

“Governance and Citizenship in Europe - the Influence of Culture”

*My current research examines the use of the ever more common **evaluations as an instrument of governance in the European Union**. In this paper I argue that the mere refining of evaluation methodology will never suffice to dispose of the fact that whenever large amounts of money are passed from one place to another, a great deal of politics is involved. Not even the best evaluation is a magic tool that automatically allows ignoring contradictory, conflicting interests, or economic, social and cultural factors, or solves the infinite diversity and unpredictability of social reality.*

Governance- based liturgy, however, maintains a different opinion, presumably with the well grounded justification that governance must be possible even in the midst of ambivalence and uncertainty. From this starting point it becomes, as I will demonstrate, inevitable that a lot of information will remain uncovered, and some of the discovered data will be false. In the scale of European Union, we are dealing with a significant problem. The main reason why the problem has been left without attention is probably that the magnitude of it hasn't been understood. In this paper I will illustrate what these problems could be, what may result from them, and why they are worth a closer examination.

*My choice of case is the Objective 3 of **European Social Fund (ESF)**, and particularly the Finnish projects and their evaluations of the period 1994-1999. I hope that after the discussions in the theme group I will have a better understanding and possibly some new ideas about how the problems may reflect to the European context.*

Effects and side-effects

It is a well known fact, that as the insights produced by social and human sciences about the lives, needs and troubles of people are applied to improve the conditions, the actions taken have effects and side-effects. Some times they are revealed after a considerable delay, sometimes never. Sometimes the effects and side-effects can be ruled as positive or negative, but as we haven't got a moral code carved in stone, we must conclude that the measures taken as well as their results are determined by values subjective enough to inescapably dim the line between good and bad.

Ethical guidelines for governance are scant. We can lean on some rawlsian formulations of inequality being fair only where it is to the benefit of everyone, after which we only have to reach compromise on the problems of allocation and distribution, achieve joint positions about the current state of the social reality and the best ways to change it. The direction, as well as most everything, is decided on by a complicated process under a heading of democracy...

The mechanism involves an interminable amount of variables and factors, some of them known and the rest unknown. It involves vested interests of individuals and different groupings of them, laws of economics and politics, and endless unpredictability tied to historical contexts of time and place. The mechanism is hardly controllable, and governable with considerable limitations. What should we try to hang on to then?

The Quest for truth

The question can be answered in many ways. This paper is written on one possible answer; when we take action to moderate the social reality, we should try our very best to understand what the consequences of our actions are. If we have, after that uncontrollable and fathomless process, reached an agreement, that some particular state of affairs should be responded with some particular measures, we should make sure that we know what the measures produce.

The Structural Funds of the European Union work with the fine principle that every funded program must be weighed up. In practice this means that with sophisticated and rapidly developing techniques of evaluation, the funded programmes are assessed for their outcomes, outputs and results; is the measure cost-efficient, effective, and productive; what are the consequences in the short or long perspective, what are its by-products and derivatives, what kind of influence does the ever changing state of worldly affairs have on the programme, its conditions and premisses. Evaluation research is a remarkably challenging and fascinating field!

The field has grown in an equally remarkable speed, and, at least from the Finnish perspective, mainly due to the effect of the policies of Structural Funds. The European Evaluation Society was founded in 1994, and national evaluation societies are being founded all around Europe. The Finnish one is currently in the process. More and more seminars, training and publications are available, and obviously a new, dynamic and enthusiastic profession, evaluators, is emerging. The situation is similar in many countries around Europe, at least in new members countries of the EU. Since there will be new members in the future as well, the boom of evaluation will be present for a while.

As always when new territories are to be conquered, the vanguard is full of progress-oriented euphoria and joy of learning. A lot of learning indeed has taken place in Finland, during the first period of 1994-1999. A lot remains to be learned but the direction is fitting. The premisses are ideal too; the future Structural Fund -programmes will need to be evaluated too, as well as an increasing proportion of national programmes. It seems like the sophisticated methods and practices of evaluation are bringing a new kind of certainty, firmness and self-confidence into decision making. In the end everything can and must be evaluated.

