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tel: +39 040 918 8111***

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REPORT

“EVALUATION OF PUBLIC POLICIES”

by

Mr Renaud EPSTEIN

**Institut des sciences sociales du politique –
Groupe d’analyse des politiques publiques (ISP-GAPP)
Ecole Normale Supérieure de Cachan
France**

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Evaluation at the national level: a short story

In the French constitution and political tradition the legislative branch has little weight. That's one of the main reasons why, unlike in other European countries, legislative evaluation isn't a common practice in France. Evaluation is an executive activity.

Its development is quite recent. The first French initiative in the evaluation field was launched during the 1960s and drew its inspiration from the American PPBS (Public Programming Budgeting System), the aim of which was to base budgetary decisions on a prior assessment of policies. It was abandoned by the first socialist government in 1983 because of criticism for being excessively dogmatic and ill-suited to the constraints and peculiarities of the different services.

After the PPBS attempt (and failure), experts panels were commissioned by the government to foster innovations in evaluation. These panels have developed competing approaches to evaluating.

- The first one is called managerial or technocratic. Evaluation is defined as an approach aimed at "recognising and measuring the effects of a policy". The political dimension of the act of evaluation is overlooked.
- The second conception is called "democratic" by its upholders. It is radically different from the first one, defining evaluation as a "judgment from elected representatives on the value of public policies". The accent is therefore on the need for evaluation to enhance counter-powers towards the administration and, more generally, the executive, suspected of monopolising expertise.
- The official definition of evaluation, as stated in a governmental decree, is a synthesis of these two approaches, insisting on pluralism: « Evaluation of a public policy consists in comparing its outcomes with its goals, considering its means (legal, administrative or financial). It has to be distinguished from control and monitoring, as it must lead to a collective judgment on efficiency and not only to checking that the policy is implemented in accordance with the administrative or technical norms ». Evaluation is considered here as having to formulate a value judgment, through a pluralistic evaluation body composed not only of elected representatives, but also of the administrations concerned and target groups. Evaluation is part of a collective process of problem solving, which requires the stakeholders themselves to judge the relevance of the public action and to compare their value systems.

In 1990, an institutional apparatus was built with the aim of developing and generalising this pluralistic evaluation practice at the inter-ministerial level. A Scientific Council was set up by the government to provide evaluation projects with methodological support, and to give publicly an opinion on the quality of each evaluation. A National Fund for the Development of Evaluation was created. Seven evaluation committees were created in two years, covering subjects as diverse as the social integration of young people, the rehabilitation of social housing or energy policies. Evaluation of innovative bills has been supported by the national executive too, such as the law on Minimum Income Support, passed for a three-year period.

This institutional apparatus was however quite complex and evaluation has quickly been perceived by potential commissioners as a heavy, constraining and elitist practice. It has been dismantled four years ago. The frantic period of evaluation didn't last long and had limited impact on political decisions. For instance the recommendations from the evaluation of Minimum Income Support did not have much influence on the debates in Parliament when the bill had to be voted on again after the experimental period.

Some efforts have been made in recent years to develop evaluation of public policies on the national level, yet the results achieved, and the use of evaluation work didn't have the expected impact. Many evaluation projects were not supported by political will and have simply been ignored by the executive.

To understand this failure, one has to remember that France has powerful monitoring and audit bodies. The State Audit Office is responsible for judging the appropriate use of public funds. The field of observation of this body is limited to the examination of results and to that of the impacts of policies as compared to the objectives set in laws and rules. The Audit Office does not, however, judge the quality or relevance of laws. Furthermore, most of the ministries have their own monitoring and audit bodies. These powerful bodies have set specialised units and committees to carry out evaluations. But the practices of these organizations consist less of policy evaluation than verifying the legality of procedures, controlling the use of funds, reviewing the management, or measuring the effectiveness of different techniques.

