

# THE PRACTICE OF EVALUATION OF EU PROJECTS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN POLAND

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## **Abstract**

**Background.** This paper discusses a process of development of evaluation practice at the local level of self-government in Poland. The author raises the question whether the current practice of evaluation of the projects co-financed by the European Union contributes to building of the evaluation capacity and development of sustainable evaluation culture in Polish local administration.

**Research aim.** The aim of this study was to analyze the conditions of application of evaluation of the EU projects in communes and counties in Poland, i.e. to examine the scale of evaluation practice, methods of its application, evaluation functions, and factors favouring or limiting development of this practice at the local level.

**Methodology.** The study was based on a review of literature on evaluation and evaluation capacity building. In the conducted field research complementary quantitative and qualitative methods and techniques were used: computer assisted telephone interviews with representatives of 25 counties and 125 communes in four Polish provinces, in-depth interviews with representatives of 13 local governments, and an analysis of relevant documents.

**Key findings.** The current process of implementation of the EU funds in Poland has contributed to the development of an evaluation practice at the local level of self-government only to a limited extent. Evaluation is regarded primarily as a formal requirement associated with implementation of EU grants (as accountability instruments), which does not promote evaluation capacity building in the local administration in Poland. The main barrier to the practice of evaluation at the local level is a lack of knowledge about evaluation and a low level of internal motivation for its use. Financial constrains are also important obstacles.

**Keywords:** evaluation, EU projects, local governments.

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## INTRODUCTION

A requirement of evaluation of interventions financed by EU funds has contributed to substantial increase in practice of evaluation in the Polish public administration in recent years. The EU rules and recommendations have been important incentives to use evaluation in order to appraise programmes and projects. For the public sector in Poland it has also been an opportunity to build evaluation capacity, to transfer evaluation practice to other areas of public policy, thus to develop a durable evaluation culture.

The current dynamic development of evaluation practice in Polish administration can be observed mainly in institutions at central and regional levels which are responsible for implementing operational programs co-financed by the EU funds, which involves mandatory evaluations of those programmes. Studies, most of which focus on the regional level of administration, confirmed the considerable increase in evaluation practice mainly in the context of the use of the Structural Funds (Januszkiewicz, 2014; Kupiec, 2014). This paper attempts to answer the question of whether that process also concerns the administration of local governments, which are among the largest beneficiaries of the EU funds. The research carried out by the author is the first one conducted on a large scale in Poland. A similar study on evaluation practice at a local level was realised only in one of the Polish provinces (Grzywa, Łukasiewicz, Perek-Białas & Worek, 2008).

In general the EU Cohesion Policy encourages institutional changes supporting the modernisation of Polish administration and new approaches to the management in the public sector, especially those in line with the concept of multi-level governance. This concept, which was formulated on the basis of the Cohesion Policy after the 1989 reform, became a model of management of public policies in the European Union (Chrabąszcz, 2015). It assumes transparent, open and inclusive policy-making, based on participation and partnership (which involves relevant public and private stakeholders) in order to foster policy efficiency and coherence and to promote budget synergies between all levels of governance (Committee of Regions, 2014). It is understood as a process of respecting competences, sharing responsibilities, and cooperating between various levels of governance. In Poland it seems that the influence of the Cohesion Policy on the development of the

multi-level approach concerns only those institutions (or even internal units of institutions) directly involved with the implementation of the Structural Funds, with limited transfer of new solutions to other parts of public administration (Kozak, 2015).

The author's research was based on the premise, adopted according to literature and international research, that evaluation carried out under the influence of 'external pressure' or requirement (e.g. within the framework of implementation of the Structural Funds) is only a factor initiating a practice of evaluation in a given country or region, which may or is not able to contribute to durable practice and evaluation culture. It depends, among other things, on how evaluation is implemented and what are its perceived aims and functions.

First, evaluation as an instrument increasing efficiency and effectiveness of the public sector is presented. Next the results of research, conducted in local governments in four Polish provinces, are discussed. They concern conditions of utilization of evaluation of the EU projects in communes (*gmina*) and counties (*powiat*) in Poland, and in particular, the scale of practice of evaluation, methods of using evaluation, functions of evaluation, and the factors that contribute to or limit the development of this practice. In addition, the author reflects on the potential influence of the current practice on evaluation capacity building and development of sustainable evaluation culture at the local level. Basing on the research findings and literature on the subject, the author recommends actions in order to encourage local administration to use evaluation.

## EVALUATION AND ITS APPLICATION IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

### Concept and functions of evaluation

Evaluation is a systematic and objective assessment of the value and the quality of planned, on-going or completed interventions (e.g. projects, programs, policies), conducted in order to determine the relevance of intended objectives and the level of their achievement, utility, efficiency, effectiveness and the impact of undertaken activities, and sustainability of results (OECD, 2002). It is a study which observes the scientific rigor of research (i.e. by using properly selected research

methods and reliable data). From research in a strict sense, evaluation is distinguished by an element of assessment of a given intervention, made on the basis of previously adopted criteria, and it is followed by formulation of recommendations and instructions on the basis of that assessment (Gubba & Lincoln, 1986).

