-Drs. 9/701 v. 29.7.1981; Böhret/Franz 1982).

3.2 Resistance against PE

Apart from differences in the applicability of PE in the various policy areas there are psychological obstacles to further institutionalization of PE. Evaluation is normally regarded by practitioners as a monitoring procedure, and this is in accordance with its rationale as a management tool. But as in the FRG PE often is termed in the traditional control terminology (Erfolgskontrolle, Inspection), it is associated with person-oriented performance measurements or juridical controls of individual decisions. Programme failures, thus, tend to be personalized and interpreted by administrators in terms of guilt and responsibility instead of cause and effect. Furthermore, if the evaluation function is not located

in special units, initiating the evaluation of the programme he is in charge of would mean to a minister or section head not only the possibility of incurring negative political or administrative sanctions, but also to be prepared for cognitive dissonances if the programme would not produce the expected (and promised!) results. As Wildavsky has put it: the proper evaluator should be a kind of official eunuch (Wildavsky 1978). Unless legally instituted it, therefore, needs considerable public criticism to induce an ad-hoc-evaluation. Resistance against PE will be the stronger the older the programme is, as vested interests of programme beneficiaries and self-confidence of the administration tend to neglect or doubt all criticisms.

"Sunset legislation", i.e. the automatic termination of a programme, unless its effectiveness has been proved (Bothun/Comer 1979; Adams/Sherman 1978), is regarded in the USA as a means to make the executive branch more inclined to have PE carried through. It can be interpreted as a special mode to enforce PE legislatively. Although there are serious doubts in this country, if sunset legislation is compatible with constitutional law, it has been practiced with the Second Law on Protection of Tenants against Arbitrary Notice 1974, the evaluation report being published 1979 (BT-Drs. 8/2610); last month the new federal government announced that a regulation, which forces clients to share costs of hospital treatment, is to be evaluated 1984; in the same way the above mentioned social experiments with comprehensive schools and juridical training are, of course, terminated. Insofar terminated general regulations extend experimental policy beyond voluntary participation of clients in single projects.

Rhineland-Palatium has generally all administrative regulations and circulars expire after 5 years (Kindermann 1981, 60). This device, however, was taken less with respect to PE than as a measure to initiate de-bureaucratization and de-regulation.

3.3 The Iron Law of Evaluation Flaws

PE in order to function properly has to cope with a number of methodological problems, which are quite characteristic for this type of applied research. Meanwhile there are lots of text-books on the methodology of evaluation research, which do not fall short of taking account of these specific problems, and practitioners speak of the iron law of evaluation flaws (Williams 1971, 123).

3.3.1 Operationalising Goals

Normally the methodological presuppositions of PE are not met by a programme to be evaluated: Some programmes do not have explicit goal descriptions; others do have goal descriptions, but too ambitious to be ever accomplished, too ambiguously formulated or even informationally empty ones. There are often political reasons for this lack of precision in formulating programme goals: formulations referring to general welfare and happiness of the majority are likely to secure political support, as the electorate can interpret them arbitrarily and believe that individual expectations will be met; the more ambiguous, the less operational goal descriptions are, the easier is political consensus building (Braybrooke/Lindblom 1963); some programmes might even be launched for symbolic purposes with no specific effects to be achieved at all (Edelman 1964).

As a consequence of political bargaining goals are formulated in an abstract way in order to disguise basic political controversies, the solution of which is, sometimes intentionally, deferred into the implementation process. Because of these tactical functions of goal formulations they are regularly not formulated at the beginning, but rather at the end of the policy process.

Furthermore, even if it is possible to derive indicators of goal achievement, these do only measure the positive and intended effects of a programme. Uncertainty being one of the motives for PE, unforeseen positive and negative impacts, however, should be investigated, as well.

Facing this situation the researcher is bound to be selective in measuring the impact of a programme. He is also likely to stimulate political conflicts when trying to specify what might have been (positively or negatively) expected by programme proponents and opponents. Case studies show, that evaluation research, that sticks to goal formulations and tries to operationalise them without taking into respect the various and often conflicting political expectations, or that is too selective in investigating unforeseen consequences, does not succeed in being politically accepted afterwards; it is blamed not to have measured what one had intended to achieve with the programme under scrutiny, or to be affirmative by neglecting negative side-effects, which have emerged since the programme had been implemented.

3.3.2 Design Problems

Apart from other methodological problems, e.g. in data collection, there is, secondly, the problem of causal inference, as the methodological ideal of an experimental design can hardly be accomplished. At least in Germany many programmes are legislated and, therefore, cannot be withheld from a control group. Secondly, social experiments are mostly merely quasi-experiments:

- the geographical location often is the result of a political decision rather than of systematically striving for representativeness;
- the programme variables are not kept constant, as for instance in school experiments teachers would not wait to improve situations until the research results are published;

- therefore, systematic variation of programme elements in order to learn about the relative effectiveness and efficiency of alternative programme designs is hardly realized;
- there is no random sample of those participating, for instance, in a school experiment. Hawthorne effects, i.e. self-fulfilling prophecies, are likely when most highly motivated teachers and children as well as parents in favour of comprehensive schools do recruit themselves into the experiment (AuClaire 1977).

