

Sixth European Conference on Evaluation of Cohesion Policy

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to be here in Warsaw today and to manifest my support for the important work you are doing. It has taken us some time to get where we are today with the evaluation of the European cohesion policy. In our journey we have been accompanied by a lot of expectation, many institutions and committed experts have been involved. And this conference is about what I appreciate so much in the progress of cohesion policy making which is sharing with others, learning from each other and disseminating good practise. What we share is also the will to make policy work better. My major concern is how to make the results of your reflexion reach in the right moment the right people.

This is a change when decision on the reform of delivery system of cohesion policy is taken, we will be better informed on what works what does not work. I would like to thank you for your contribution.

For the last five years as Commissioner for Regional Policy and now as a Member of the European Parliament, I have been hands on involved with cohesion policy. And I understand the vital importance of being able to demonstrate what the policy has achieved. And it is not only because the policy absorbs one third of the Community budget that we must be concerned with its impacts and whether or not it is achieving its objectives. Evaluation is crucial to any public policy making. And it is not only the context of the forthcoming review of the budget, which makes this focus more crucial than ever. It is the scale and scope of challenges Europe is facing that makes us responsible for the most efficient use of available resources.

I know that the room is full of the best experts but allow me to say that for me the role of evaluation is to provide us with evidence on the performance of the policy. In the European Parliament I chair the committee concerned with regional policy. Recently, I asked DG REGIO to come to our Committee and present first findings of the ex post evaluation of Objectives 1 & 2, 2000-2006. The members of the Committee found this extremely interesting and we want to have further discussions as more evaluations are completed. In particular we welcome the approach of evaluating thematically, so that we have evidence of the performance of the policy across the different sectors and themes. Impressive as the results of

macro models are, as politicians we are perhaps more interested in understanding what is being achieved in relation to different areas of the policy. Is the policy having the impact on the ground which we anticipated? What is working well? What is working less well and how can impact be maximised? This is what should get through to decision makers.

MEPs, while impressed with the volume of what has been achieved with cohesion policy resources, we were also somewhat concerned that the evaluations conclude that there is a weakness in the strategic focus of the policy. This implies that the policy could have had a greater impact, if resources were more concentrated and there was a stronger focus on results. This is a concern for us. But as a former commissioner I remember well that strategic focus was a priority for 2007-2013. I remember our additional effort to secure focus on Lisbon through earmarking. We don't know yet how post evaluation will judge these effects. It is a real challenge to continue a strong strategy and allow for flexibility on the ground that would make policy better and effective. How evaluation can cope with this double nature of strategic focus.

The evaluations confirm that we have a nearly exclusive focus in the policy debate on audit and control issues. While these are important, it is only one and perhaps for the broad public the least interesting aspect of the policy. I want to know what we are achieving and why. Good evaluation

can play an important role in redressing this imbalance in the political debate.

The positive message is that evaluation is delivering the evidence which can equip us to make informed decisions on how to improve the policy programme and management now and how to design it in the future. I believe that today cohesion policy is well placed facing into the budgetary review because there are no other community policies which are evaluated as intensively.

But just because we have evaluations doesn't mean that they all deliver evidence. We all know evaluations hundreds of pages long which remain unread and unused, sitting on the shelf and gathering dust because they don't tell us anything new. Let's be honest – evaluations like that are of no interest and really are a waste of money. That is why it is so crucial to have conferences like this one. There is also another risk - the evaluation can be used against the policy which is evaluated while alternative policies are not.

In your debate you have devoted a lot of attention to methods. The focus on methods is important, therefore, not because we want to impress others with our technical knowledge, but because we want to find out what is working in our policy and why. The methods are not an end in themselves. But they can give us methods new knowledge and new insights.

Evaluation does not replace political debate on policy. But it is providing evidence which feeds into a political debate. This should happen at all governance levels of cohesion policy – at EU level, at national level and at regional and local level. But this will only happen if we have evaluations which are interesting: based on robust methods, delivering credible evidence and generating new knowledge that we can debate.

I understand that yesterday and today you have discussed and debated methods from a range of different angles. Some of the workshop titles intrigue me. I was particularly interested in the idea of incentives for better performance. As a non-specialist in evaluation, I was also interested in the idea that evaluations should tell a story. There seems to me to be real challenge to integrate methods which can be quite technical with the idea of narrative. However it is important that evaluations convince - which comes as much from the story-line as from the technical method. And I am also interested in the idea that we move beyond an exclusive focus on GDP.

The challenge now must be to turn the talking about methods into real evaluations of real policies as they impact on the ground. There must be a role for the Commission, but first of all it is a task for you, the managing authorities, evaluators and Member States. I can assure you that there is an eager audience in the European Parliament for the results of your evaluations.

I hope you would share my opinion that discussions during policy review should be based on evidence and not on anecdote or opinion or as Piotr said - myths. Of course it is not possible to evaluate all the interventions of the policy. We have to be selective. But I do believe that by building up a picture of the effectiveness of carefully selected elements of the policy, we can arrive at good judgement of overall policy effectiveness. Selectivity allows to concentrate and look for evaluators with very specific knowledge, and to go more in-depth. We can be more credible. Professionalism and expertise of evaluators matter, so do methods applied. I remember my first hearings on results of ex post 2000-2006 evaluation and how grateful we were to our critical friends from academia.

I was told you were frank, generous and constructive in sharing your thoughts and argumentation. It is the shortest way to better policy.

Thank you very much for your attention.