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**Key topic:**

**Policy Learning and SD evaluations: Learning through SD evaluations.**

**This is a draft in need of further work. Comments welcomed**

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### **Evaluation utilization in multi- institutional contexts.**

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#### **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to analyze and assess the use of evaluation findings after conducting a participatory evaluation. For that, we focus on our experience in the mid-term evaluation of the Rural Development Plan (2000-2006) in the Basque Country. In this evaluation, our main hypothesis was that stakeholder participation would increase evaluation significance, ownership and utilization. Following this premise, once the evaluation report was written and disseminated amongst the actors who took part in the evaluation (stakeholders and local and regional institutions), we undertook specific research aimed at an assessment about the use of evaluation findings and processes. The research tools used for searching this purpose was conducting a survey amongst those participants combined with in- depth interviews to key informants.

After reviewing the obtained information, the paper analyses how relevant the evaluation was for stakeholders and regional and local institutions. The utilization of evaluation findings and processes were assessed according to four areas of influence: a) information generation, b) knowledge generation, c) oriented action (improving the program), and d) oriented policies (improving rural policies in the Basque context). The results achieved has given the opportunity to draw lessons lead to improve participatory evaluation practice in multi- institutional context so as to increase our knowledge on evaluation utilization.

## 1. Introduction

Within the framework of the Structural Funds, the rural development policy, “second pillar” of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is the main financial tool for implementing the European Union’s strategic policy for the sustainable development of rural areas in Europe. The Rural Development policy provides funding for all European Member States on a mayor scale for programs which develop and regenerate the socioeconomic rural areas in Europe. The rhetoric surrounding rural development policy emphasized decentralized, participative delivery, and a territorial and multi-sectoral focus, a relatively new and unfamiliar principle for the CAP.

In the Basque Country, this rural development policy was first compiled under the Rural Sustainable Development Plan (PDRS) length from 2000 to 2006. The PDRS was elaborated with the aim of improving the living conditions of rural population. Together with this goal, the plan also integrates other concerns related to the modernization of agricultural holdings, companies settled in rural areas as well as agri- environmental and forestry maintenance.

At the end of 2001, the Department of Agriculture of the Basque Government, as the body responsible for the Plan, asked the University of the Basque Country to undertake the design of an evaluation system that would allow intermediate and ex post evaluations of the PDRS to be carried out in line with the Community Structural Funds legislation (Regulations (CE) 1257/99 and 1260/99).

A work process was thus set in motion with the remit of improving the quality and social utility of regional development policy evaluations. To meet such an objective, the evaluation team decided that a participatory evaluation model should be used, to encourage and extend public use of the evaluation findings and process<sup>1</sup>. Their choice signified a break with preceding evaluation culture<sup>2</sup> and a commitment to design a socially useful evaluation, both for regional institutions involved in rural development management and for the rural community itself. Having adopted this new focus, the evaluation team set out to create an evaluation capable of meeting the following targets:

1. To satisfy the European Commission's requirements for the information necessary in order to make a global assessment of the results obtained from plans co-financed by the European Agrarian Guarantee and Guidance Fund (EAGGF).
2. To produce results that would constitute useful pointers for the Basque administration when taking decisions regarding rural development policy.
3. To democratise the evaluation and thus make it transparent.
4. To increase the utilisation of evaluation results within our area of intervention.

In order to achieve these goals, our first task was to design the methodological Guide for drawing up the intermediate and the ex post evaluation of the PRSD of the Basque Country 2000-2006. The process lasted over a year, from October 2001 to December 2002, and was also accompanied by a complete review of follow-up indicator systems. Our second task was to carry out the 2000-2002 intermediate evaluation, which took place during the whole of 2003. Finally, in May 2004 a series of presentations were organised in order to disseminate the

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<sup>1</sup> We agree with Weiss (1998) when saying that “the best way that we know to date of encouraging use of evaluation is through involving potential users in defining the study and helping to interpret results, and through reporting results to them regularly while the study is in progress” (Weiss, 1998: 30)

<sup>2</sup> This evaluation model breaks new ground in evaluation practice in our context because, up until now and apart from rare exceptions, evaluations of regional development policies have been carried out only to comply with Structural Funds regulations. As we have been able to observe during the course of this work, the results of these evaluations were not disseminated and had no repercussions on fund managers, who had no knowledge whatsoever of reports on previous evaluations.

evaluation report amongst a wider audience. These presentations provided the opportunity to distribute a semi- structured questionnaire to the PDRS stakeholders with the purpose of collecting suitable information that would enable us to analyse the relevance, quality and utility of our evaluation.