Evaluation practice facing these problems increasingly seems to lower its methodological level of aspiration. Recognizing that programmes are not logically derived from specified goals and experimentally designed before enacted as a law, that the policy process does not follow the Popperian methodology of falsification and modification of policy theories and that, on the other hand, rigid experimental designs rather apply to laboratory settings, obviously has contributed to the growing acceptance of qualitative research methods and quasi-experimental designs not just as a second best way, but as the only adequate procedure. It is difficult to judge, where methodological prostitution starts particularly in commissioned research; sacrificing methodological standards can, after all, devalue the research result in the policy process. In any case, the suggestion to check the evaluability of programmes, before an evaluation proper is done (Wholey 1976) seems to be reasonable.

3.4 Politicization of Evaluation Results

Particularly with externally ad-hoc initiated evaluations the likelihood of negative results is relatively great, as there is always some truth in political feedback mechanisms. Past experience of this sort seems to have conditioned the basically defensive attitude of programme administrators the more.

Usually the research process is already negatively affected by opposition and defense of those in charge of a programme, the result being increased methodological difficulties for the external evaluators, as cooperation in giving access to files and data may be lacking.

Negative evaluation results constitute a threat to the legitimacy of an ongoing programme, the political success of a minister, and the administrative career of the official. In this situation the normal reaction is to question the validity of the research results. Be it that the methodological weaknesses are evident, be it that external counter-advice is asked for, the iron law of evaluation flaws offers lots of possibilities to maintain that the inefficiency of a programme has not been validly demonstrated. It is quite a surprise that even in a field like regional policy evaluation, carried out predominantly by economists, there are serious methodological infights as to the validity of the findings (Krist/Nicol 1982).

An outstanding example in the FRG for the tendency to politicize evaluation results (Weiss 1970) is the interpretation of the comprehensive school experiments by advocates and opponents of this school type (Raschert 1981).

3.5 Research Utilization

In recent years evaluation researchers and policy analysts in general seem to have a growing concern, if their studies are utilized by administrators (e.g. Patton 1978; Wildavsky 1979). On the one hand the shaky state of the methodological art of practical evaluation studies has to be acknowledged (Bernstein/Freeman 1975; Cook/Gruder 1979), on the other hand programme administrators are (implicitly, as I have done in section 3.4) blamed to behave irrationally if not taking immediate decisions based on commissioned scientific "evidence"

If it has to be admitted, that many studies (for what reason so ever) have methodological weaknesses, meta-evaluation research should extend its scope to isolate additional variables affecting the process of giving scientific advice, above all qualitative aspects of the contents of research reports (van de Vall/Bolas 1980) and information needs of administrators (Barkdoll 1980).

4. Perspectives

The German experience with PE, which is quite in line with findings elsewhere, indicates two new trends in policy studies, on the part of administration as well as on the side of the professional evaluator.

4.1 Alternatives to PE

As the possibility to take action is so important for the political reception of a study, much more emphasis has been put on implementation studies, recently (Mayntz 1980). On the one hand they reveal failures which can be amended in relatively short time, on the other hand this can be done quite early after the programme was launched, whereas impact evaluations necessarily can be carried out only after years of operation, because results will not be observable before.

Obviously, the time perspective of administrators is limited. If therefore implementation studies gain importance, it is only logical to save time by simulating the implementation process. This has been done in the FRG with respect to the effects of a programme, particularly with new tax regulations and changes of the health and social insurance system. In addition, the implementation process, too, was simulated in the cases of the City-planning-law (1971), Building Regulation law (1973, 1975) and the Youth Protection law (1977) (Böhret/Hugger 1980).

4.2 The Incremental Evaluator

The analogy between Popper's methodology of falsification as a rule to accumulate scientific knowledge and evaluation as a mechanism to improve programmes seems to have led evaluators to believe in a rational model as opposed to the normally incremental reality of the policy process (De Young/Conner 1982). Politicization threat and utilization problems could help to redefine the evaluator's role in politics, accepting that research is just one factor in the game, that research reports are not only subject to "truth tests", but also to "utility tests" (Weiss/Buvelas 1980).

This change of role understanding would at least help to bear the aking experience that PE does play almost no role in the recent policies of retrenchment, that it does not help to re-allocate resources among competing goals. After all, Thomas Kuhn has shown, that even science does not progress "scientifically", but is driven forward by revolutions.

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