A second reason is to be found in Parliament. In theory, Parliament has significant means for undertaking evaluations, but its involvement in evaluation has been very limited until the mid 90s. In 1996, two new agencies were set up: the Parliamentary Office for the Evaluation of Legislation, for "gathering information and evaluating the appropriateness of laws in relation to the situations they govern" (law of 14 June 1996) and the Parliamentary Office for the Evaluation of Public Policies. Both are composed of delegations from the National Assembly and the Senate. The members of Parliament found it very difficult to define their missions precisely and to allocate adequate resources to them. Not surprisingly, these offices have been behind a very limited amount of evaluation work.

The development of evaluation at the regional and local levels

Until the early 80s, infra-national levels (the Regions, the Departments and, finally, the municipalities) had weak decision-making powers, limited fields of competences and few resources. Evaluation was therefore a national monopoly.

With the 1982 law on decentralisation, which enhanced the competence of the regional and local authorities, the French hierarchical administrative model has exploded. Combined with the setting up of the European Union, the sharing of responsibilities between different levels has boosted up partnerships involving public authorities from different community levels.

The development of evaluation at infra-national level has taken place within this context of a change in the administrative organisation, characterised by local autonomy together with an increasingly influential supra-national level (EC). The appearance of «vertical» counter-powers that the national executive has to take into account on the one hand, the rise of partnership and co-financed policies on the other hand represent significant breaks from former administrative tradition.

The regional implementation of European structural programmes, which include regulations concerning evaluation, and the setting up of "State-Region Contractual Plans" have been associated with a multiplication of evaluation work at regional level. The systems set up at this level for the evaluation of regional policies are characterised by their great heterogeneity. In some regions, the deliberative Assembly decides on the actions to evaluate and draws conclusions from the results; a Scientific Committee has been created to guarantee the scientific nature and deontology of the work carried out by external organisations. Finally, 'ad hoc' groups are formed for each evaluation to monitor the work. But in most of the regions, the State-Region Contractual Plans (articulated with the European structural funds) are the main or unique objects of evaluation. The choice of programmes to evaluate within each contract is made by the contracting parties. Even if the work undertaken has not always had the desired quality, evaluation has become a widespread activity within regional administrations and is treated as a specific exercise.

The same process has occurred at local level, with the development of contractual policies with the national government. Regulations concerning these joint-up policies, which make evaluation compulsory, have pushed the towns and metropolitan authorities to set up evaluation procedures.

The growing importance of partnerships in the formulation and implementation of public policies is thus the main force driving the development of evaluation in France. It has led, in turn, to particular difficulties in the definition of adequate evaluation procedures. "Vertical" partnerships constitute a favourable context for the development of evaluation. They may also provide the means to carry out quality evaluations since situations of partnership favour pluralistic approaches. Unfortunately, partnership also introduces a new series of constraints. While partnership policies can be defined as the pooling of resources for the attainment of supposedly convergent objectives, joint decision-making unquestionably increases the difficulties of evaluation and limits its scope. The aims of policy programmes which have been defined in partnership often lack coherence due to the negotiation and compromise in which their formulation is grounded. Furthermore, co-responsibility singularly complicates the management of resources. Evaluation defines its object with difficulty and partners tend to fear that it will compromise the negotiated « *modus operandi* ».

Evaluations carried out for partnerships often tend to be over ambitious (in an effort to reflect the interests of each partner) and this can lead to poor quality evaluation since resources are inevitably limited. Furthermore, some issues are treated as taboo. An unfortunate consequence of co-responsibility in relation to evaluation is that the most costly programmes or questionable projects are not necessarily the first and best evaluated. In the worst cases, the implementation of evaluative requirements is reduced to a formal exercise of self-justification with little if any substantial content. Fortunately, in other cases, some evaluations have led not only to the increased efficiency of these programmes but also to an overall evolution of administrative patterns.

