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UNDERSTANDING THE EVALUATION OF PUBLIC POLICY. EVALUATION OF THE ROMANIAN NATIONAL ANTI-DRUG STRATEGY

Madalina HIDEG¹

Abstract

International organizations (public and private) seek to find standard procedures to evaluate public policy or programs in order to have a common measure for public policy effectiveness and efficiency. The national governments, with the aid of the subordinated entities, are quite much interested in developing frames for the design of the evaluation of public policy in general and of public policy in specific fields, in particular. After having reviewed some models of evaluation, we will analyze the case of Romania and we will see that this country doesn't have a working conceptual frame for the evaluation of the public policy in the anti-drug area.

Keywords: evaluation, public policy, Anti-Drug Strategy, standards of evaluations, governmental guidance of evaluation.

Introduction

It is generally accepted that the evaluation of public policy is the last stage of the public policy process (it is preceded by agenda-setting, policy formulation, decision making and implementation) (Jann & Wegrich, 2007). The public policy is a double loop process, where inputs and outputs are interchangeable, and thus, the public policy design follows a cyclical model. Moreover, the organizations applying this double loop process are learning entities, as they transform the findings from previous evaluations into inputs for further public policy design. The limitations of the usage of the evaluation results in the public policy cycle are given by the fact that political representatives, that are active in the stage of decision making, don't give enough room to scientific analysis of their work (Howard, 2005).

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The place of evaluation in the policy cycle

The evaluation of public policy serves both to public policy and political process. If the evaluation shows shortage in outcomes, this can be used by the opponents to contest the political order that created that policy or program. Sometimes, the lack of measurable goals (which are essential for a proper policy evaluation) is on purpose, because in this case, the political elite can't be blamed for the failure of the policy or program (Hood, 2002). Going deeper in the subject of public evaluations, two directions of discussion arise: the discussion about international standards of evaluation - the standards developed by the scientific and academic world, and the discussion about the guidelines of public evaluations that accompany specifically the making of public policy, which is the attribute of governmental forces. The paragraphs below will take a glance on both directions of discussion about public evaluations.

Standards of evaluation developed by other institutions than governments, at the European level

Switzerland, Germany, France and The United Kingdom are the European frontrunners in evaluation standards. The documents that contain these standards are worth to be reviewed, as they are considered the baseline of any future of evaluation standards in Europe (Widmer, 2004).

Standardized evaluation of public policy in Switzerland: SEVAL

The Swiss Evaluation Society (SEVAL) (2016) sets rules for the evaluation, that contribute to the professionalization of the evaluative activity. These are universal standards, regardless the institutional context, the investigation field or type of evaluation (according to information available on their website). The first set of rules were established in 2000 (Widmer, Landert and Bechmann, 2000), and so, The Swiss Evaluation Society became the first evaluation society to set its own evaluation standards.

According to SEVAL, the quality norms that should be kept in mind for every evaluative process are: utility (the evaluation responds to the aims of the evaluation and to the informational needs of the users; it is important to the evaluators to know the addressees), feasibility (the evaluation must be adapted to the existent conditions), deontology/propriety (the evaluation must be correct from the point of view of law norms and ethics, neutral and impartial) and accuracy (the evaluation should transmit valid and usable information).

The Swiss Evaluation Society splits the standards into three groups, depending on the significance for each evaluation stage: the first group of standards describe the general principles, that doesn't depend on a specific activity or stage of the process, but are mandatory for ensuring the quality of the evaluation; these standards are: the absence of prejudices against the results and impartiality, transparency, take into consideration the target groups, approach centered on utilization and appropriation

– the results should have further usage for the stakeholders, balanced cost-utility report, ensuring the quality, conformity to the rules of law, data protection and confidentiality, ethics, respect and loyalty.