During this whole long process, we wished to secure the active participation of the various of the actors involved, as a necessary element for strengthening the usefulness of the results, because, like other authors (Patton, 1997; Cousins and Withmore, 1998; Burke, 1998; Forss et al., 2002), we believe that stakeholder involvement in the evaluation process leads to increased utilisation of evaluation results. At the same time, we attempted to familiarise them both with the evaluation process and the results in order to contribute to expand a culture of evaluation, since a better “understanding of the benefits of being involved in an evaluation process clearly indicates progress in evaluation thinking” (Valovirta, 2002: 64).

This paper is divided into three main parts which includes all the questions studied and presented above. The first part describes the reference context of the mid- term evaluation of the PDRS 2000-2006, where new and broader areas of intervention and new actors involved in the plan and its evaluation are emerging. In the second part, the evaluative approach is explained. Finally, the last part analyses how significant the evaluation was for stakeholders and regional and local institutions, basing our findings on a specific survey using questionnaires and in-depth interviews. The use of evaluation findings and processes was assessed in relation to four areas of influence: 1) information generation; 2) knowledge generation; 3) oriented actions (improving the programs) and 4) oriented policies (improving rural policies in our country).

## **2. The mid- term evaluation reference context.**

The growing importance of regional and rural policy and the necessity for cohesion within the strategic priorities of the European Union, together with the increase in the budget devoted to co-financing structural activities in regions with socioeconomic development problems, have all served to strengthen the need to bring about greater transparency in the use of public funds and to guarantee the efficiency and efficacy of the resources distributed through the Structural Funds.

Thus, the European Commission (EC) concern to establish systematic evaluating practices has been channeled through hard work in two simultaneous and complementary directions. In the first place, the Structural Funds Regulations increasingly called for evaluations<sup>3</sup>. Secondly, methodological work was centered on the harmonization of concepts and the extension of evaluation practice, backed up by a specific programme, which had been available since 1994: the MEANS<sup>4</sup> programme (Methods for Evaluating Actions of a Structural Nature) aimed at improving methodologies for evaluation, generating a global framework for the evaluation of structural interventions and at contributing to enhanced quality in evaluation of the Funds.

In addition, some specific features of the PDRS mid- term evaluation are going to influence the approach to evaluation in terms of both issues and methodologies. These aspects relate the variety of objectives pursued, the multiplicity and heterogeneity of actions and the plurality of actors involved in the programming and implementation of policies.

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<sup>3</sup> The Regulation 1260/1999 clearly and unequivocally established that the evaluation was legally integrated into the regulatory mechanism of the Funds.

<sup>4</sup> After MEANS (with a second edition in 1999) the Commission in coordination with of the Tavistock Institute elaborated in 2003 a new updated resource for the evaluation of socio- economic development programmes: The GUIDE.

### *2.1. The mid- term evaluation*

Within this context, focusing on the rural development policy, the document elaborated by the EC under the STAR Committee<sup>5</sup> “*Guidelines for the mid-term evaluation of rural development programmes 2000-2006 supported by the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund*” (DOC STAR VI/43517/02), becomes a reference guidance essential for the carrying out of mid -term evaluations.

As the document indicates, the aim of the mid- term evaluation, to be undertaken at the equator of the programme, is to ensure the quality, utility and value for money of this segment of the evaluation, becoming this evaluation a means to improve the quality and relevance of the programmes and their implementation, and to identify reorientations to the programming that may be needed to ensure the achievement of the original objectives.

In order to achieve these goals, the mid- term evaluation, while covering the evaluation questions raised in the Guidelines Document, would in particular examine the initial achievements, their relevance and consistency with the rural development plan and the extent to which the targets have been attained. Together with these issues, it also assesses the use made of financial resources and the operation of monitoring and implementation gathering a rational use of those resources. To put it briefly, the mid- term evaluation main goals are as follows:

- To address the existence of regulations and mechanism possibly necessary for the right implementation of the programme,
- To attend to the clarity and adequacy of responsibilities for the implementation (management, consultation, control etc.),
- To adequate the monitoring system to the implementation and evaluation needs.
- To increase the efficacy and efficiency of the actions evaluated.