Rist compared the importance of evaluation for the public sector to the role played by the market mechanism for the private sector (Rist, 1999). In the private sector, success is measured by profit and competitive advantage in the market. Public organisations lack such a mechanism of verification. Perhaps a more relevant parallel was formulated by Picciotto, who compared evaluation in the public sector to audit and accountancy used in the private sector (Picciotto, 2013). Evaluation delivers standards for appraisal of results in the public sector. Evaluation may be used to assess and improve the quality and the value of public interventions, thus the effectiveness and the efficiency of the public sector itself (Shaw, Greene & Mark, 2007). Evaluation is used for better justification and planning of interventions, appraising of their results and drawing conclusions for the future (Patton, 1997; Rossi & Lipsey, 2004; Olejniczak, Kozak & Ledzion, 2008). It is the instrument which facilitates evidence-based and rational decision-making on allocation of public funds. The purpose of evaluation is to improve implementation and effectiveness of interventions, rather than to draw responsibility for their failure (which distinguishes evaluation from control or audit).

Evaluation has three general functions in organisations of the public sector (Chelimsky, 1997). It is used to measure effects of public activities and to demonstrate them to those who allocate funds (*accountability perspective on evaluation*). Evaluation measures the value and the quality of interventions, their results, the relevance in relation to the needs and problems, the effects in relation to the funds involved. Evaluation can also contribute to the increase of transparency of public organisations, provided that the results are publicly available and disseminated.

Evaluation provides objective evidence which allows assessing the value and the quality of the intervention, examining the nature of social and economic problems, as well as verifying the effectiveness of various methods of solving them (*knowledge generation perspective on evaluation*) (Chelimsky, 1997). Olejniczak described evaluation as a process of production and use of knowledge in organisations (Olejniczak, 2008). Evaluation provides objective, reliable, and useful knowledge which supports, most of all, the decision-making process

in management of public affairs at different levels. It is also valid when we consider the role of evaluation from a broader perspective in different models of state organisation. Raczkowski placed knowledge and wisdom at the heart of his postulated model of the harmonic triad (i.e. idea of the welfare state, deregulation, and intervention) in democratic state management in the twenty-first century (Raczkowski, 2016). He particularly stressed that the added value of this model lies in the possibility of using the society's collective knowledge.

Implementation of evaluation contributes to organisational development in public institutions through improvement of management and supporting development of a learning culture (*development perspective on evaluation*) (Olejniczak, Kozak & Ledzion, 2008). Learning in organisations occurs in the result of evaluation, especially if the process is participatory in nature and the results of the evaluation are actually used (Torres & Preskill, 2001).

The features and functions of evaluation described above constitute strong arguments in favour of evaluation as an instrument of efficiency and effectiveness in the public sector.

## **Development of evaluation practice and culture**

Based on the research conducted in 21 countries Furubo, Rist, and Sandahl concluded that the development of practice and culture of evaluation was usually introduced as a result of internal or external "pressure" and the states which introduced evaluation as a result of internal motivation often reached a more mature and lasting evaluation culture (Furubo, Rist & Sandahl, 2002).

In many countries (e.g. United States, Canada, UK, Sweden) evaluation was introduced to the practice of public administration as an integral part of reforms aimed at the modernisation of the public sector. The role of evaluation and methods of its use in those countries evolved with the adoption of successive paradigms of management in the public sector (Olejniczak & Ferry, 2008). Within the traditional approach to administration, evaluation served only as a tool to measure and describe public interventions. Along with reforms, based on the concepts of neoclassical public administration, evaluation started to explain the cause-effect relationship between interventions and achieved effects, thus it gained more explanatory and judgmental functions. Next reforms introduced a spirit of managerialism, which incorporated

techniques and tools used in the private sector to the public sector management (including results-based management). That approach increased the role of evaluation as the useful instrument which provided managers of the public sector with specific recommendations for the implementation of programs and policies. In the reforms based on the concepts of the New Public Governance and the Good Governance, evaluation gained additional functions in supporting accountability, transparency, and participation in the public sector activities.

Those countries which started and developed evaluation practice as a result of internal motivation were characterised by certain features that Furubo, Rist and Sandahl recognised as favouring development of the evaluation culture: a democratic system open to public debate, rational approach to problem solving, promoting institutional efficiency, having a tradition of public intervention, particularly in the areas of education and social policies, as well as a sectoral approach to the implementation of socio-economic programs (Furubo, Rist & Sandahl, 2002).