The second group of standards address to the practical aspects of planification and implementation of the evaluation: clarify the object and the questions of the evaluation, mind the context, respect the deadlines (so that the results could be available on the right time for further usage), stakeholders' agreement on the evaluation process, appropriate evaluation concept, scientific character of the analysis, appropriate measurements, reliability and validity of the data collection, quality and pertinence of the information.

The third group of standards applies to the communication of the results: complete and fair appreciations, transparent and grounded conclusions, useful recommendations, adequate communication of the results, documented evaluation, granted access to the results of the evaluation. The full description of these standards can be accessed on the website of the organization. The standards are useful to evaluation practice, quality assurance purposes and to evaluation education (Widmer, 2004).

Standardized evaluation of public policy in Germany: DeGEval Standards

The German Evaluation Society (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Evaluation, DeGEval) adopted their evaluation standards in 2001, based on the SEVAL standards, of which they changed the neutral reporting standard into a new standard about unbiased conduct and reporting (Widmer, 2004).

Standardized evaluation of public policy in France

In 2003, The French Evaluation Society (Société Française d'Évaluation, SFE) adopted the Charter of Evaluation Guiding Principles for Public Policies and Programs, with seven guiding principles: pluralism, independence, competence, respect of human beings, transparency, opportunity and responsibility (on the website, the available version of the Charte de l'évaluation de politiques publiques et des programmes publics is from 2006).

Standardized evaluation of public policy in the United Kingdom

In 2003, the United Kingdom Evaluation Society (UKES) released a document named Guidelines for Good Practice in Evaluation of the UKES, fully updated in 2019. They set eight principles: clarity, integrity, independence, accessibility, trust, equity, transparency and diversity, and they transformed them into standards for four groups that could be implied in the evaluation process: evaluators, commissioners, institutional self-evaluation, evaluation participants.

Examples of guidance for public evaluation developed by state or inter-state institutions

Evaluation of public policy in the United Kingdom: The Magenta Book

The Magenta Book (2011) is the government guidance on evaluation process of public policy, consisting of practical guidance for practitioners. It is about the design and management of public evaluations and it is comprised of two parts, one designated to public policy makers and the other one is designated to public policy researchers or policy makers.

Evaluation of public policy in the public health sector from the United States

CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), subordinated to the Public Health Department in the United States, designs its own approach to evaluation that focuses on evaluation as a stage within the public policy cycle, not as an ex-post evaluation, after the policy implementation is over. They justify their preference with the fact that such evaluation can contribute to improve the policies and strengthen the results.

CDC makes the distinction between monitoring and evaluation and it sets the main indicators (output indicators, process indicators and outcome indicators) for the evaluation in the public health field. No matter what kind of indicators they use, they should be simple, precise and measurable, and sometimes they should aspire to be SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and timely).

There are six connected steps that should be ticked for the evaluation of a public policy in the public health sector (CDC, 1999): engage stakeholders (those included in the program and those who will use the evaluation), describe the program, focus the evaluation design on the issues of greatest concern of the stakeholders, gather credible evidence, justify conclusions (link them to the evidence) and ensure use and share lessons learned (steps: design, preparation, feedback, follow-up and dissemination). These steps are represented in a circle in the middle of which reign the standards. CDC defines four standards for the evaluation of a program or policy in public health: utility, feasibility, propriety and accuracy.

Evaluation of public policy in drugs sector: ERANID

European Research Area Network on Illicit Drugs (ERANID) is an integrative project of eleven organization from six EU countries (Belgium, Italy, France, The Netherlands, Portugal and The United Kingdom) that encourages an interdisciplinary approach on the drug issue. As stated in The Strategic Research Agenda for Europe in the field of illicit drugs, the project aims to map the current situation of illicit drugs research in the ERANID countries. Because it follows the issues from the EU Drug Strategy, we may consider that ERANID includes a

kind of inter-state monitoring and evaluation of the anti-drug public policy and it certainly may give important input in the design process of public policy on drugs. Unfortunately, the data is available only up to 2014.