### *2.2. A new rural policy: the Rural Sustainable Development Plan 2000-2006*

The image people from outside have of the Basque Country is one an very industrialized area, yet within the territory of this region there are rural areas affected by a persistent decline in their economic activity and by significant migration. The Basque public administrative bodies have been taking action in rural areas for some time and various programmes have been implemented, some of a general character, throughout the territory, others acting on specific “rural” issues (LEADER Initiative, Operational Programme 5b etc.). All initiatives aimed at helping to bring about a living rural environment and more balanced territorial development.

After the implementation of theses programmes, the changes introduced in 1999 by Agenda 2000 into the CAP were faithfully reflected in the passing of the Plan for Rural Sustainable Development (PDRS) 2000- 2006, jointly financed by the EAGGF and the Basque authorities. The PDRS sets out a long- term plan, grouping together actions and measures previously dispersed throughout different policies: structural policies, compensatory allowances for mountain regions and rural development policies mainly. Indeed, the plan is a clear example of a complex program: 9 lines of action, more than 35 measures and around 7,000 beneficiaries each year.

Therefore, the PDRS has meant that for the first time joint planning has been designed for the whole of the Basque rural milieu, covering at the same time actions aimed at the

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<sup>5</sup> The STAR Committee is one of the EC management Committees. The STAR Committee helps Commission with the supervision of Rural Development policies, its application and control.

modernization of agricultural holdings together with measures intended to improve the living conditions and the well-being of rural population. The main fields of intervention of the PDRS can be broadly summarized under three headings:

- Measures to help strengthen the competitiveness and viability of agricultural sector,
- Measures to improve the quality of life and economic opportunities in rural areas,
- Measures to promote good environmental practices as well as the provision of services linked to the maintenance of habitats, biodiversity and landscape.

Together with the multiplicity of actions described above, one of the most interesting features of the rural policy in the Basque Country relies on its inter-institutional nature. Many institutional partners and stakeholders are involved, from the European level to the local level (DG Agriculture-EAGGF-, Basque Regional Government, three Provincial Governments, municipalities, agrarian unions, local entrepreneurs and associations, local community organisations, and so on). Besides, the Plan is run in a de-centralized way via Local Agrarian Offices and Rural Development Associations. These associations work similarly to the Local Actions Groups (LAGs) promoted by the EC although present different political and legal nature.

Nevertheless, the division of powers over management of the different measures that make up the PDRS (between the different Basque Administrations) means the great effort has to be put into planning and coordinating, as has become clear to us during the process of the mid-term evaluation. Our evaluation model, to be explained next, had to develop within this complex and multi-institutional context and, taken this in mind, had to be responsive to the different needs of information and priorities of primary users and other stakeholders.

### **3. The approach to the evaluation**

As said earlier, the PDRS is characterised by a multiplicity and heterogeneity of contents, objectives pursued, actors involved and implementation modes. All this implies a particularly complicated evaluative activity, referred to a complex and multi-level public programming, placed in a multi-actor context with a high institutional exposure (Lion & Martini, 2006).

Within this context, our objective while carrying out the mid-term evaluation of the PDRS was twofold: 1) to generate information facilitating and enriching the process of discussion on the problems and capacity for collective learning and action, and 2) to increase the use of evaluation results helping the Basque administration to take new decisions about sustainable rural policy in the future. Having this double purpose in mind, we adopted a participatory model for evaluation.

#### *3.1. A participatory evaluation*

Beginning with the theory of evaluation as a democratic process (Murray, 2002), we focus on the relationship between the concept of democracy and the way different actors participate in evaluations. From different disciplines and traditions within the evaluation field a wide range of related approaches have been designed which could be grouped together under the designation of participatory evaluation. Although there are some differences between these approaches, they all provide an evaluating focus committed to the development of a change or improvement that is interactive, contextualised and directed at knowledge building. This focus has given rise to evaluation practices with provocative implications, both theoretically and practically speaking (Connell et al, 1995; Patton, 1997; Greene, 1998; Withmore, 1998; Fetterman, 2001)

From our perspectives, the evaluation of rural development policies should be understood as a participatory evaluation since this approach makes it possible to convert evaluation into an exercise that stimulates the generations of a collective learning process. The nature of these policies, designed within a model of “bottom- up” approach, being endogenous development and the promotion and animation of local resources two of its main issues, should be reconsidered when designing its evaluation (Ray, 2000). Moreover, this focus is helped in practice by the decentralisation process of these policies. It is precisely at the regional and /or local level where participatory evaluation can be easily put into action.