In the majority of the countries studied by Furubo, Rist, and Sandahl the reason for the introduction and development of evaluation was the ‘pressure’ from outside. International organisations, e.g. World Bank, OECD, and the European Union, require evaluation of programs and projects as a condition for granting financial support (Picciotto, 1999). International organisations promote the use of evaluation as one of the key instruments of modern public management, influencing institutional capacity of the beneficiary countries and ensuring effective use of financial assistance (Mackay, 1999; Rist, Boily & Martin, 2011). However, according to Furubo, Rist, and Sandahl, in countries forced to use evaluations by external factors, the practice was usually less mature and less permanent (Furubo, Rist & Sandahl, 2002).

The requirement of evaluation of the programs co-financed by the Structural Funds of the EU also had an important impact on the development of the evaluation practice in many European countries (Bachtler, 2001). In some countries, the obligation of evaluation was treated as one of the formalities imposed by EU bureaucracy, which was usually abandoned with termination of financial support. For others, the implementation of this requirement had become a good opportunity for the development of evaluation practices in their public administration. An example of such approach can be observed in Ireland, which started to build evaluation capacity in response to the EU requirements, and then continued the development of the

evaluation practice in the framework of internal reforms of the public sector (Boyle, 2005).

Regardless of the motives for initiating evaluation to the practice of the public sector, its effective application and development require an appropriate evaluation capacity (Januszkiewicz, 2012). According to Boyle, Lemaire, and Rist, it includes: human, financial, and material resources necessary for the implementation of evaluation, the existing evaluation practice, appropriate organisational arrangements, as well as the institutionalisation of the evaluation process (Boyle, Lemaire & Rist, 1999).

The institutionalisation of evaluation should be understood here as a formal incorporation of evaluation functions and activities in an organisation or system. The important factor in this respect is the location (anchoring) of evaluation in the structures of the system. In case of a state, the question is in which branch of authority evaluation should be located: executive, legislative, or outside of those branches. In most countries, evaluation functions are located in the structures of executive power (e.g. Canada, United Kingdom). Legislative authorities rarely take evaluation functions, executing them rather through the supreme audit institutions. Mayne, Divorski, and Lemaire claim that the location of the evaluation within the executive branch can contribute mainly to improvement of the implementation of programs and policies, but it does not guarantee a proper assessment of their results and impact, nor to a sound allocation of public funds. These issues are best evaluated from the outside, by institutions to which the executive branch accounts for its results. However, in this case there is a risk that in the parliament evaluation can be used for political purposes. As Raczkowski stresses in the organisation of a modern unitary state legislature seems to be rather political and lobbied authority (Raczkowski, 2016). The evaluation function can be placed in several places, taking into account the different motivations and needs. In the US evaluation is anchored in both branches, executive by governmental agencies and legislative by its auditing institution (General Accounting Office) (Boyle, Lemaire & Rist, 1999). Another possible solution is evaluation realised by academic institutions and non-governmental organisations. The choice depends largely on how the essential functions of evaluation are perceived and the balance within the tripartite division of authority of the state.

From a more functional point of view, adequate resources and skills are required in order to commission and use evaluation (*the demand*

*side of evaluation*) and in order to conduct evaluation research (*the supply side of evaluation*). The realisation of evaluation research also contributes to the development of evaluation capacity, increasing knowledge and expertise within a given organisation. However, the existence of evaluation practice does not guarantee the development of a sustainable evaluation culture. Intentional and focused efforts are required to build the evaluation capacity, tailored to a given organisation, program, or country (Stockdill, Baizerman & Compton, 2002). In literature, it is assumed that strengthening of demand for evaluation in the public sector is the key prerequisite and starting point for building the evaluation capacity (Mackay, 2006). The most important factors are, above all, human, organisational, and financial resources. Equally important is understanding of and the attitude to evaluation of the staff or members of the organisation, and hence their active involvement in its use. While knowledge and skills can be developed through training, it is much more difficult to change the attitude and commitment of people. They must be convinced of the benefits of evaluation in order for the capacity to be fully utilised. Evaluation capacity building is also influenced by the type of functions that evaluation fulfils (for what purpose it is used), and the organisation of evaluation activities within the organisation or system (who decides about it, who implements it and who uses its results) (Mayne, Divorski & Lemaire, 1999).

## **The study on the practice of evaluation of EU projects in local governments in Poland**

### **Objectives of the study and research methods**

The main objective of the study, conducted by the author, was to analyse the conditions of application of evaluation of the EU projects in the local self-governments in Poland, namely in communes and counties. The term 'EU project' is understood here as any project co-financed by the budget of the European Union (i.e. Structural Funds, funds for rural development, and various EU programs). In order to achieve this objective, the following specific objectives were formulated:

- analysis of the scale of evaluation of the EU projects in local governments;
- examination of the way evaluation is used by local governments (what are the objectives, types and evaluation methods, evaluation use);

- identification of the functions, which evaluation plays in the functioning of local governments;
- identification of factors that influence positively or negatively the practice of evaluation in the local governments.