Case study : “*politique de la ville*” (national urban policy)

Politique de la ville does not mean, as a literal translation might suggest, the urban policy for a city as a whole, but is rather the policy for ‘disadvantaged neighbourhoods’. The vast majority are city ‘housing developments’ built from the late 50s to the early 70s to provide homes for the population arising through demographic growth and the rural exodus. Many of the initial inhabitants left these apartment blocks in the 1970s to move into individual houses. Those who replaced them in the housing developments, who were mostly immigrant families, did not enjoy the same employment guarantees as a result of the crisis and the consequent mass unemployment.

In these neighbourhoods, residents’ lack of skills, qualifications and work experience limit access to jobs and income. The housing schemes lack political clout and are unlikely to provide a market for viable businesses. Jobs are scarce and difficult to reach. Public services are under pressure because of high levels of demand and declining budgets. Long-term unemployment contributes to already high levels of ill health. Schools struggle with low motivation and underachievement. All of these problems place pressure on family and community life and problems of racial harassment, crime and the fear of crime are evident. In some cases self-esteem is affected and more generally the residents of such areas are subject to adverse stereotyping which even further limits their chances of obtaining employment. The cumulative process of social exclusion may then be at its worst where place of residence adds to other factors involved.

As the 2005 riots that occurred in some of these neighbourhoods had a huge media impact all over the world, I think you have an idea of what I am talking about.

To address the challenge of social cohesion in deprived neighbourhoods, a specific national policy was developed in the 80s. Together public authorities at national, regional and local level develop, finance, implement and evaluate the objectives of *politique de la ville*, which deals with urbanism, social and economic development, crime prevention, education, health, etc.

Politique de la ville is the most evaluated policy in France. Last year, I made an inventory of this work, and I had to read 12 national evaluation reports and 200 regional and local evaluation reports. At first glance, the result is depressing: since the early 80s, *politique de la ville* has swung between multiples priorities but its evolutions cannot be linked to the evaluation results.

To give an example, an initiative called “*zones franches urbaines*”, offering 5 years of tax breaks and other incentives to business locating in the most deprived of France's urban neighbourhoods has been set up in 1996. In return, firms located in these areas had to hire 20% of their new employees amongst the residents. Two national evaluations have proved that this initiative has succeeded in attracting new firms in the targeted areas. But its cost was disproportionate compared to its impact. Evaluations have drawn attention to pernicious and opportunity effects. All the firms were eligible to the tax breaks (approximately 6 000 € for each employee working in the targeted areas), even those who didn't create new jobs. Some firms seized upon the opportunity, moving to the areas without creating new jobs (or less than 5 to avoid hiring residents). After such evaluations, it was hard to believe *zones franches urbaines* could be extended and the socialist government made it clear in 2000 they would not be.

But France is characterized by a lack of coherence and follow-up in governmental action, due to the changeover of political power, which hinders the development of evaluation (we've had 9 different prime minister both socialist and conservative since 1988). The socialists lost the 2002 general elections and the new conservative minister in charge of *politique de la ville* quickly passed a decree that extended *zones franches urbaines* by 5 years.

As you may imagine, the 2005 riots have had more impact on elected representatives than any evaluation work. After such a traumatic event, the government had to show its concern. Few months afterwards, a law was passed that added 46 new *zones franches urbaines* to the 41 old ones.

On the basis of this example (and I could have taken other examples), one could think evaluation of *politique de la ville* has been useless. I'd like to show now it's only partly true. But if it has been useful, it's not in the way it is usually expected.

Despite twenty years of implementation and a substantial experience, national and local policy-makers have continuously mixed different approaches to deprived neighbourhoods, each one referring to a different (but always implicit) diagnostic. The incoherence of *politique de la ville* is one of the causes of its lack of impact. Hesitations are not merely about remedies but also conceptions of the problem and evaluation work have been useful to distinguish between these conceptions, forcing policy-makers to make a choice.