Nevertheless, this is still an approach that has been very little used in rural development policy evaluations in the European Union. This practice seems to contradict a defence of planning processes and policy designers, where the participation of regional actors becomes an essential element as one of the new ways of making rural policy.

In our opinion, the advantages that participatory evaluation introduces into the evaluation practice of rural development policies are clear:

- Evaluation is understood as a learning process around the policy evaluated from the perspective of all stakeholders. It is precisely the real participants in the policy who contribute to understanding and learning about the process of change underlying the programme and to the development of new awareness regarding the policy under evaluation. Therefore, evaluation becomes an exercise stimulating the appearance of learning processes.
- This common learning process allows the creation of a working framework where the evaluation is used to build trust among stakeholders, managers, institutions and evaluators (Kulhmann, 1998). Participatory evaluation makes it possible to democratise the process of knowledge building. Active participation should be a practice applied throughout the entire evaluation process and be directed towards identifying and resolving problems and improving understanding of rural necessities.
- Evaluation is used to create useful knowledge for those involved in the process in order to achieve their objectives in the short and long term. In a pluralist society where there exist a multiplicity of viewpoints and perspectives, to expect to obtain an exact measure of policy impact, in the sense of an unchangeable truth, is neither possible nor desirable (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Patton, 1997).
- This creation of knowledge is, at the same time, a facilitator of action, as it is a practical kind of knowledge that will stimulate the capacity of regional governments, community institutions and organisations, in general, to solve the pertinent problems (Finne et al, 1995:12). In this context, participatory evaluation favours learning for action, since the evaluation process is used to propel action directed at policy improvement.

Ultimately, this evaluation model wants to make progress in increasing the social utility of the evaluation. The evaluation should, firstly, be a useful practice for those in charge of running the plan and, in addition, for all potential users and collectives affected by its outcomes: beneficiaries, social agents, civil associations etc. From this perspective, evaluation becomes an exercise aimed at responding to the need for information from all stakeholders and goes as far as to promote their active participation in evaluation process (Stame, 1999).

Thus, the adoption of a participatory evaluation model represented a big change in approach within the field of evaluation culture to which we are accustomed. Such an important change, therefore, called for prudence and we decided to tackle this opening up process in two stages. In the mid- term evaluation, work was carried out with all the managing bodies of the PDRS, from regional to local level, employing an instrumental selection criteria. However, in the ex- post evaluation active participation would be extended to the rural community itself, to the beneficiaries and to the local social groups directly or indirectly affected by the Plan, along

lines of democratic selection. The evaluation team directed and stimulated the movement of the evaluation process from the top downwards. This means that the participants were basically primary users: managers, developers and implementers. The process, however, was opened up to other legitimate groups such as experts (from research centres and agricultural management centres) and social agents (trade unions, sectoral associations, local rural development associations etc.)

### *3.2. A multi- phase evaluation*

Putting all the principles involved in the development of a participatory evaluation into practice has led to dividing our work into different operational phases (table 1):

Preliminary phase: Before starting on the evaluation design process, a first contact meeting was held between the evaluation team and the managers of the different measures, in which we let them know about the action principles underpinning our work. Our principle was to put across to the managers the need to convert the evaluation into *their* evaluation. The results of this first contact were very positive, although not all in attendance showed themselves willing to change their attitude to evaluation. Indeed, one common objection some managers make to getting involved in designing the evaluation is that they lack the knowledge necessary to do it properly. The notion that there is one right way to do the evaluation dies hard. In this sense, our basic message was: “you are in a unique position to describe what the program does and how it affects people, and that is very important for the evaluation, your experiences and your thoughts about your experiences”.

First phase: At this stage in our work, we started working together with managers in an effort to identify the key questions included in the methodological guide for the evaluation. Thus, the evaluation team has two main sources of information: the guide itself and the stakeholders. Some of the questions arisen are: What are their concerns about the measures and programs? Under what conditions and ongoing dynamics is the programme operating? How are the activities catalysed and implemented? What did they want to know about the results and running of the programme?