The study used complementary quantitative and qualitative methods and research techniques. In May 2013, the author conducted a pilot survey and direct interviews with representatives of local administration offices of the Lodz Province, which allowed for identification of the preliminary findings, but also for verification and elaboration of the research tools for further investigation (Januszkiewicz, 2013). The proper study was conducted in 2015 and 2016 in four provinces: Lower Silesian, Kuyavian-Pomeranian, Lublin, and Lesser Poland\*. The research included:

- conducting of 150 computer-assisted telephone interviews with employees involved in the implementation of the EU projects in 25 counties and 125 communes (Table 1) (by AT Research company in December 2015);
- in-depth interviews with representatives of 13 local governments (in 10 communes and 3 counties) in order to deepen the interpretation of the data collected in CATI interviews (in 2015 and 2016);
- analysis of documents and existing data in order to obtain detailed information on the evaluations carried out in selected local governments.

**Table 1.** Composition of the research sample

Province	Commune		County	
	Number of communes in the province	Number of communes in the sample (%)	Number of counties in the province	Number of counties in the sample (%)
Lower Silesian	169	28 (17%)	30	9 (30%)
Kuyavian-Pomeranian	144	30 (21%)	23	4 (17%)
Lublin	213	32 (15%)	24	6 (25%)
Lesser Poland	182	35 (19%)	22	6 (27%)
Total	708	125	99	25

Source: own elaboration.

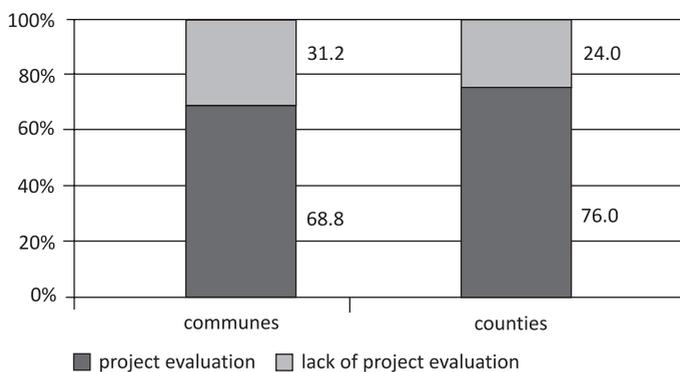
\* The study was conducted with the financial support under a grant of the Dean of the Faculty of Organisation and Management, Lodz University of Technology in 2015.

## The scale and methods of implementation of evaluation of EU projects in the studied local governments

The results in individual provinces do not vary significantly. Differences in the practice of evaluation existed, however, between communes and counties. Therefore, the average values for those two types of local units in the four studied provinces are presented below.

The results of the telephone interviews indicated a fairly high level of evaluation practice in the units of local government in Poland. The majority of respondents, namely 68.8% of the representatives of communes and 76% of counties, declared conducting evaluation of the EU projects (Figure 1). More than 25% of them declared evaluation of all projects and 34% of most of them.

Those results should be interpreted with caution. In-depth interviews showed that the respondents had quite a different understanding of the notion of evaluation. Sometimes they recognised single evaluation techniques, e.g. conducting a survey among the participants of the training, as the evaluation of the whole project (it concerns mainly the European Social Fund interventions). Others thought that for evaluation it was enough to collect information about the results of the project (in the final report).



**Figure 1.** The practice of evaluation of EU projects in the studied local governments (% of respondents)

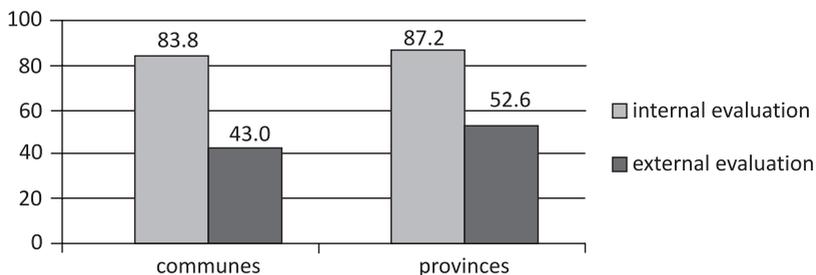
Source: own elaboration.

In a similar study conducted in Lesser Poland province in 2008, 42% of local government officials responded positively to the question

whether they conducted evaluation (systematic assessment) of programs, strategies, etc., and 37% declared carrying out evaluation of the projects co-financed from the EU funds (Grzywa, Łukasiewicz, Perek-Białas & Worek, 2008, pp. 65–67). The authors of the study, basing on in-depth case studies of selected communes, considered those declarations to be overestimated because of relatively loose interpretation of the concept of evaluation, as well as the low level of knowledge about the evaluation in local governments. Since then knowledge about evaluation in local governments has probably increased. It is still, however, quite low, which has been confirmed by the present study (please, refer to the description below). Therefore, it is difficult to provide the precise data on the scale of the evaluation practice (understood in line with the adopted definition of the OECD) and it would require more in-depth studies. It should be noted, however, that more and more local governments undertake evaluation-type activities in the framework of the EU projects implementation.

