

## Challenges for the Adoption of the Sustainable Development Perspective in Polish Evaluation Studies

### Problemy z uwzględnieniem perspektywy zrównoważonego rozwoju w polskich badaniach ewaluacyjnych

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#### Abstract

This paper aims to examine the extent to which the sustainable development (SD) perspective is integrated into Polish major evaluation projects and to discern the challenges for incorporating the SD approach in evaluation research and practice in general. It will also try to identify the methodological challenges related to the SD evaluation procedures in Poland. The paper will overview these issues on the basis of a complete database of evaluation reports concerning EU structural funds implementation in Poland as well as selected evaluation reports and expert opinions commissioned by the Polish Ministry for Regional Development. The adoption of the SD perspective in Polish evaluation studies is still virtually inexistent, despite some positive trends in the field of building the evaluation culture, which are supported by the requirements imposed by the European Union.

**Key words:** sustainable development, evaluation, Strategic Environmental Assessment, Poland, European Union

#### Streszczenie

Celem pracy jest określenie w jakim stopniu perspektywa rozwoju zrównoważonego jest obecna w głównych polskich projektach ewaluacyjnych, a także jakie problemy występują na drodze do szerszego wprowadzania rozwoju zrównoważonego w takich badaniach. Szczególną uwagę poświęcono kwestiom metodycznym. Podstawą do przeprowadzonej w pracy analizy jest pełna baza badań ewaluacyjnych odnoszących się do wykorzystywania w Polsce funduszy strukturalnych UE, a także wybrane raporty ewaluacyjne i opinie eksperckie przygotowane przez Ministerstwo Rozwoju Regionalnego. Przeprowadzona dyskusja wykazuje, że perspektywa rozwoju zrównoważonego w polskich badaniach ewaluacyjnych jest jeszcze słabo zarysowana, pomimo wspierania takich projektów przez UE.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Rozwój zrównoważony, ewaluacja, Polska, ocena oddziaływania na środowisko, Unia Europejska

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#### Introduction

Sustainable development has been defined as such development *that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs* (WCED, 1987; Etkins et al., 2008). Three generally recognized dimensions of sustainable development have been devised: ecological, social and economic. However,

the basis for them is moral reflection regarding humankind's responsibility for its environment and for the future generations. According to Artur Pawłowski (2008), we should also include technical, legal, and political dimensions.

The EASY-ECO project carried out under the aegis of the Research Institute for Managing Sustainability at the Vienna University of Economics and Business Administration attempted to identify the

usage, markets and institutionalization of sustainable development evaluations across countries. From a number of country studies performed under the project, some important lessons were learnt including:

1. Evaluation activities in the areas of structural funds and agricultural and rural development funds are often triggered by requirements formulated by international actors (e.g. the European Commission, United Nations agencies, such as the World Bank, or United Nations Development Programme, as well as national development aid agencies).
2. The EU legislation is a driver for the environmental impact assessment (EIA) and strategic environmental assessment (SEA) procedures.
3. National Sustainable Development Strategies, rooted in the Rio process, serve as common point of reference across Europe and often had a role in driving for SD evaluations (they often introduce mechanisms that oblige sectoral policies to undergo evaluations in order to better perform under the criteria of sustainable development).
4. Implementation of Local Agenda 21 (LA21) projects has become a major driving force for the development of SD evaluations at the sub-national level (Martinuzzi, 2002).

Most importantly, however, this research led to a belief that the culture of evaluation and the degree of institutionalization of evaluation differed strongly from country to country.

An absence of a wider public debate on the issue of sustainable development in Poland in the early 1990s does not mean that no efforts were undertaken in this direction. On the contrary, principles of sustainable development were gradually, yet decisively, implemented through reforms of public administration, which significantly changed Poland's socio-political system (Kostrzewa, Piasecki, 2009). Needless to say, the main driving force towards a greater inclusion of the principles of sustainable development in Poland's public policy was the decentralization reform of the public administration system, which was passed in 1998. Along with the internal reform of its administrative division in the late 1990s, Poland also embarked on intensive preparations for the EU accession. Not surprisingly, the concept of sustainable development, although not always mentioned directly, was further transplanted into Poland's public policy with the country's adoption of the EU regional policy (Reichardt, 2010).