Trouble with the politics

Evaluations are most always performed directly for the needs and utilisation of governance. Due to this feature evaluation has been suited with a reputation of being an objective and practical field of “scientific” research; it doesn’t lose itself in philosophy and wander around in the area of subjectivity and values. The evaluations being objective and practical, the system of governance utilizing them must also be objective and practical. The generalized methods have been chosen to accommodate the practical assignment and are thus produce very reliable data. My argument, however, is that as a principal rule evaluations are not objective, and neither do its methods stand up to a closer examination.

It appears, that at no point does the evaluator need to take into consideration the fact that he/she is operating on a politically highly charged field. By politics I mean international, large scale politics, local level as well as individual “life politics” and everything in between. Whenever money changes owners, politics are involved, but for some curious reason evaluators apparently don’t need to take that into account. What’s most alarming, is that apparently no one else does either.

In the American tradition of evaluation research one of the main branches reaches out to grasp the political factors and variables that affect the working environment of evaluations (for example the classic works of Carol Weiss). One of the essential, and as a matter of fact, by intuition obvious, conclusions or findings are that quite often the political interests involved are the main determinants of the evaluation results, and often so beforehand. The political interest determine who is assigned to evaluate what and when, and what sort of findings are desired and published. This is nothing new under the sun. But I do maintain that, especially as the clients of ESF-programmes are real-life persons in need of support, the policy of programme administration cannot be one of producing inadequate, insufficient and even incorrect information about the clients’ reality. And at the present situation, where the political features and aspects can be neglected, no satisfactory descriptions are produced. The political features may range from the empathetic client who for personal concern doesn’t want to tell off the staff for its incompetence, or the evaluator who doesn’t want to reveal the flaws in the project, to be hired again, to the fact that the administration who issued the program that during 5 years has influenced the lives of 500 000 people across the continent, maybe doesn’t want to trumpet the program a complete waste of time and money even if it eventually turns out be just that.

Youth workshops

The case I bring forward as an example is an ESF objective 3 program under “Youthstart”, the “Innovative Workshops” designed to meet the needs of long-term unemployed youth at the risk of marginalization. It aims at activating, i.e. employing or putting to shepherding to further training the, its clients, with a 6 -month work period. The central mechanisms are the social interaction that improves the clients’ social skills, private consultation, experiences of success, information and designing on individual paths to employment. The operational principles include creating networks with the local industries and other actors, searching for “best practices” via innovative work methods, flexibility and individual treatment of the clients. The objective is to activate 50% of the participants. Other essential features are the break in inactivity and the general empowering of the clients. Supposedly the client is more willing to seek employment after discovering the joy of daily routines, meaningful labour and the work-related social relations, after working in an atmosphere where the work is meaningful and rewarding, both for its actual substance and what comes with the package, that is the friends and overall direction in life.

The programme seems by all means great, easy to appreciate and support, and as it is very versatile and resourceful it appears quite credible. And with the many choices of specialization especially the bigger cities can offer, ranging from wood shop to car-repair and www-design, even acting, it easy to be convinced that the period spent at the workshop will help the youth ahead in their lives. Hence it is no surprise, that the extensive all-round evaluation of the programme finds it a success; it has reached its objectives, and although some difficulties were met on the way, the programme was deemed a success by the staff, the clients and the evaluator. (P.Virtanen: Innovatiiviset työpajat 1998, EHF-publications, ministry of labour, Helsinki)

A closer examination, however, reveals a lot of interesting details. I list some of them:

- an important concept of cream-skimming isn’t mentioned. The concept refers to the phenomenon, where the local authorities in charge of choosing who among the line of applicants gets to participate in the project, rather choose individuals who are likely to reach the goal of activation during the course of the workshop, than the troubled individuals

who are unlikely to get a job, and who would make the project look bad in statistics, but who would often be the ones really in need of the workshop. The recruiting is done locally, but we can only guess how.

-shortly after the workshop was over the objective of 50% was reached. Half of those who had started the workshop had quit before the 6 months was over; half of them due to a job or a spot at a school, but the rest for an unknown reason. What can so horrible in this terrific programme that a kid stamps out although the laws say it results in cutting or even ceasing of benefits?

-the follow up/feedback was very unsatisfactory. The follow-up/ feedback questionnaire was only mailed to those who had stayed at the workshop for the whole period, not to those who had quit beforehand. Would this be too obvious a way to manipulate the feedback?