The scale of the declared evaluation practice increases with the number of the EU projects implemented by the local governments. However, it is not affected by the size of the local government, nor the organisation of the project management in offices (e.g. the existence of a separate organisational unit for management of the EU projects in the office's structure).

The predominant form of declared evaluation of the EU projects is an internal evaluation (Figure 2). In most units, namely 83.8% of communes and 87.2% of counties, evaluations are carried out by office personnel or persons involved directly in the implementation of the project.



**Figure 2.** Type of evaluation in the studied local governments (% of respondents)

Source: own elaboration.

The main disadvantage of internal evaluation is a risk of lower objectivity and of lack of independence of evaluators (Scriven, 1991). The biggest advantage of this kind of evaluation is, however, better knowledge and understanding of projects and better access to information. It usually translates to better adaptation of the evaluation research to the information needs of the organisation and to greater use of its results. In addition, the internal evaluations promote evaluation capacity building and learning culture in organisations (Januszkiewicz, 2015). However, for most of the studied local governments, evaluation activities were not motivated by the internal need for information (please, refer to the description below). It is, therefore, hard to expect that the practice of internal evaluation resulted in the above mentioned benefits in the studied units.

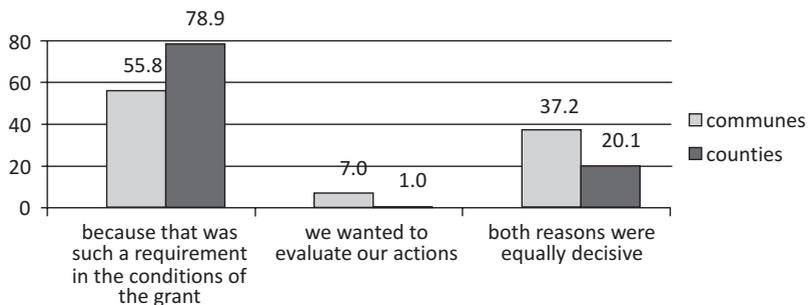
On average, in 44.8% of the units, the implementation of evaluation was also entrusted to external experts (in communes – 43%, in counties – 52.6%). In practice, evaluators are selected in a public procurement procedure. The advantage of external evaluation is the independence of evaluators, which should encourage a more objective judgement (Scriven, 1991). Moreover, evaluations carried out by external experts are usually characterised by greater professionalism of conducted studies and higher quality of conclusions and recommendations (in accordance with international standards). It should be noted, however, that in practice the prevailing price criterion in the selection procedure of the best evaluation offer may be the reason for the low quality of evaluation results. The declared level of implementation of the external evaluations can be considered as a more reliable measure of the general level of evaluation practice in the studied local governments.

The utility of evaluation is usually decided by the degree and way of use of its recommendations. The respondents assessed the usefulness of conclusions and recommendations from the evaluations of the EU projects at the average level: in communes 3.8 and in counties 3.7 (on a scale of 1–5, where 1 – not useful at all, 5 – very useful). The level of practical use of evaluation results by the authorities is difficult to estimate because of the lack of access to data that would allow verification of the declarations. The authorities themselves do not keep such records. In in-depth interviews, respondents declared that the conclusions of the evaluations were used primarily to summarise or verify project outcomes and to better plan the next projects. At

the same time they admitted that they served a rather small circle of employees and people involved in the implementation of the EU projects.

### The functions of evaluation in the studied local governments

The main function of evaluations of the EU projects in studied local governments was accountability to institutions managing of the EU funds. The representatives of the communes and the counties confirmed that the most common motivation was the requirement to carry out evaluation due to the rules and conditions of the EU grant (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** The reasons (motivation) for the evaluation of EU projects in the studied local governments (% of respondents)

Source: own elaboration.

Only a small percentage of units declared the need for evaluation resulting only from internal motivation.

The dominant accountability perspective on the function of evaluation was also confirmed by the declared objectives of individual evaluation studies. Most respondents indicated such objectives as (Figure 4): the need for appraisal of the achieved results of the project (87.2% of communes and 94.7% of counties) and the need of settlement of the grant (64% and 36.8% respectively).

The second function of evaluations, although not used to the full extent, was knowledge development. On average, over 20% of the respondents indicated that the purpose of the evaluation was to verify the effectiveness of different solutions, but only 6.7% of them indicated the desire to better understand the issues in the area within which the project was implemented as the main reason of evaluation. The third

function of evaluation, organisational development, was taken into account by local units in a very limited way. Only an average of 15.7% of respondents indicated improvement of the project management as the aim of the evaluations.

