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Opening Speech

~~Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort~~

Hearing on Results of the Ex Post Evaluation of Objectives 1 & 2, 2000-06

Brussels, 23 June 2009

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to welcome you to this hearing on the first findings of the ex post evaluation of the 2000-2006 programming period of cohesion policy.

Evaluation has been one of the requirements for cohesion policy since the first reform in 1988. Ex post evaluation has always been the primary responsibility of the Commission, with Member States having responsibility for ex ante and mid-term or ongoing evaluation.

Evaluation is an important cohesion policy tool and will be more important in the future. It helps us to reply to two major questions: Where have the funds for the regional policy gone exactly? And, what are the results of the policy implementation?

This is why, in the framework of the debate on future cohesion policy, I asked my services to intensify their efforts to ensure that the ex post evaluation delivers credible evidence on its performance. My objective is that our debates and discussions during the policy review are – as much as possible – based on evidence and not on anecdote or opinion.

My services have been working on an ambitious programme of ex post evaluation since 2007 which will continue until the end of 2011. Between now and then we will publish 15 different evaluation studies, looking at the performance of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) - including the Community Initiatives - Interreg and Urban - the Cohesion Fund and the Instrument for Pre-Accession (ISPA). For the ERDF evaluation, we will publish a synthesis report early in 2010. The Cohesion Fund/ISPA evaluation will be launched through a public call for tenders next month and it will be completed in the middle of 2011.

Why are we meeting today then? I want to bring the findings of evaluations out into public debate as early as possible. Evaluations must be discussed by policy makers and stakeholders if they are to be useful. Otherwise, they will simply remain on the shelf.

In the opening of today's debate, I would therefore like to share with you a few lessons we have learned in this exercise by now.

Focus on selected themes

First of all, the basic questions we faced were: can one conclude on policy performance in varying contexts, with many supported fields and certainly more than a million projects? Can one evaluate the effects of 230 programmes, implemented in 25 Member States, each of these programmes covering a wide variety of activities and ranging in size from €6.4 billion ERDF (Andalucía) to €6.4 million (Hamburg)?

We obviously could not evaluate all interventions. We had to be selective. But I believe that by building up a picture of the effectiveness of carefully selected elements of the policy, we can arrive at a good judgement on overall policy effectiveness.

This ex post evaluation examines the most important themes that were supported by the ERDF. This includes transport, environment, enterprise support, innovation and the themes covered by the studies that will be presented and discussed today. The idea behind this selective approach was that we wanted to ensure a high quality of evaluation. Selectivity enables us to concentrate

our efforts on important elements of our policy. Even more importantly, it allows us to look for evaluators with specific knowledge and experience in a certain field. Finally, we can go more in-depth and use more rigorous evaluation methods appropriate to the particular theme under evaluation. This should enhance the credibility of the evidence generated by the evaluations.

More rigorous methods

Quality depends on the professionalism and expertise of evaluators, and it depends on the application of methods that can answer specific evaluation questions. There is no one method that could be applied to all themes. So the second distinctive feature of the ex post evaluation 2000-2006 is a mix of evaluation methods. The evaluations typically start off with a review of literature; they collect available administrative data; and they deepen the analysis in case studies and interviews. The results of two macro-economic models will complement these hands-on studies. As one of the most interesting parts of the ex post evaluation we are testing a control group approach in the field of support to enterprises. Here we will compare the performance of supported enterprises with that of enterprises without such support. This approach – impact evaluation using counterfactual methods – is one recommended in the report of Fabrizio Barca and I am interested to see the results of experimentation with this method when the study is completed early next year.

Involvement of academics in evaluation

As further support to the credibility of our evaluations, we have involved the academic community in the evaluation exercise. In each evaluation contract, three academic experts meet with the consultants and my services to review the methods used and the reports produced. Their role is to constructively criticise the approach and the work undertaken. Here comes an important lesson: the openness to independent views and expertise enriched our evaluation process enormously. I would like to thank our "critical friends" for their contribution to-date – it has been most appreciated.

Evaluation by Member States

Another key lesson from these evaluations is that they confirm the need for evaluation to be undertaken by the Member States. If we really want to know how our policy works, we need thorough studies of individual interventions as they impact on the ground. Only if we can prove that a certain support scheme to enterprise actually works - that supported enterprises create more jobs than non-supported enterprises - only then we can claim that this intervention is really a success. But to claim that the overall Operational Programme that includes other priorities is a success, we need evidence of the performance of all the priorities. We need to unbundle big programmes for evaluation. This is what all research does: a phenomenon needs to be cut into pieces for analysis, only with new knowledge is a synthesis of the overall effect possible.

Clearly, this cannot be done by the Commission alone. It is a task Member States need to carry out. This aspiration to achieve better evaluation needs to be built into the future of Cohesion Policy. Our flexible approach to ongoing evaluation for the 2007-2013 period is based on a view that Member States and regions are best placed to understand their needs for evaluation. If they need a particular evaluation, they are more likely to use the results and, consequently, improve the performance of their programmes. The new approach also creates a space for experimentation with new evaluation methods – which I strongly encourage. Based on the

knowledge we gain during this period, we can design a better evaluation process for the future. Evaluating and understanding our programmes requires the design of an evaluation approach and its research methods right at the beginning of interventions. If we do this, it will allow us to collect the right data, to reduce bureaucracy, and to avoid data graveyards and interventions without any assessment.

I am glad to see that the biggest recipient of Cohesion Policy funds, Poland, is the most active Member State in this respect, having launched more than 100 smaller and bigger evaluations.

The Commission's role – a clearing house for evaluation

For the Commission I see its role more and more as that a clearing house. What can be done in Brussels is to pull together information from our many programmes and their evaluations and, perhaps even more importantly, to give visibility to examples of methodological excellence.

Monitoring, evaluation and strategic reporting as inputs to the policy debate

Another point I would like to make is: collecting information and knowledge building is not a task for evaluation alone. We have other tools like monitoring, and the strategic reporting by Member States and the Commission. All of them should contribute to the public policy debate. And they should not only be discussed between the Commission and Member States. It would also be useful if the Member States also shared information collected and their experience between themselves as peers.

Conclusion

Today we have invited three evaluation teams to present key findings of the studies that they have carried out in the last months. They have worked hard during the last months; they have grappled with data that is often less than perfect and they have had to come up with conclusions that reflect very different realities across 25 Member States.

All the evaluators are independent. We have not asked for propaganda. We have asked for evidence and judgement on the performance of the policy. The three reports are not yet finalised. Draft final reports have been produced and discussed with my services and they have been circulated to you. If you do not agree with the evidence or the conclusions, today we are here to listen to you and discuss the initial findings.

I hope for a lively exchange of opinions today. I encourage you to ask questions to the evaluators, to react to their recommendations and to challenge their argumentation. Let's be frank, constructive and generous in sharing thoughts. I believe that open debate is the shortest way to the design of a better cohesion policy.

Thank you very much for your attention.