The concept of evaluation came to Poland in the mid-1990s and is strongly associated with the country's compliance with the EU accession requirements. With minimal research experience in evaluation prior to 1989, Poland embarked on a journey towards building its own evaluation culture starting in the mid-1990s. The initial phase of the journey

was marked by such endeavours as defining theoretical concepts and finding adequate Polish equivalents for existing terms used in reference to evaluation research. Undoubtedly, the popularization of evaluation was a result of the participation of Polish public agencies and researchers in the EU-sponsored programs, first PHARE and other pre-accession funds, later structural and agricultural policies (Bryła, 2007) and their increased contacts with international evaluation policies (also through bilateral and multilateral development agencies such as the USAID and the World Bank). As a result of these contacts, Poland started producing its first home-grown evaluation specialists, mainly recruited from academic centres and universities but also private companies engaged in social research (Reichardt, 2010).

### **Challenges for sustainable development evaluation research and practice**

Sustainable development policy raises new challenges for evaluation. These challenges include the practical concern not to introduce a paralysis in policy-making by waiting to understand all possible direct and indirect effects, and the principal methodological challenge of comparing and weighting (explicitly or implicitly) disparate effects which may be expressed in different units. There is also the challenge of evaluating impacts, and their relation to policies, at different levels (global, international, national, regional and local) and at different spatial scales (Ekins et al., 2008). Internationally, evaluation capacity-building activities have mushroomed as demands have increased for government-funded programs to demonstrate that they are effective and efficient (Naccarella et al., 2007). The number of sustainable development evaluation methods has proliferated recently. However, they are often time consuming and expensive to conduct, making reiteration, a crucial part of assessing progress, an unappealing and difficult task. Making the results comprehensible and meaningful to the public is also challenging, yet essential if evaluations are to be translated into policy and action (Becker, 2004). Evaluations have become compulsory in many policy areas at various levels of governance. They are often placed within the context of the political decision-making cycle. They relate to the design of public policies, the ongoing monitoring, and the assessments of impacts and efficiency. This also holds for evaluation studies and actions related to SD. Evaluations have to become an integral part of a *sustainability management system*, which consists of agreed goals, operationalisation of concepts, implementation, and feedback. SD evaluation is thus not an isolated task to measure the effectiveness and impact of individual actions, but an organised feedback process for decision-makers in politics, business and society (Störmer and Schubert,

2007). Some clear challenges have been identified in developing sustainability indicators. First, there has been a lack of clear and simple frameworks for presenting the indicators. Second, developers of indicators have often failed to engage those who are intended to ultimately benefit from the indicators in the process. Third, many existing indicators remain unknown to the potential users due to failures to make them accessible (Hildén and Rosenström, 2008). Radojčić et al. (2012) have proposed a new approach that integrates many SD indicators into one, called I-distance.

Peter Hardi and André Martinuzzi (2007) have identified four major challenges for sustainable development evaluation research and practice:

1. The integration of the economic, social and environmental dimensions of SD requires complex assessment concepts, which need to encompass non-monetary and qualitative aspects, as well. Trade-offs between these dimensions have to be addressed.
2. The wide temporal and geographical horizon of SD requires integrated system models and reliable monitoring data. Time lags of interventions and system reactions, long-term risks and system dynamics must be taken into account.
3. Evaluations should be understood as a mutual learning process. SD evaluations constitute a key factor for institutional innovations and the establishment of an adequate institutional culture.
4. Stakeholder involvement is necessary in SD evaluations. Therefore, successful evaluators need not only sound scientific knowledge, but also complementary skills, demanded by the systemic and participative evaluation concepts.

The complexity of SD means that it is often difficult to evaluate and communicate the concept effectively. One standard method to reduce complexity and improve communication, while maintaining scientific objectivity, is to use selected indicators. Doody et al. (2009) proposed to utilize the Q-method for discourse analysis. The method sought to combine public opinion with technical expertise to create a list of technically robust indicators that would be relevant to the public. The strengths and constraints of various evaluation methods in SD projects with an emphasis on participatory evaluation have been analyzed by Rusdy Hartungi (2010). Frans Hermans and Luuk Knippenberg (2006) arrived at two main principles that might guide assessments for sustainable development, namely resilience and justice, and proposed the application of this framework within sustainability assessment processes based upon Participatory Integrated Assessment.