During this phase, however, the evaluation team set out to create channels of communication that would allow stakeholders to speak freely and openly about their experiences and problems. The main hurdle facing the evaluation team is the fact that some managers still think evaluation as an external investigation. In this sense, they find it hard to understand that evaluation is now asking for their collaboration. By this reason, it was necessary to carry out a significant number of interviews with those responsible for the PDRS in the Basque Government and the three Provincial councils. The evaluation design proposals (criteria, questions and indicators) that arisen as a result of this first round of interviews have been sent back to the managers to check that all the details had been correctly understood.

Second phase: Drawing up a preliminary report which contains all the evaluation questions and criteria, the outcome and impact indicators and the instruments for observing and analysing information for each measure within the PDRS and well as the global level. Once again, our aim is to arrive at an operational document based on agreement. In order to achieve this, the evaluation team was immersed in a series of thematic one- day workshops with all the agents involved in the evaluation (Government, Provincial councils and local organisations) organised according to action areas. After finalising these workshops, the report was sent again to the managers. Our intention was to obtain a document that would lead the process of mid- term and ex- post evaluation and is accepted and owned by all the political agents who take part in PDRS 2000-2006.

Third phase: Taking the document as a reference for the development of our first task, the mid- term evaluation, our main goal focused on gathering the data needed for answering the questions identified by the guide prepared by the evaluation team. The information gathered was secondary data, provided by the stakeholders in charge of the different measures, as well as primary sources coming up from the different interviews with the participant actors. In addition, the evaluation team used open questionnaires to a sample of one group of direct beneficiaries, the agrifood companies, with the aim of retrieving quantitative and qualitative information on the effects of the programme up to that moment.

Once the data was fully obtained, the next step was to analyse the data provided. For that, quantitative and qualitative (in- depth interview as well as focus groups) were utilised. The qualitative tools used were directed towards the managers of the measures, the experts (being some of them formed by more than two persons), as well as some social agents. This research tool turned very useful in getting distinctive views and perceptions about the policy promoted through the PDRS, drawing up to the first conclusions and recommendations.

Fourth phase: Having elaborated a preliminary evaluation report, during this phase, one of the shortest, took place the testing and approval of the conclusions. The evaluation team, together with the managers and some other experts, took an active role in retrieving the different views about the evaluation conclusions and recommendations, starting a period of “feed-back” information with the aim of seeking out consensus on the recommendations provided.

Fifth phase: Finally, at this phase, the ultimate written mid- term evaluation report was disseminated among all the stakeholders who had taken part in the evaluation both from the Basque government so as well as from the provincial councils. This action was accompanied by a “visual” dissemination of the evaluation report. In effect, a few months after the report was distributed, four visual sessions (one in each of the provincial councils plus one at the government) were organised with the aim of presenting the most relevant results. These presentations were most welcomed by the assistants: the stakeholders and other participants who had taken an active role in the PDRS mid- term evaluation. After the sessions there were opened lively debates between the evaluation team and the participants, with the purpose of remarking different aspects regarding the mid- term evaluation results.

**Table 1: Stages, tasks and actors in the evaluation**

STAGES	TASKS	ACTORS
<p><b>Preliminary:</b> Getting to know the actors October 2001- Diciembre 2001</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Introducing the evaluation team to the agents.</li> <li>▪ Information about the principles that will guide the evaluation work.</li> <li>▪ Seeking consensus around these guiding principles.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The client: Management of the Minister's Office (director and experts)</li> <li>▪ The evaluation team</li> <li>▪ The managers</li> </ul>
<p><b>First stage:</b> Preparing the evaluation January 2002-July 2002</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Drawing up the methodological guide for the intermediate and ex post evaluation.</li> <li>▪ Review of the annual follow-up indicators, co-ordination and homogenisation of information sources.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The evaluation team</li> <li>▪ The managers via individual interviews</li> <li>▪ IT experts</li> <li>▪ Experts</li> </ul>
<p><b>Second stage:</b> The evaluation design September 2002- December 2002</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Testing and approval of the methodological guide for the intermediate and ex post evaluation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The evaluation team</li> <li>▪ The managers via group meetings</li> <li>▪ The client (Director and experts)</li> <li>▪ Experts participating in the group meetings</li> <li>▪ Dissemination among social agents (3 dissemination meetings)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Third stage:</b> The development of the intermediate evaluation January 2003- September 2003</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Gathering of data.</li> <li>▪ Analysis of the data.</li> <li>▪ Drawing up of first conclusions and recommendations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The evaluation team</li> <li>▪ Beneficiaries (companies) as an information source</li> <li>▪ The managers via individual and/or group interviews</li> <li>▪ Experts via individual and/or group interviews</li> <li>▪ Social agents via individual interviews</li> </ul>
<p><b>Fourth stage:</b> Drawing up of the final intermediate evaluation report October 2003- December 2003.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Testing and approval of the conclusions (feedback)</li> <li>▪ Seeking consensus on the recommendations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The evaluation team</li> <li>▪ The managers via individual and/or group interviews</li> <li>▪ Experts via individual and/or group interviews</li> <li>▪ Social agents via individual interviews</li> </ul>
<p><b>Fifth stage:</b> Dissemination of the intermediate evaluation May 2004</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Drawing up of the final report: written report and summarised visually presentations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The evaluation team</li> <li>▪ The client</li> <li>▪ Dissemination among managers, experts and social agents (4 presentation and dissemination meetings)</li> </ul>