Obviously not. Maybe nobody reads the truckloads of programme evaluations with the intensity required to reveal the insufficiencies. Maybe the administration isn't capable to assess the methods used by the evaluation. In "Realistic Evaluation" (1997) Ray Pawson and Nick Tilly emphasize the need to search for the exact mechanism of the project that produced the desired outcome. As it is, a great many evaluations leave the projects in a black box, i.e. the evaluator only measures what comes out, not what it was exactly that caused it. These sort of sophisticated frames of thought are still a rare delicacy in the market of evaluations. In the case of the workshops, it remains a complete mystery why the outcome of the project was what it was.

But then again, who would want to bad-mouth such an agreeable and valuable programme? Someone, who has found reasons to be suspicious of the project in a whole. Confidential interviews with the clients reveal great disappointment, frustration and experiences of the passivating effect of the programme. There were no real work opportunities, and learning stopped after the initial period of the first month. At some workshops there were no private consultations or designing of individual pathways to employment. In the official evaluation there were no references to these sort of reactions.

The workshop staff are often unemployed themselves, sometimes even recruited from among the clients of the previous workshop. This sounds sensible enough at first, but is it sensible to think they are the best people to take responsibility of designing the individual pathways to employment for the clients? If their specialty is in car repair, are they the best people to be in charge of the psychological empowerment of the troubled youth at risk of marginalization? Are they skilled in developing networks with the local industries? No, is the obvious answer, but did the evaluation question the competency of the staff. No, again. And neither do the Structural Fund guidelines for evaluations require them to do it. And I'm sure the staff isn't going to trumpet their feelings of inadequacy to the evaluator, the faceless representative of heartless administration.

If one wants to create employment, one has to take into consideration the local labour market. Is it wise to train a dozen amateur actors filled with enthusiasm to an area that lacks industrial workers? Why should a workshop train 30 bike-repairmen, if there's demand for two? Should the government-funded workshop specialize and offer services on an area where it will directly result in less work opportunities for the small enterprises of the area? Should the workshop offer training in textile painting, where there are no jobs available, ever? And are these considerations mentioned in the evaluation. No.

What to make of it?

The list goes on. The sum of them is a manifest indication of the fact, that although the program was carefully planned and equally carefully evaluated, in the end we have no idea whether "Innovative Workshops" should be supported or not. At this point I must point out, that I chose this particular evaluation because it is a decent one, well above average in all, and most evaluations I've come across are significantly less sophisticated.

Who is going to come and demand for more detailed research? Not the Structural Funds, at least not at the moment. If the evaluator torpedos national employment programmes, the money just doesn't come in at all. The actors' senses of fairness and justice will be flexible, to leave room for higher goals, such as the helping of troubled youth. But the problem is, that the helping of these people at risk of marginalization would be a whole lot easier, if they were not employed by projects nobody knows the worth and value of, and full effort would be in finding the weak spots and in the fixing of them. In the end everybody would gain from it.

Or maybe not. Maybe a team of experts has decided that the overall activation figures are sufficient, although nowhere near the 50%. Maybe some other team has concluded, that the positive publicity the commission gets for providing such a humane and still efficient a way to combat youth unemployment, is a value on its own, and it doesn't really matter what the programme actually does or doesn't do.

Who knows what really happens. What must be kept in mind, is that the system works even if the different levels of administration didn't work aware of each other. None of the involved actors may have thought, that the consequences of

their decisions cumulate to such extent, that the originally fabulous measure of combatting unemployment has turned into a perverted torso of itself by the time it gets realized on the field.

I apologize for my provocative metaphors and caricatures, and smooth some of the edges with a metaphor of a children's game, "the broken telephone", where the original message gets twisted when it travels through a chain, whispered by one kid to another. The metaphor could be applied to the idea of a programme travelling from the planning table to the field, although the hierarchy is not that clear.

The effect of evaluation is that it further twists the game, thus creating something that is impossible in the children's game. Once the message (the programme) has travelled all the way to the other end, and turned into something else, the programme, as it travels back to the commission via evaluations, converts back, most curiously, into the exact duplication of the original.

It is easy to put some twisting in on the account of innovativeness, flexibility and subsidiarity, but what if the result of those fine principles is such a broken telephone, or a torso of the original? The twisting elements are just as likely as their opposites, and it is up to us to choose which ones we see. The only place where we can be quite sure the odds are clearly on one side of the game, is that neither the programme planners, evaluators nor the staff will be the first in line to announce that they have been doing a bad job.