Paul Ekins et al. (2008) have introduced the concept and framework of a new model of regional sustainable development evaluation called the four-capital model, based on the analysis of the manu-

factured capital, natural capital, human capital, and social capital. All the different kinds of capital can only be identified as such from the flows of benefits to which they give rise. Where these benefits can be given a money value, then the value of the capital stock from which they derive is simply the net present value of the benefit flow over time. The benefits are no less real if they cannot be so valued, but obviously in this case the capital stock that gives rise to them will need to be described, and perhaps quantified, in a different way. There are many examples of benefits, and therefore of capital stocks (especially social and natural), to which it is difficult or impossible to give a monetary value. Different types of capital can of course also be combined to create new flows of benefits. An important question arises whether it is the total stock of capital that must be maintained, with substitution allowed between various parts of it, or whether certain components of capital are non-substitutable, i.e. they contribute to welfare in a unique way that cannot be replicated by another capital component.

SD is an extremely complex process, which makes it difficult to define specific goals. According to Störmer and Schubert (2007), it is preferable to understand this concept as postulating an evolutionary process. Social learning in the direction of more sustainability stimulated by public policy is indispensable. There are four basic strategies for the orientation of such learning processes: 1) reflection and dialogue to promote awareness of ecological, economic and social impacts of any policies and actions; 2) participation of citizens to strengthen the civil society and the readiness to get involved in politics; 3) conflict resolution and compromise in the direction of equity in resource endowment and social power; and 4) social innovation to create potentials facilitating the transition to SD. Sustainable development evaluation is not an isolated task to measure the effectiveness and impact of individual projects, but an organized feedback process for decision-makers in politics, business, and society. This should lead to enhanced accountability, transparency, and democracy. SD evaluations constitute a part of a *sustainability management system*. The integration between various policy areas postulated in the SD concept impedes the classical sectoral approaches and procedures in the public sector. The extent to which innovative ideas of cooperation are implemented is an important indicator of progress towards SD requirements. Two fundamental areas of SD evaluation can be distinguished:

1. Formulation and implementation of policies, programs, and projects, dominated by the requirement to establish objectives, set up an appropriate institution and organization, and ensure guidance of the relevant system and power for implementation.
2. Effects and impacts, the analysis of which must include the non-intended effects.

SD evaluations support rational decision-making, constitute an element in social learning processes and provide a vehicle for decision-makers to legitimize their actions.

According to Martinuzzi, Schubert and Störmer (2007), the following three areas of discussion concerning the incorporation of the SD approach into evaluation research can be distinguished:

1. The strategic level: evaluation as decision-making support (including such issues as evaluation culture building and stakeholder involvement).
2. The program and project level: evaluation as performance assessment.
3. The institutional level: evaluation as learning for institutional transition (incl. governance and participatory evaluation approaches).

### Investigation of the database of Polish evaluation studies

Despite an enormous progress in the development of the evaluation culture in Poland since our accession to the EU, the integration of the SD perspective seems still insufficient. In a database of all evaluation projects concerning the structural funds implementation in Poland, there are 410 records (Baza..., 2010). Each record concerns a separate evaluation project. There is a link to each report, which may be downloaded. We consider this as an important tool of transparency and a considerable improvement in the policy-making processes. Secondly, there is an indication whether this is an ex ante, ongoing or ex post evaluation. There are also data on the programme to which a given evaluation applies, time horizon, year of the study, commissioning and executing institutions.

However, the most interesting to us is the classification according to the predominant context of the study (table 1).

Table 1. The distribution of Polish evaluation studies according to their predominant context. Source: own calculations based: on Baza..., 2010.

The predominant evaluation perspective	Number of evaluation studies	%
1) regional and territorial development	85	20.7
2) good governance	131	32.0
3) human resources development	76	18.5
4) socio-economic development	21	5.1
5) innovativeness of the economy	51	12.4
6) environment	14	3.4
7) development and modernization of infrastructure	32	7.8
Total	410	100.0

This point includes the following categories: 1) regional and territorial development, 2) good governance, 3) human resources development, 4) im-

part of the National Cohesion Strategy on socio-economic development, 5) innovativeness of the economy, 6) environment, 7) development and modernization of infrastructure. In quantitative terms, the most common types of Polish evaluation studies include those oriented at good governance, regional and territorial development, and human resources development. The number of studies focussing on the ecological aspects of the adopted strategies and programmes is rather low.