## 4. Analysing the utility of evaluation

### 4.1. Possible uses for the results and the evaluation process

Evaluators have shown a long-standing interest in the nature and extent of their work's impact, being the use of evaluation an old concern (Kirkhart, 2000: 5). For that, an ample literature has been devoted to analyzing the uses to which evaluation can be put. The different ways in which it is applicable and the functions it is able to perform in decision-making are described in studies and articles by numerous authors, amongst whom the contributions made by Weiss stand out in particular (Weiss, 1987; Weiss and Bucuvalas, 1980; Weiss, 1998; Preskill & Caracelli, 1997)

In fact, it was the article written by Weiss and Bucuvalas in 1980 that provided us with the structure for our analysis of the utility of the results and the evaluation process. According to these authors, people judge social science research through two frames of reference. First, they apply "truth tests" in which the actor assesses the quality of the research and its conformity with prior knowledge and expectations. Secondly, they consider the implications of information for feasible actions and the challenge it poses to current policy, thus applying a "utility test" (Weiss and Bucavalas, 1980: 308 and consecutives).

With these two tests as a referential framework, the evaluation team designed a semi-structured questionnaire with the purpose of gathering information that would enable us to analyse the relevance, quality and utility of our evaluation. Altogether, 48 questionnaires were produced, duly answered and returned by the different stakeholders during the sessions dedicated to the final dissemination of the evaluation report. This information was complemented by a few in-depth interviews and reinforced by direct observation. To carry out the analysis and systematise findings, the effects identified were grouped within two areas of influence or impact of the results and the evaluation process (Cousins and Whitmore, 1998; Patton, 2001; Feinstein, 2002; Valovirta, 2002)

- Use of a more conceptual nature (educational or learning-oriented). Three assessment criteria were used for this: the information supplied, the generation of knowledge and agreement with the methodology applied as a way of estimating the relevance and rigour of the evaluation. These three indicators develop the "truth test".
- Use of a more instrumental nature, related, therefore, to actually improving the evaluated plan. Two criteria were used here: improvement of the application and the potential impact on policies. This was our "utility test".

### 4.2. Summary of the assessments obtained from the questionnaires

We now provide a brief summary of the results obtained in the questionnaires<sup>6</sup>. The actors were asked to mark, on a rising scale between 1 and 4, questions in which different assessment criteria are formulated.

The first criterion was regarding their assessment of the information provided. The questions required them to assess the capacity of the evaluation to gather and present complete and up-to-date information, compare their results with those registered in other ambits, diagnose problems, identify areas of improvement, offer an accurate synthesis of the situation and be able to give a global view of rural development policy. The average assessment reached for all these questions is 2.8.

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<sup>6</sup> The annex provides detailed information concerning the scores obtained for each question included under each assessment criterion.

The second criterion was the generation of knowledge. Had the evaluation paved the way for the appearance of new ideas, or had it rather enabled them to confirm pre-existing ideas or even correct previous appraisals that the evaluation did not refute? In this case, as might have been expected, and in line with the results obtained in other studies, the evaluation served to confirm established facts (3.0) and, to a lesser degree, to generate new knowledge (2.1).

The third criterion was directed at determining the degree to which there was agreement with the methodology. The marks obtained were generally high, with an average score of 3.0 for all questions in connection with the methods employed, the indicators, the subjects covered and the work dynamic. It must be said that the mark for this last question represented the lowest score within this group (2.7).