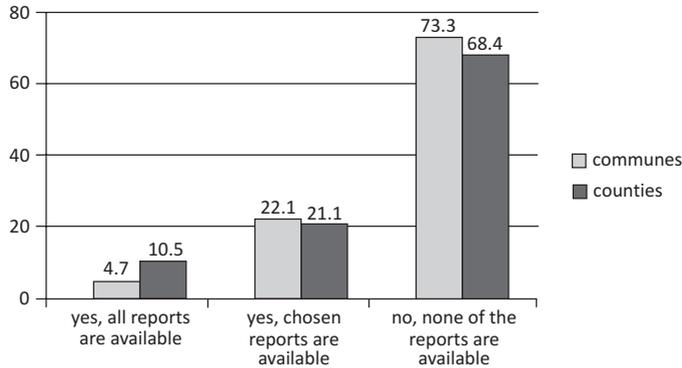


**Figure 4.** The objectives of evaluations of EU projects in studied local governments (% of respondents)

Source: own elaboration.

The predominant function of the evaluations did not translate into increased transparency in the studied local governments. It should be emphasised that the majority of the units (91.3%) usually provided information about the effects of the projects. It was connected with the formal requirement to promote the EU projects. However, the results of the evaluations (reports, recommendations, etc.) were not publicly available in most of the units (Figure 5).

This was also confirmed by the analysis of documents available on the websites of the self-government offices. In addition, the author encountered considerable difficulties in the direct access to documents relating to evaluations in selected offices. It is in contrast to the practice of administration at the central and regional levels, involved in the implementation of operational programs co-financed by the Structural Funds. All reports from the evaluation of those programs are available on the websites.



**Figure 5.** Public availability of evaluation reports of EU projects in the studied local governments (% of respondents)

Source: own elaboration.

It is also worth considering whether the organisation and implementation of evaluation of the EU projects corresponded to the accountability function of the evaluations, adopted in the majority of the studied local governments. One of the key issues in this regard is who and at what organisational level determines, implements, and/or uses the evaluation (Mayne, Divorski & Lemaire, 1999). In order to serve as an accountability tool, evaluations should in principle be decided by controlling bodies (e.g. the commune council or the county council), rather than the executive branch of government. In addition, a better solution is to locate the tasks of evaluation at a higher level of the organisation's structure. It allows for a greater coordination of evaluation activities and for taking into account broader issues by evaluations (Sönnichsen, 1999). The use of external experts is also preferable for this type of evaluations. In contrast, the implementation of evaluation in the studied units, which was based on internal evaluation, undertaken at the lower organisational level, by people involved in the implementation of the projects directly, corresponds rather with the use of evaluation as an instrument in support of project management (planning, implementation, etc.).

### The evaluation capacity in the studied local governments

Evaluation capacity, i.e. an ability to conduct and use evaluation, is a prerequisite for the effective development of the evaluation practice in any organisation. It includes: human, financial and material resources,

necessary for the implementation and use of evaluation, as well as appropriate organisational solutions. In the study, the assessment of the evaluation capacity of the local governments was limited to the question about the level of knowledge and skills among the staff. The employees who dealt directly with the execution of the EU projects declared the level of knowledge of evaluation, its objectives, and application, at an average of 3.4 on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 – lack of knowledge, 5 – a high level of knowledge). In direct interviews, the respondents confirmed that they assessed their level of knowledge about evaluation as insufficient. In particular, they pointed to the lack of knowledge and experience in the planning and implementation of evaluations in practice.

They also stressed that the level of knowledge about evaluation and its functions among other office workers, not directly involved in projects, including decision-makers, was rather low. This was confirmed by the pilot survey carried out in the Lodz Province in 2013, in which the respondents also included secretaries and members of the Management Boards of communes (Januszkiewicz, 2013).

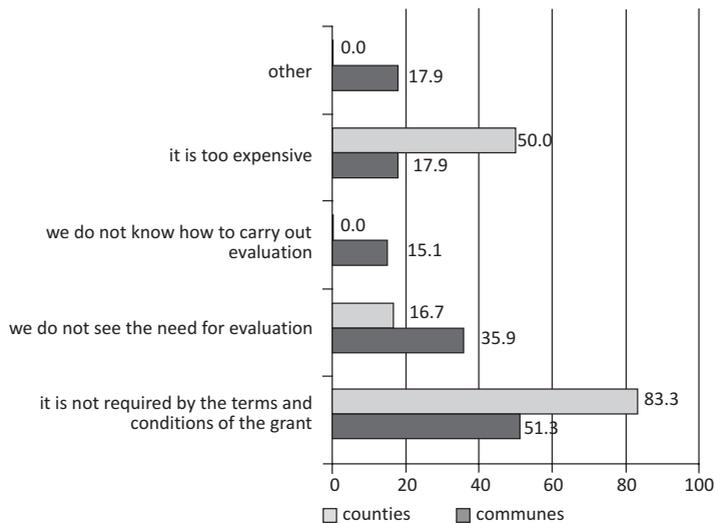
## **The barriers of evaluation of EU projects in local governments**

The research did not allow for an analysis of all the factors affecting the development of the evaluation practice in local governments in Poland. Such an analysis would require the identification of the factors arising from the conditions of functioning of the public administration (legal, organisational, connected with organisational culture, etc.) and the factors stemming from the conditions of implementing of the EU projects. Below the respondents' opinions about the barriers to the development of evaluation practice and barriers to the implementation of the evaluation research are presented.