It is worth noting that the term *sustainable development* is missing in this catalogue of evaluation perspectives. The evaluation reports are categorised according to the strategic thematic areas. They stem from the *Evaluation Plan of the National Strategic Reference Framework*, though it happens to be difficult to attribute certain multi-faceted evaluation studies to a given category. The classification is therefore based on the predominant evaluation context. Let us define briefly the logic of each type of evaluation studies distinguished in the database:

Ad. 1: Evaluation studies focused primarily on the territorial dimension of implementation of the *National Development Plan* (NDP) and the *National Strategic Reference Framework* (NSRF). They are aimed at assessing the impact of the programmes on regional and spatial development of the country and their contribution to regional, territorial, and social cohesion in Poland.

Ad. 2: Evaluation studies oriented at the impact of the adopted strategies on building public administration capacity and on the implementation of the good governance principle in the institutional system of public administration as well as on its ability to carry out tasks in the field of public policies efficiently and effectively. The processes of policy implementation are subject to evaluation, with an emphasis on the quality of coordination and cooperation of the involved institutions and their capacity of programming, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating development measures.

Ad. 3: Evaluations that aim to assess human resources development and the income of NDP and NSRF on improving the quality of human capital. Particular attention is paid to the impact on improvement of the education level of the society and of the quality of education on the reduction of unemployment level, increasing the employment level and promoting entrepreneurship.

Ad. 4: Evaluation studies that aim to provide a comprehensive assessment of the impact of NDP and NSRF on the Polish economy. They focus on the analysis of the influence on economic growth acceleration, employment growth as well as socio-economic and territorial cohesion. One of the major instruments of such studies is the macroeconomic assessment carried out with the use of econometric modelling.

Ad. 5: Evaluation studies concerning the effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, utility and sustainability

(in the sense of permanence) of instruments of NDP and NSRF and their consequences for the development of innovativeness of enterprises and the whole economy. They assess the economic and financial instruments adopted within enterprises and measures oriented at the development of the institutional business environment supporting competitiveness and innovativeness. Essential aspects of such evaluation studies concern issues related to the Research and Development processes and development of the information society.

Ad. 6: Strategic Environmental Assessments. They are specific in focusing on the potential impact of programmes, projects, or measures on the natural environment. The SEA of the NSRF will be discussed in more detail below.

Ad. 7: Evaluation studies that assess the impact of the development and modernisation of the technical and social infrastructure within the NDP and NSRF on the socio-economic development of Poland, in particular on enhancing the attractiveness of the country for investors. Such evaluations assess intervention in the field of transport, environmental, informational, social and energy infrastructure, including the impacts of projects co-financed by the EU funds on the natural environment.

Therefore, the approach adopted in the classification reflects the general lack of the sustainable development context in Polish evaluation studies. They tend to focus only on separate aspects of SD, and an integrated approach seems to be missing. Certain aspects of the SEA procedure may be considered as an element of integration of the SD assumptions (Haładyj, 2006), but there were no evaluation studies in the database that could be described as fully-fledged SD evaluations.

Apart from this quantitative analysis, we tried to identify the presence of the SD perspective in the Polish evaluation studies by examining the kind of language used in their titles. It turned out that the term *sustainable development* was virtually inexistent in the titles of evaluation studies included in the database.

One exception was a few studies related to the Operational Programme for Fisheries, but only because the official name of the programme included this term.

A second notable exception was the *Manual of Good Practices for Sustainable Development*, which was worked out to facilitate implementation of the Regional Operational Program for Zachodniopomorskie Voivodeship for the years 2007-2013 (*Poradnik...* 2008). The main objective of the Manual was to identify which practices for sustainable development will better contribute to coordination and stimulation of development processes in the region, taking into account economic, environmental and social aspects and bearing in mind that they should pose the least threat to the environment, not hamper the economic growth and

not increase the poverty margin. The Manual contains examples of good practices in particular categories of projects of *Regional Operational Program for Zachodniopomorskie Voivodeship* and shows how to build regional potential for using these funds for promotion of sustainable development. However, it has to be admitted that it is not an evaluation study, though it is included in the database.

Therefore, this second procedure of examining the titles of evaluation studies confirmed our conclusion drawn on the basis of the analysis of the predominant perspective as defined in the database.