Standardization in the evaluation of public policy in Romania

Romania doesn't have evaluation standards developed by non-government academic or scientific institutions, generally accepted and implemented. At the government level, the evaluation of the public policy is coordinated by the Secretariat-General of the Government. In 2008, they released the publication *Manual de monitorizare și evaluare politici publice (The handbook for monitoring and evaluation of public policy)*. They established *six dimensions of evaluation: relevance* (if the intervention reached the target group), *effectiveness* (what were the reasons that led to success in goal achievement), *efficiency* (in terms of cost-efficiency for the fulfillment of the activities of the public policy), *implementation* (how good was the performance of the institution or of the process, what lessons can be learned), *impact* (what is the impact of an activity, compared to the expectations, what is the impact of the new procedure compared to the old one, why an expected impact was reduced for a certain area), *sustainability* (what are the odds for the sustainability of the results, why was there a reduced sustainability, what are the future costs for the program). They specify that each ministry should elaborate their specific guidelines for evaluation of public policy in their sector.

The evaluation of specific public policy: The National Anti-Drug Strategy

A delimitation needs to be done from the beginning: we don't aim to present the results of the evaluation of public policy in the drug sector, but to analyze the conceptual frame of the evaluation in this specific field. The National Anti-Drug Strategy is designed by The National Anti-Drug Agency, a public institution that is subordinated to the Romanian Ministry of Internal Affairs.

The National Anti-Drug Strategy for 2013-2020 follows the design of the EU Drug Strategy for the same period. It is the second strategy of this kind, after the one that covered the period between 2005 and 2013. Romania was forced to adopt such a strategy as part of the efforts to harmonize the national legislation with the acquis communautaire, in the perspective of the integration in the European Union, which actually happened in 2007. Three Drug Action Plans were adopted up to now: one for the first strategy (2005-2012), one 2013-16 Drug Action Plan and 2017-20 Drug Action Plan. As having been adopted by the national government in specific legislative acts, the Anti-Drug Strategy and the Drug Action Plans act as public policy in the field of drug phenomenon.

The EU Drug Strategy comprises five main policy fields: drug demand reduction, drug supply reduction, inter-institutional coordination, international cooperation, and last – information, research, monitoring and evaluation, all of which were taken in the national strategy. The EU Drug Strategy does not

specify certain requirements or indications regarding the evaluation of the national strategies. It only demands the member states to invest in monitoring, research and evaluation of the drug situation and responses to it at the national levels. Following the instructions of the Secretariat-General of the Government and the European demands in the field of design and implementation of public policy, The Ministry of Internal Affairs (that subordinates The National Anti-Drug Agency) published on their website *Ghid de politici publice la nivelul Ministerului Afacerilor Interne* (*The Guide for public policy for the Ministry of Internal Affairs*), a document that guides the policy makers in designing public policy; they addressed the monitoring and evaluation process as a stage of the public policy cycle, stressing the importance of public policy evaluation, without setting any actual standards for it.

The external evaluation of the public policy in the drug field is comprised only of the evaluation of the first Strategy and Action Plan. On the last range of country reports released on June 2019 by The European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), they state that the 2013-16 Drug Action Plan was subject to an internal multi-criterion evaluation.

The EMCDDA country reports emphasize the drug situation at the national levels, on a range of levels of analysis: national drug strategy and coordination, public expenditure, drug laws and drug law offences, drug use, drug harms, prevention, harm reduction, treatment, drug use and responses in prison, quality assurance, drug-related research, drug markets, key drug statistics at the national level and EU dashboard. They mention that the statistical data reported relate to 2017 (or most recent year). Although it creates the most updated image of the national drug situation and it may be a baseline for some indicators of the evaluation of the public policy, it doesn't represent a proper monitoring or evaluation of The National Anti-Drug Strategy (2013-2020) or of the two related Drug Action Plans (2013-2016) and (2017-2020), but it indirectly obliges the National Anti-Drug Agency to collect and submit data regarding the implementation stage of the Strategy and regarding the evolution of the quantitative indicators for evaluating the activities from the Action Plan.