The fourth criterion sought to ascertain the usefulness of the evaluation with regard to its capacity for improving the application and functioning of the measures applied. In this area, the scores obtained were appreciably lower than those registered in the areas mentioned above. An assessment of 2.5 points accompanied the answers concerning the communication and sharing of information and experiences, concentration on daily work, the improvement of internal information flows and of follow-up. The contribution made by the evaluation towards improving management scored 1.9 points.

The fifth criterion measured the potential impact of the evaluation on rural development policy, that is to say, whether it had helped them to reflect on the future of policy, to design new measures and introduce changes within them. The marks given to these three questions were again high, at around 3 points. The assessment awarded dipped once again when it concerned matters connected with changes in functioning and changes in management.

Lastly, a global assessment was included regarding the degree of relevance, where a score of 3.1 was reached, and the degree of overall satisfaction, which obtained 3 points.

#### *4.3. Findings on evaluation use*

First of all, our analysis has demonstrated that the evaluation contributed to increasing the relevance and significance of the evaluation results, and it can be said that the information provided was very much appreciated. As is confirmed by the interviews, the evaluation report became a document of reference within the sector and is reaching increasingly wider audiences. It is a document that acts as an aid to debate and favours discussion based on contrasted evidence and well argued conclusions.

Secondly, it opened the way for the primary users themselves to have a greater grasp of the evaluation results. The conclusions and recommendations are transparent, known to all the actors in the process, derive from the logical reasoning process of the evaluation, and were communicated afterwards to wider audiences. In this way, the evaluation contributes to bringing rural policy and its agents out into the open, highlighting their economic and social role within the realities of the Basque economy, which have always been characterized by the preponderance of industrial life. This, at least, is what the actors in the evaluation perceive, feeling that the evaluation helps their efforts and work on behalf of the region to become better known. They felt more recognized, more appreciated and more respected, because the evaluation allowed their own voices to be heard when they expressed themselves.

In the third place, the evaluation has contributed to intensifying the promotion and stimulation of an evaluation culture. In particular, the methodology employed has made a contribution to introducing new practices and, to some extent, to initiating the development of a culture of evaluation: *“Evaluations had not been done like this before. We have had to learn”*, said one of the actors in the questionnaire. Indeed, the mere fact that the evaluation report is read or that

the presentations are heard familiarizes the listeners with the language and methods of evaluation. The evaluation in itself begins to be valued as a form of learning.

Fourthly, it became possible to detect failures and deficiencies in the actual participation process, affecting both the methods adopted and the selection of the participants. So, for instance, the actors demand a more group-based work dynamic: more discussion groups, more sectoral meetings. To a great degree, the evaluation was a very individualized process, based on in-depth interviews at work with the actors on a one-to-one basis. Nevertheless, the actors wish to see more group work, with a dynamic aimed at increasing the information flow between the different actors participating, both in different areas of work (forestry and agriculture, for example) and in different territories. In addition, they ask for a greater opening up of the evaluation process with the inclusion of the beneficiaries as active evaluation agents. This is expressed in terms such as *“we'd like to know the opinion of those being administrated”*. This idea crops up among the observations expressed in a good deal of the questionnaires and in the interviews with some of the primary users.

In fifth place, where direct application of the results is concerned, the degree of participant satisfaction is pretty low. The actors demand the inclusion of more operational aspects and internal management of the measures. *“The evaluation should be geared to more practical aspects”*, is the way they express their dissatisfaction, which was also manifest in the final dissemination sessions. This discontentment is expressed in the main by the field-work staff, who are extremely concerned about the need to make mechanisms more flexible and to reduce the most bureaucratized side of their work in order to speed up the development of their daily management tasks and allow them to attend to the beneficiaries, simplifying procedures at the same time.

Lastly, perhaps one of the most interesting aspects to emerge from the conclusions obtained in this analysis is the powerful potential impact that the actors attribute to the evaluation, in reference to its capacity for modifying the design of current rural development policy and also, in consequence, measures to be adopted in the future. Nevertheless, this result shows up one of the weaknesses in the process of participation that we initiated, eloquently expressed by one of the actors involved: *“Let's see if it has any impact on our politicians. We are simply managers with no power of decision, even if we might have the power to make suggestions”*.