### **Strategic Environmental Assessment of the National Strategic Reference Framework**

The Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) of the draft *Polish National Strategic Reference Framework (NSRF)* for 2007-2013 was commissioned by the Ministry of Regional Development and performed by a team of experts from the Environment Protection Institute (Błaszczuk *et al.*, 2006: 4-12). The forecast aimed to identify environmental impact categories and to verify the conformity of the NSRF with current requirements and needs in the field of environment and sustainable development (explicitly mentioned in the analysed document) as well as to propose solutions susceptible of eliminating or reducing any deficiencies of the strategy. NSRF is a strategic programming document developed on the basis of the *National Development Strategy for 2007-2015*, focussing on the implementation of the EU cohesion policy by Poland. NSRF concerns measures undertaken by the Polish government to foster sustainable economic development, competitiveness growth and higher employment. Moreover, NSRF serves to ensure effective and efficient support for regions lagging behind and social groups endangered by exclusion and to help restructure problem industries and regions.

The SEA was made using the objective-led appraisal method. This method is recommended in the *EU Handbook on SEA for Cohesion Policy 2007-2013* and it had been tested in Poland in the Framework Strategic Environmental Impact Assessment of the *National Development Plan for 2004-2006*. This method aims to incorporate ecological aspects into the structure of the document subject to assessment. The policy and methods of taking into account environment protection goals and objectives are analysed.

Strategic assessments are performed for documents characterised by a very high degree of generality, making use of such categories as: goals, principles, priorities and types of measures to be taken. They become more concrete only in more detailed programmes of a lower level, and especially in individual projects. Therefore, the analysed factor having an impact on the environment may consist of

features/parameters of the whole economy and society on a given, usually substantial, area (sometimes features of selected economic domains or social groups) as well as a plan aiming to change these features/parameters and their possible effects. The element susceptible to the impact of economy and society in such assessments is the environment of the whole country or region, which due to its immense territorial coverage, is likely to be highly diversified. Under these circumstances, any forecast (strategic assessment) is faced with the dilemma of serious shortages of information, as both the factors influencing the environment and the elements of the environment which are influenced are not defined very precisely. Therefore, knowledge gaps and fields of uncertainty largely stem from the specificity of the SEA of strategic documents.

Having adopted the methodology of an objective-led appraisal, the evaluation team worked out the following plan to prepare the SEA:

- 1) To analyse the contents of the NSRF, including its principal goals and links to other documents.
  - 2) To define the fundamental, crucial for NSRF and up-to-date ecological problems and objectives concerning the environmental situation in Poland, Europe, and world-wide, based on an analysis of the most important Polish and international strategic documents in this field, formulating the diagnosis of the ecological situation and main goals and priority actions for the future.
  - 3) To define – on the basis of the above analysis – environmental issues and objectives, which should constitute assessment criteria, taking into account the initial research questions provided by the institution commissioning the SEA.
  - 4) To analyse the completeness and relevance of the diagnosis and of the SWOT analysis.
  - 5) To analyse the internal coherence of the document together with the adopted indicators for assessing its implementation, as there is no doubt that the coherence, clarity and lack of ambivalence of the NSRF will largely determine the efficiency of its implementation process, including the ecological impacts.
  - 6) To forecast potential trends of changes in the field of environment in Poland in the counterfactual situation of not implementing the evaluated strategy (zero option).
  - 7) To assess the environmental impacts of goals, assumptions and directions for action adopted in the NSRF, in particular to analyse their relationship with the adopted assessment criteria, to identify ecological issues left out from the analysed document (especially the diagnosis) and to identify the direction, strength and character of the correlations.
- 1) To prepare the preliminary version of the final SEA report and submit it to the commissioning institution.
  - 2) To take into consideration received comments.
- The main part of the SEA was performed with the use of a relationship matrix linking the assessment criteria with the NSRF objectives. A 7-point scale (from +3 to -3) was adopted. On the basis of the relationship matrix as well as reading reflections and team discussions, the evaluation team prepared a description of identified potential influences of the NSRF on the environment, taking into consideration shortages of the diagnosis and adopted indicators of implementation.
- The following uncertainties (difficulties, knowledge gaps) linked either to the specificity of strategic assessments or to the contents of the analysed document were identified by the SEA team:
1. The analysed version of the NSRF contains very few indicators of reaching its objectives. Their selection method and target values do not guarantee an adequate incorporation of environment protection aspects.
  2. The evaluated document was subject to frequent modifications, extensions and changes during the short period (about 2 months) when the SEA was being prepared, which made it difficult to carry out a systematic analysis of its content.
  3. The analysed document does not show clearly enough the logical causal flow between the presented diagnosis, analysis of strengths and weaknesses and the proposed development strategy, which prevented an appropriate assessment of their environmental impacts.
  4. The document lacks clear information on the zero option (the hypothetical situation in which the NSRF would not be implemented at all), although the described development scenario referred to this alternative.
  5. Due to time limits imposed on the authors of the SEA, they had to use the set of criteria elaborated for the needs of the evaluation of the *National Development Plan 2004-2006*, only with necessary adaptations.
  6. The time constraint reduced significantly the possibility of consultations in the process of the SEA preparation.
  7. The simultaneous preparation of Operational Programmes while the final version of the NSRF was still unavailable may result in certain inconsistencies between these documents.
  8. There was a lack of reference in the document under study to tasks and measures to be implemented in the same period as the NSRF, but in the framework of other strategies, programmes and projects concerning the whole country. In particular, there was no information which weaknesses will be addressed by other documents and to what an extent their imple-