The respondents who declared a complete lack of evaluation of the EU projects in their units, most often gave as the reason the lack of a formal requirement to conduct evaluation (Figure 6). It confirms the low level of internal motivation to the practice of evaluation in the local governments.

As the biggest barrier to the development of evaluation practice in their units the respondents indicated the lack of necessary resources: organisational, human, and financial (Figure 7). The majority of them (56.8% of commune and 48% of counties) pointed out the lack of time

as one of the biggest barriers. Project management is often dealt with by individuals or small groups, who are usually burdened with other duties. Another important barrier for evaluation practice was the low level of a general knowledge about evaluation in units, as well as the low level of skills in the use of evaluation in practice. Considering the fact that the majority of evaluation activities were realised internally, by office staff, the problems associated with insufficient resources significantly restricted the evaluation practice in those units.



**Figure 6.** The reasons for the lack of evaluation of EU projects in the studied local governments (% of respondents)

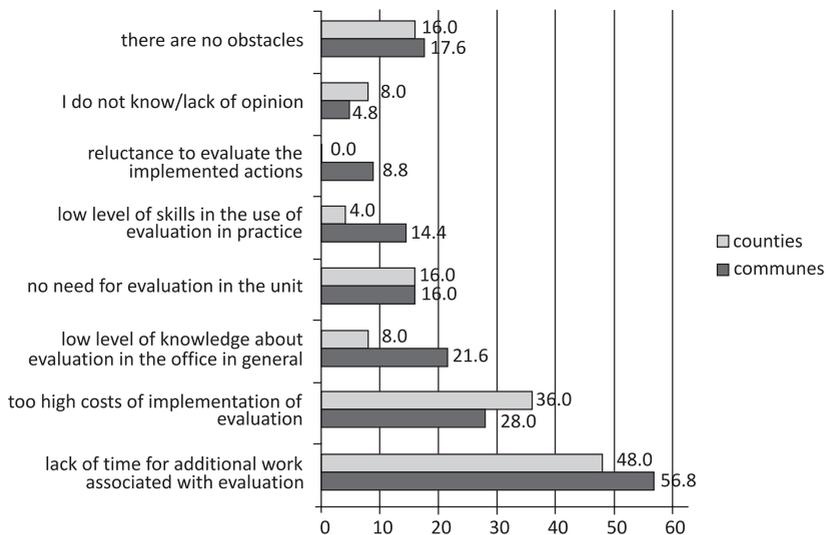
Source: own elaboration.

Similar difficulties and limitations in the implementation of internal evaluations in public administration also affect units at a regional level in Poland. Although it is acceptable to conduct internal evaluations of the regional operational programs, the external evaluations are usually used. It is because of the EU/national guidelines, which recommend the use of external evaluations (as more objective). Only single attempts of internal evaluations were undertaken by regional authorities. They, however, faced barriers related to insufficient human resources to implement evaluation, lack of knowledge in the area of advanced methodology of evaluation of programs and organisational problems (inadequacy of internal administrative procedures for the implementation of research-type projects in the offices) (Jankowski, 2010).

The evaluation experience of the self-governments in Polish provinces (Marshal's Offices) indicates that the initial stage of evaluation capacity building in the administration should be based mainly on external evaluations. However, the studied local governments had implemented predominantly internal evaluation activities, which with limited resources, especially in knowledge of the subject, was not conducive to high-quality evaluation research and the use of its conclusions.

Financial constraints in local governments might have been a major barrier to commission external evaluations more often. Although the cost of evaluation of an EU project may be covered by granted resources, the respondents indicated too high costs of evaluation as one of the main obstacles to the evaluation practice (28% of communes and 36% of counties).

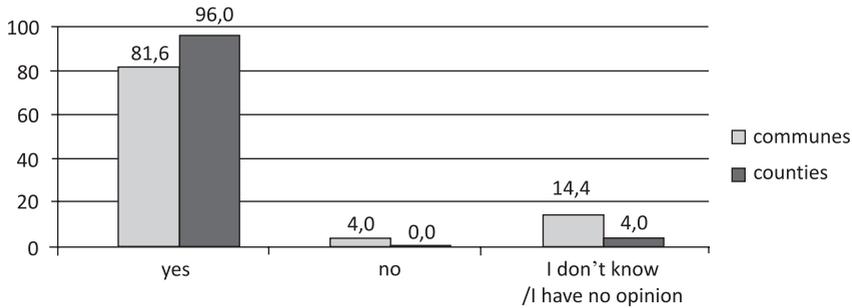
The problem of the lack of awareness and knowledge about evaluation among office employees, and in particular among decision-makers, was mentioned in the in-depth interviews as the most important barrier. According to the respondents the reason for this is that evaluation was treated as a 'procedure' required by the terms of the grant agreement or the EU recommendations, and not as an instrument that could be useful for the unit itself.