And the fact of the matter is that, while the whole evaluation process was marked by the express willingness of the evaluation team to secure the active involvement of managers, field-work staff, social experts and/or agents, the same did not occur when it came to the political decision-makers. This group participated only slightly, with no intervention by the evaluation team directed at motivating them or inducing their involvement, this being left to the personal free will of the directors. It is possible that behind this situation lies an internal problem to the evaluation team, who, in this process, did not feel themselves to be sufficiently legitimised (or perhaps empowered) to be admitted to this group in the capacity of interlocutors. This does not mean that the directors were not kept up to date regarding the progress of the evaluation, or that they did not receive and read the different reports: this is borne out by observations they sent and by the fact that some of them even took part in the discussion groups, though this last proved to be the exception rather than the norm<sup>7</sup>. Whatever the case, it must be said that the degree of “bottom-up” permeability achieved was rather limited.

Along with these failing, other problems were experienced too. Since a single central unit does not exist, the degree of interlocution that must be reached with the political decision-makers is multiplied by four. This dismembered central unit that does exist is, furthermore, subjected to political cycles, in the sense that the evaluation process coincided with local elections whose

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<sup>7</sup> Active participation by the directors in the working groups only happened in one of the three provinces.

results produced a change of Provincial Council Members and, in turn, of directors, this occurring in mid-2004 in all the provincial councils<sup>8</sup>.

## 5. Final conclusions

The aim of this paper was to analyze and assess the participatory evaluation model implemented in the Basque PRSD intermediate evaluation and, specifically, to ascertain whether the evaluation had contributed towards an increase in the utilization of the results and the process. The second purpose of the design for this evaluation was, therefore, to boost evaluation culture within the area we intervene in.

Throughout this paper, we have attempted to highlight both highs and lows in our project so as to be able to improve our practice as evaluators and draw lessons from the experience acquired during this work. It must then be stated that the evaluation process was a long one (lasting just over three years) and constituted hard work in the dedication that was demanded of the evaluation team and also, to a lesser degree, of the stakeholders, with ups and downs insofar as the working dynamic was concerned, as well as in their ability to generate activity and a spirit of enthusiasm, but we believe that, all told, the results obtained and the usefulness of the process undertaken were satisfactory.

Despite the teething difficulties referred to above, the evaluation managed to achieve a high degree of participation, particularly on the part of the managers (including field-work staff), experts and social agents, and, on the whole, was characterised by considerable all-round involvement. The actors took an active part in the evaluation process, and it was very interesting to see the way in which control over the evaluation gradually shifted until the participants, side by side with the evaluation team, took charge of many of the tasks that had to be performed. The issue of who makes the decisions is intimately linked with individual learning, since "learning and gathering experience has an impact on the staff's empowerment and emancipation..." (Themessl-Hubber and Grustch, 2003: 109). In this sense, the evaluation proved to be a powerful tool for encouraging participatory learning and developing a culture of evaluation.

Regarding the use of results and the evaluation process, our analysis has revealed the importance that evaluation has taken on both for the participants in the process and for wider audiences. The fact that the report acted as a reference document for the development of a far broader debate on the future of agricultural policy and rural development in our region represents an unquestionable success for the evaluation model employed.

Equally, one is indeed struck by the opinion expressed by the primary users that the conclusions arrived at can (such, at any rate, is their wish) and ought to produce actual changes in policy design, to an extent where this affects decisions concerning rural development policy. In fact, the new plan (PDRS 2007-2013) elaborated for the coming programming period 2007-2013 has included some of the recommendations done by the evaluation team at the mid-term evaluation report, having adopted some of the issues related to the re-design of certain measures as well the financial resources needed to achieve certain goals.

In this respect, we feel that, as an evaluation team, we in some way were able to recognize that the evaluation had the power to produce results that could transform rural development policy. From the outset, however, we ought to have made a sharper analysis of the organizational structure and politics (Weiss, 1998: 31; King, 1998: 64) within which our work unfolded and discovered ways to identify the means and/or links necessary to forge a stronger

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<sup>8</sup> This means that the directors who acquainted themselves with the final report were not the same individuals with whom the evaluation process had initially kicked off.

relationship between the evaluation, and the accompanying process of participation, and the levels at which policy decisions are taken. This is, indubitably, the challenge that awaits future projects. "And then we have to keep our fingers crossed that audiences pay attention" (Weiss, 1998: 32).

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