mentation will support the measures undertaken according to the NSRF.

The evaluation team estimated that the potential influence of the NSRF implementation on the environment is:

1. Highly ambiguous – beside positive impacts, multiple negative effects are possible, and it is impossible to say which impacts will prevail in concrete cases, even if the general outcome seems to be rather beneficial.
2. Subject to a high level of uncertainty – taken into consideration the lack of sufficiently precise information, it was necessary to make certain assumptions, which may turn out wrong.

The SEA criticised the NSRF for:

1. excluding environmental issues from the strategic goal of the NSRF;
2. not referring to these issues (e.g. ecological awareness, negative environmental side-effects of certain actions, preferences for environmentally-friendly activities etc.) in the description of detailed objectives;
3. not mentioning certain essential environmental problems in the diagnosis and SWOT analysis;
4. insufficient differentiation of the directions of planned activities depending on different development predispositions of Polish regions (the predominant approach was universalistic with indicators referring to EU averages of data for EU-15);
5. problems with internal coherence of the NSRF document;
6. focusing on *end-of-pipe* solutions (i.e. curing symptoms or effects), and not on preventing problems and eliminating or limiting their causes.

The evaluation team complained that environment in the NSRF tends to be treated in a very traditional way as:

1. A sectoral and not horizontal issue, which would require concerted actions in all spheres of life (not only infrastructure, but also micro- and macroeconomics, education, public administration, civil society etc.).
2. A difficulty/barrier to development, and not as one of the factors contributing to development (no less important and valuable than human capital, financial resources, fixed assets, technology and research potential).
3. An element which requires special care and protection because of legal constraints, especially international commitments of Poland, and not because of the fact that it is a rational approach in the well understood interest of the present and future generations.

The evaluators stated in the SEA that sustainable development issues were practically absent from the NSRF, as both the strategic goal and horizontal detailed objectives did not refer directly to the environment or to the SD.

### Challenges identified by the National Evaluation Unit

The National Evaluation Unit situated in the Polish Ministry for Regional Development identified the following challenges facing the evaluation process in Poland:

1. Providing arguments for the discussion on the future shape of the cohesion policy.
2. Making use of the evaluation tool in the process of preparation and implementation of national policies not related to the EU.
3. The coordination of the cohesion policy evaluation with the Common Agricultural Policy evaluation processes.
4. A stronger connection between evaluation and programme management.
5. The use of evaluations to allocate the reserve of execution.
6. Dissemination of evaluations at a lower level of governance, including at the project level.
7. A rapid development of the potential to commission and absorb evaluations at the regional level.
8. Further developments in the methodology of evaluation studies.
9. The use of meta-evaluations to provide a comprehensive assessment of the cohesion policy implementation.
10. Carrying out of ex post evaluations for the former programming period.
11. Evaluation of issues related to territorial cohesion.
12. More active participation of academic circles in the growing market for evaluation services;
- 13) a wider use of evaluation results (Bienias *et al.*, 2008: 63-67).

Therefore, this list of challenges also lacks the term *sustainable development*.