**Figure 7.** Barriers to implementation of evaluation of EU projects in the studied local governments (% of respondents)

Source: own elaboration.

The factor supporting the development of the evaluation practice was a general positive attitude towards evaluation of staff dealing with the EU projects. The overwhelming majority of respondents gave an affirmative reply to the question whether the evaluation can be useful for local governments (Figure 8).



**Figure 8.** The answer to the question whether evaluation can be useful for local governments (% of respondents)

Source: own elaboration.

The approach of local governments to measurement and appraisal of their actions also seems to be positive. Although the study did not include this issue in more detail, it is worth noting that over 40% of respondents confirmed that their units carried out activities, other than evaluation, that were designed to appraise the effectiveness of the implemented projects, programs, and strategies (giving the examples of such activities). The question of the actual approach of local governments in this area requires, however, a more in-depth study.

## SUMMARY

The current process of implementation of the Structural Funds in Poland has contributed to the development of the evaluation practice at the local level of government only to a limited extent. The low level of knowledge about evaluation, especially among decision-makers, is the main barrier to the development of the evaluation practice. Evaluation of the EU projects is treated primarily as a formal requirement, associated with the settlement of the grant.

The key problem seems to be how to encourage local administration to use evaluation. One solution might be to impose a formal obligation

to carry out evaluations of the EU projects. The dynamic development of the evaluation practice in the Marshal's Offices is a proof that imposing a formal requirement is a good starting point to initiate such a practice on a large scale. However, imposed requirements may be considered as an additional burden (organisational, financial) for the local administration. Instead of formal requirements, a number of different incentives can be used (e.g. additional resources for the use of evaluation) (Toulemound, 1999). Securing of financial resources for the evaluation of a project in the framework of the EU funds seems to be a prerequisite of further development of the evaluation practice at the local level.

The initiated practice of EU project evaluation can contribute to the developing of the evaluation capacity as well as increasing the knowledge and experience associated with it. However, an intentional, targeted, and systematic effort to build the evaluation capacity in the local administration should be undertaken. Bodies that could become the initiators and coordinators of such activities in the regions are, for example, the Marshal's Offices (e.g. evaluation units of regional operational programs), already having experience in this field.

The above presented findings indicate that the main barrier in the practice of evaluation at the level of local self-government is the lack of knowledge of what evaluation is and how it can serve the effective functioning of the local public administration, as well as how it can contribute to the increase of the local economic and social welfare in general. This applies particularly to the key decision-makers at the local level, for whom evaluation is to be a helpful tool. Training and promotion measures should address this group in particular. Otherwise, the practice of evaluation, treated as the procedure for the implementation of the EU funds, will be given up with the expiry of the EU's support.

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# PRAKTYKA EWALUACJI PROJEKTÓW UNIJNYCH W SAMORZĄDACH LOKALNYCH W POLSCE

## Abstrakt

**Tło badań.** Artykuł podejmuje temat rozwoju praktyki ewaluacyjnej na szczeblu samorządowej administracji lokalnej w Polsce. Autorka zadaje pytanie, czy obecna praktyka związana z wdrażaniem projektów unijnych sprzyja budowaniu zdolności ewaluacyjnych i trwałej kultury ewaluacyjnej na szczeblu lokalnym.

**Cel badań.** Celem badań było określenie uwarunkowań zastosowania ewaluacji projektów unijnych w gminach i powiatach w Polsce: określenie skali praktyki ewaluacyjnej, sposobów stosowania ewaluacji, funkcji, jakie pełni ewaluacja, a także określenie czynników sprzyjających lub ograniczających rozwój tej praktyki.

**Metodologia.** Badania oparto na przeglądzie literatury przedmiotu. Wykorzystano uzupełniające się ilościowe i jakościowe metody oraz techniki badawcze: wywiady kwestionariuszowe w 25 powiatach i 125 gminach w czterech województwach, wywiady pogłębione z przedstawicielami 13 samorządów lokalnych oraz analizę dokumentów.

**Kluczowe wnioski.** Dotychczasowy proces wdrażania funduszy strukturalnych w Polsce przyczynił się do rozwoju praktyki ewaluacyjnej na poziomie samorządów lokalnych jedynie w ograniczonym stopniu. Ewaluacja jest traktowana głównie jako wymóg formalny, związany z rozliczeniem dotacji unijnej (funkcja rozliczeniowa ewaluacji), co nie sprzyja budowie zdolności ewaluacyjnych i rozwojowi praktyki. Główną barierą w praktyce ewaluacji na szczeblu lokalnym jest brak wiedzy o ewaluacji oraz wewnętrznej motywacji do jej wykorzystywania. Dużym problemem są również ograniczenia finansowe.

**Słowa kluczowe:** ewaluacja, projekty unijne, samorzady lokalne.