The evaluation of the National Anti-Drug Strategy (2005-2012) was initiated by The National Anti-Drug Agency and funded by UNICEF. It was carried on by The Romanian Angel Appeal Foundation, in August-October 2012, in order to set the base for the next national strategy that should have covered the period between 2013-2020.

According to the Evaluation report, the process of data collection was based on two methods; the first method was the analysis of documents available in official statistics, activity and research reports provided by the Agency or other Romanian organizations, in legislative acts, official communications, web pages etc. The collection and analysis of qualitative data was the second evaluation method. The evaluation provider conducted focus groups and interviews with a wide range of stakeholders: service providers (private, public, profit and non-profit ones) for diminishing drug demand, teenagers from the overall population, parents, consumers of injectable drugs (men in detention, women and teenagers from the community), teachers, persons responsible for the implementation of the National Anti-Drug Strategy, local NGO's representatives and representatives of

international organizations that support the fight against drugs in Romania. The evaluation of the actions from the Strategy was carried on taking into account the evaluation criteria from the Development Assistance Committee of the Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD/DAC): relevance and fulfillment of objectives, development efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability (Austrian Development Cooperation, 2009) and <http://www.oecd.org/development/evaluation/dcdndep/47069197.pdf>).

The five criteria seem to be slightly inappropriate for public policy evaluation: they are originally designed to evaluate a wide range of aid interventions from programs to sector interventions or interventions supported by a donor agency in a country or state (Chianca, 2008). The OECD/DAC criteria are suitable for evaluating development assistance and are adopted as standards of good practice in evaluation (Peersman, 2014). The report of evaluation followed the main five dimensions of the Strategy and intended to stress the progress for each of them. The service provider for the evaluation pointed that it was difficult to conduct this ex-post evaluation, as the 2005-12 Drug Action Plan missed the component for evaluation. The recommendations were used as a closing loop in the ongoing process of designing the public policy on drugs.

The Romanian Court of Accounts Curtea de Conturi, 2015) provided another evaluation for the 2005-12 National Drug Strategy, as they had to relate the public expenditures to the results of the Strategy and its' Action Plan. Thus, they analyzed the effectiveness, efficiency and economic performance of the use of the resources from the national budget in order to reach the objectives from the National Anti-Drug Strategy. The methodology of the audit was comprised of the following procedures: the direct observation, the analysis of documents, the structured and semi-structured interviews, the questionnaires, the comparative analysis, in order to determine the evolution of some indicators and to analyze the level of fulfillment for the objectives. They concluded that the action plans for the implementation of the National Anti-Drug Strategy for 2005-2012 didn't have measurable indicators that could allow the evaluation of the degree to which the activities were fulfilled and the objectives were achieved. This was an error of the projection of the strategy.

The Romanian Court of Accounts also pointed in their report that The National Anti-Drug Agency didn't make a final evaluation of the strategy for 2005-2012, as they should have done, according to their attributions of coordinating and monitoring the implementation of the Strategy. Thus, at the end of the period of implementation, they couldn't know whether the objectives of the Strategy for 2005-2012 were reached or not. However, the Agency monitored the specific objectives with the aid of the National Report regarding the situation of drugs in Romania, monitored by EMCDDA.

Conclusion

Standardization of public evaluation process is a continuous challenge for both scientist and practitioners, as it would ease the evaluative work and it would set bases for comparative analysis. Governments should keep in mind the importance of the evaluation of public policy and should not be trapped by the temptation of using the results on political purposes (for undermining opponents).

Romanian evaluators should officially adhere to a set of principles and criteria for public evaluation and the Romanian government should strengthen their capabilities for public policy evaluation. Learning about the development stage of policies in specific fields allows institutions to transform into learning organization, where innovation is an active process and a necessary step for the desired progress.

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