Ad. 1: The discussion on the future cohesion policy has already commenced. It may be expected that there will be more and more critical voices on the part of net contributors to the EU budget. They will concern effectiveness and efficiency of programmes co-financed by the EU structural funds. There is a serious threat of reducing future support from the EU budget. Therefore, the Polish National Evaluation Unit believes that the task of evaluation is to provide solid arguments in favour of the implemented policies. At the same time, certain weaknesses of the current policies must be disclosed by the evaluations in order to build arguments on the future assumptions of the post-2013 EU cohesion policy. The interest of Poland includes stronger orientation of the EU policy on development. That is why evaluations should emphasise not only positive effects of the structural actions for Poland, but also for the *old* EU-15. This is especially relevant due to the observed shift in the paradigm of the support from cohesion and equalisation of

opportunities towards development and competitiveness. It is worth noting that Poland – because of the scale of EU funds engaged – may be treated as a kind of laboratory for the whole EU cohesion policy. That is why quality of programmes implemented in Poland will impact heavily on the prospective scale and shape of the EU cohesion policy.

Ad. 2: There is a widely recognised weakness of Polish administration in the field of strategic programming. Draft strategies and programmes often lack such fundamental elements as budgets, quantified objectives, specified implementation system, monitoring and evaluation requirements. It is absolutely crucial to transfer best practices resulting from the implementation of EU programmes to other public policies undertaken in Poland. This positive spill-over of structural funds on national policies is a frequently underestimated benefit of the EU cohesion policy in the new Member States. This kind of transfer constitutes nevertheless a great challenge, especially in the field of evaluation, as it is one of the most innovative and demanding tools used to improve the quality of governance. What is essential is consequence in building an appropriate potential inside the public administration as well as persuading the decision-makers to make use of this instrument in their respective areas of competence. Legislative measures to make evaluations obligatory would be welcome.

Ad. 3: One of the conditions of effectiveness of measures undertaken in the field of the Common Agricultural Policy and the cohesion policy is their synergy and complementarity. The close relationship of the CAP with the regional policy gives rise to the need for co-ordinating the evaluation processes of the aforementioned policies. The National Evaluation Unit, which is situated at the Ministry of Regional Development, aims to co-operate with its counterpart in the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Ad. 4: The length of the EU financial perspective – 7 years plus 2 additional years for implementation according to the n+2 principle – encourages changes in operational programmes as an indispensable instrument of management. A lack of proposed modifications could be considered as a certain deficiency in public management skills due to the dynamics of the socio-economic situation, taking into account the recent financial and economic crisis in Europe as well as other factors. We must bear in mind that it is the role of evaluations to provide justification for modification proposals within the operational programmes. Otherwise, the European Commission may refuse to modify the documents. Taking into consideration the time requirements of evaluation studies, it is necessary to incorporate evaluations in the current process of public intervention management. Evaluation should serve to diagnose potential changes in the programming

documents and to adjust the programmes to real and dynamic needs.

Ad. 5: Poland, as one of few member states, decided to maintain a performance reserve. It was set at the level of 3% of funds dedicated to the Convergence Objective. It will be allocated after evaluating the performance of implementation of operational programmes. Its role is to strengthen the most effective and efficient priority axes. What is crucial is that its allocation should depend on evaluation studies, and not only on the financial aspects and simple absorption capacities. The assessment, should be based as much as possible on real effectiveness and efficiency of the intervention as well as the quality of implementation of the programmes.

Ad. 6: A great challenge for the evaluation process is a decentralization of the system stimulating the development of evaluation culture at lower levels of implementation, including at the level of individual projects. Although there is no formal requirement to carry out evaluation studies at the project level, such behaviours should be promoted as an important tool of managing the EU structural funds. It is particularly relevant for big infrastructural projects, as they determine the success of the programme.

Ad. 7: Polish administration bodies operating at the regional level in the form of self-governments have been made responsible for the management of regional operational programmes as well as certain measures within the national operational programme Human Capital. Therefore, the marshal offices (regional self-governments) need to order and use evaluation studies for this kind of programmes. Their previous experience in this filed had been rather limited, so it is crucial to create an appropriate potential of the evaluation units at the regional level. The Ministry of Regional Development supports these officials by trainings in the field of evaluation.

Ad. 8: The reliability and quality of evaluation studies is one of the key factors determining their effective use. Obtaining reliable study results constitutes a real challenge, especially if the net effect of the cohesion policy needs to be singled out. More rigorous measurement methods need to be adopted, including a wider use of control groups. High credibility of the evaluation study results is also very important from the perspective of discussions on the future cohesion policy. One of the recommended solutions is a more common use of macroeconomic models, which enable a holistic assessment of impacts of the cohesion policy. Preferably, there should be several independent macroeconomic models concerning the same problem, as it was the case with the EU 4<sup>th</sup> Cohesion Report.