- In a first approach, *politique de la ville* comes within the scope of affirmative action, on a geographical basis. The diagnostic is simple: by comparison to their environment, targeted neighbourhoods cumulate urban, social and financial problems. These deficiencies are a major obstacle to integration within the labour market and the housing market. But they are not insurmountable. Levelling the neighbourhoods and bringing back their inhabitants in the market is a mere affirmative action issue : more money for urban investment, more public servants (teachers, social workers, policemen and so on), reserved jobs in companies located in the neighbourhood or in some public services (police).
- Affirmative action supporters watch the neighbourhoods from a normative standpoint, seeing differences as deficiencies in the market field. Alternatively, neighbourhoods can be watched from a more comprehensive point of view. That's what some officials advocate, upholding community development approaches. As they point out, social exclusion relates not only to individual skills, but also to the extent and quality of social networks people are included in. Therefore, the main problem isn't the concentration of low-income households, but the inhabitants' lack of social capital. *Politique de la ville* should then try to promote exchanges based on reciprocity in order to empower the

residents, rather than try to fight against social segregation. In order to help individuals and communities achieve self actualisation and full citizenship, public subsidies are granted to not-for-profit and cooperative projects in the neighbourhoods. Thus, new collective services (such as day care centres or school support) are developed; social involvement of the residents is promoted (through community centres, participatory knowledge exchange systems and other actions). To that may be added other initiatives contributing to recognition of the inhabitants by the rest of the city (for example: intercultural exchanges).

- The third approach is known under the name of rights for the city. The diagnostic differs clearly from the former approaches: deprived neighbourhoods are not considered to be a problem but a mere symptom. They are useful, as magnifying glasses through which the obsolescence of public policies can be analysed. But solutions cannot be found at their scale. They have to be sought within a broader geographical area, which is at the level of town and metropolitan area. For the defenders of the “Rights for the city” approach, what is at stake is the possibility for the inhabitants, without exception, to have universal access to jobs, amenities and services which cities offer. To guarantee residents of deprived areas that they have access to public services similarly to the other inhabitants of the city, urban policy should be based within the framework of mainstream policies: those of housing, transport, economic development, etc. Rather than trying to bring the deprived neighbourhoods and their residents up to the average standard, *politique de la ville* should try to improve mainstream policies, for them to cope with the needs of all the inhabitants of the city.

After 20 years of evaluation, one can assess these three strategies.

- affirmative action. Despite growing resources, *politique de la ville* remains a minor policy from a financial standpoint. The effectiveness of affirmative action depends therefore on mainstream policies, and their willingness to channel their means to distressed areas. Most of the studies and evaluations show that it seldom occurs. To give an example, *politique de la ville* supports training for the unemployed to find back a job. But only a few benefit with the latter, while the local employment services often keep the majority of the inhabitants of deprived areas out of the most efficient measures.
- community development. This approach is common in speeches, but very unusual in facts. Immigrants are not represented on municipal councils and participative democracy is often seen as a threat by elected officials. Appearance of community leaders is feared, as it might lead to a legitimacy competition with elected officials. Rather than a way to achieve full citizenship, support to grassroots initiatives is often used to buy social peace, or as a pretext to reduce furthermore public services. In France, decentralisation is always depicted as a solution to get ahead with democracy. The urban policy experience gives an opposite view. One can hardly rely on local elected officials in order to promote community development. As long as residents do not organise themselves to counteract this political fear, community development will probably remain in the rhetorical field.
- rights for the city. This strategy has succeeded in improving the quality of life in some neighbourhoods and limited the damage caused by economic and social crisis in deprived areas. But at a general level it has not allowed a narrowing of the development gap and other inequalities between these neighbourhoods and the rest of the territory.

In conclusion, evaluation work and its conclusions have failed to have the expected impact on governmental decisions. But they have had indirect effects, allowing the political debate on issues and solutions to become clearer. In a word, evaluation has allowed elected officials to distinguish three different options, even if arbitration between these options remains mostly based on political or ideological criteria. Since the mid 90s, hesitations have disappeared: the left is in favour of “right for the city” strategy, and the right supports affirmative action. Following the 2002 general elections, the political majority decided to focus state urban policy action on a

single issue: urban renovation. The Law for the City and Urban Renovation of August 1st 2003 is taking up the challenge of reducing the gap through a five-year programme of urban renovation aimed at 'destroying urban ghettos', rather than improving their inhabitants' access to the city.