Ad. 9: The number of available evaluation studies continues to grow, and its dynamics will increase in the near future. At the level of the *National Devel-*



opment Programme/National Strategic Reference Frameworks, so many evaluation studies have been conducted to date that it is more and more possible to use an instrument called meta-evaluation. We define it as using the results of previous evaluation studies for the purpose of conducting a current evaluation study. More comprehensive and representative conclusions can be drawn thanks to meta-evaluation techniques.

Ad. 10: Although it is the European Commission that is responsible for ex-post evaluation of the 2004-2006 programming period, it is advisable to commission these studies at the national level, as well. It would enable to adjust the scope of the studies to the needs of Polish administration in order to better allocate the performance reserve and the quality of implementation of the structural funds in the current programming period. Such a move would also have its political implications. Thanks to it, Poland would be perceived in the EU-15 (and especially by the net contributors to the EU budget) not only as the greatest beneficiary of the EU policies, but also as an actor caring about their effectiveness and efficiency.

Ad. 11: The concept of territorial cohesion has been introduced as one of the dimensions of the cohesion policy, alongside social and economic dimensions. Territorial impact assessment has recently gained attention as a tool to improve the coherence of sector policies with territorial cohesion objectives (Golobic & Marot, 2011). European experiences in the field of evaluating the territorial dimension are limited. We lack widely accepted indicators and methods in this domain. One of the notable exceptions is the ESPON research programme. It has been running since 2002. Its aim is to equip politicians and practitioners with systematic, up-to-date and comparable knowledge on trends in territorial development of Europe and on the impact of implemented policies on regions and rural areas.

Ad. 12: The quantity of available funds for evaluation studies grows very quickly in Poland. In the programming period 2004-2006, it was about 15 million PLN (1 PLN = *circa* ¼ EUR) at the disposal of the National Evaluation Unit and all the managing institutions. For the financial perspective 2007-2013, these funds amount to almost 190 million PLN. Therefore, the funding available for evaluation studies has increased six-fold (without adjustment for the length of the period). The number of commissioned evaluation studies rises even faster, as at the regional level, these are mainly small and medium-sized studies. This process must be followed by the evaluation market, taking into account the expectations for better quality of evaluation as well. In Poland, the most active actors on the evaluation market are consulting companies. The involvement of universities and research institutes is rather limited compared to other European countries. A more active participation of higher

education institutions and research institutes in the process of conducting evaluation studies could on the one hand increase the supply of such services and on the other – improve their quality. Especially lower-value commissions may be addressed to this kind of institutions, as the outdated administrative structure of most universities often fails to overcome the cumbersome tender procedures for bigger projects. There have been several cases when universities participating in tenders for evaluation studies were rejected because of failing to fulfil the formal requirements, in spite of good quality substance of their proposals.

Ad. 13: Extending the use of evaluation study results and improving their usefulness constitute major challenges facing the whole evaluation process. Even in countries with long traditions of evaluation, institutions responsible for it have to put in a lot of effort so that their recommendations be followed in practice. The extent to which evaluation study results are used, is determined by many elements: adjusting the subject and scope of the study to real needs, quality and reliability of the study, getting the results at the right moment and putting them through to the decision-makers. Poland, with a relatively short history of the evaluation culture, faces especially important challenges in this regard.

## Conclusion

The adoption of the Sustainable Development perspective in Polish evaluation studies is still virtually inexistent, despite some positive trends in the field of building the evaluation culture, which are supported by the requirements imposed by the European Union. The predominant evaluation perspectives tend to focus only on selected dimensions of the SD. One of the reasons may be shortage of demand for this kind of evaluation studies. Secondly, the potential of firms preparing evaluation studies commissioned by the Polish authorities may be insufficient to perform this task, taking into account the growing (quantitatively) demand for various specialised evaluation studies as well as the relatively weak involvement of representatives of higher education and research institutes in the processes of evaluation.

## Acknowledgements

The support of the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education is acknowledged (research grant no. N N114 301938). An earlier version of this paper was presented during EASY-ECO 2010 conference on Sustainable Development Evaluations in Europe, Brussels, 17-19 November 2010.

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