Lessons of a failure

Evaluation is political. Its success depends on political will.

"What matters is what works", we are told, in today's eminently practical world of evidence-based, ideology-free public services. To find the evidence of what works, we need evaluations conducted by expert professionals crunching data, studies, surveys and so on. Whatever could be "political" about it? The answer is: plenty!

Who defines exactly what is to count as evidence of "progress" or "success"? Who decides what happens to jobs, contracts, funding, organisational responsibilities and programme design after positive or negative evaluations? Who wins out when there are tensions between different visions about how to evaluate public services, for instance as between central and local government? All these questions show that evaluation is political.

Therefore, its results and organisation should be the subject of public debate. Unfortunately evaluation remains in France characterised by an essentially managerial use. It is usually carried out at the request of the administration, for its own use. The political will still does not seem sufficiently strong to be able to give evaluation its "democratic" dimension. The development of practice and the appropriation of results cannot occur without greater involvement by law makers and the conviction, at the political level, of the usefulness of the exercise.

A degree of scepticism does remain at the political level, where too few conclusions of evaluation reports are used. To eliminate this obstacle, so that evaluation may fulfil its political function, it is necessary to make evaluation work credible and transparent. The publishing of reports is a way of accrediting evaluation and of enhancing its transparency, but also of informing citizens - and tax payers - of the results of public action.

In a word, evaluation must be accepted by the political and decisional power in order to ensure effective consequences. That's the reason why legislative evaluation is probably preferable to executive evaluation.

Enhancing evaluation quality and usefulness: three conditions

- Distinguish evaluation from other exercises

The boundary between control, monitoring and evaluation is not always clearly perceived. If evaluation quality is to be enhanced, evaluation will have to be clearly distinguished from related practices such as administrative control or monitoring, on the one hand and descriptive study or scientific research on the other. A clearer distinction would make it possible to benefit more fully from the added value of each of these five exercises, to identify scope for complementarity more clearly and to improve professional practice.

- Reducing the scope of evaluation

The quality of evaluations depends on the constraints imposed on the commissioners as well as on evaluation teams. Rather than systematically and mechanically applying the regulatory requirements for evaluation, it may be worth considering the need to modulate them in relation to the potential value of the evaluation. Such an approach would encourage a development in the quality of evaluations rather than their quantity and at the same time limit the scope of evaluation to the most essential questions.

- Evaluating traditional administrative programmes rather than partnership programmes

The traditional model of administrative accountability is simple, and *vertical*: in a bureaucracy inspired by Weberian principles, administrative agents are accountable to their superiors, and on the top of the chain the minister in charge is politically accountable to the Parliament. However, principles of accountability are much more vague in complex systems of governance, where public action is increasingly performed through partnership.

Partnerships stimulate an increased level of interest and activity in evaluation since the need for more reliable judgements and feedback on policy increases in proportion to the acknowledged heterogeneity of stakeholders. Simultaneously, the increasing presence of partnerships poses threats to the potential quality for evaluation since the official programming texts are not explicit and coherent enough to serve as a basis for the selection of information required in carrying out evaluations. Furthermore, objectives of both policies and evaluations may be expanded beyond realistic hopes of attaining them. Finally, when evaluation is a matter of co-responsibility between different partners, its success depends on the willingness of all the partners. If one is reluctant, you can be sure evaluation will end with a failure.

Evaluation of partnership programmes is not doomed to failure, but is much more complicated. An indispensable preliminary step consists of clarifying, with the relevant administrations, all intended impacts - from specific to global - and then the definition of judgement criteria, the selection of impact indicators, and the formulation of a judgement on the programme's worth. It is really easier to evaluate less complex programmes. I would therefore advise you to start with these traditional bureaucratic programmes.