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How to make it better - Evaluation and Monitoring of Promotional Activities

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How to make it better - Evaluation and Monitoring of promotional activities

Executive summary

Improving the efficiency of public spending is key goal for the authorities in Belarus, as the fiscal space is gradually shrinking in line with a more difficult economic environment. In order to conduct such efficiency assessment, policymakers need the appropriate tools.

For a wide range of state activities – e.g. policies, projects or programmes conducted by ministries, public authorities, agencies or the Development Bank, Evaluation and Monitoring are such tools to supervise and control (Monitoring) and to systematically investigate, assess and develop (Evaluation) promotional activities with respect to their objectives, achievement of objectives, effects and efficiency. These tools are internationally recognised, and extensive international best practice is available.

Evaluations have 4 overall target functions: Insight, supervision, learning and legitimisation. They contribute to a fair and critical assessment of promotional activities for all stakeholders; with the general aim improve these activities in the future. In order to be effective, certain requirements need to be fulfilled for an evaluation procedure, which can be found in international best practice standards, e.g. by the German Society for Evaluation. These standards are grouped in 4 topics that reflect the main tasks and functions of a professional evaluation: Utility, feasibility, propriety and accuracy. Utility standards shall ensure that purposes and information needs are clarified. Feasibility standards try to warrant a realistic, diplomatic and cost-conscious conduct of evaluations. Propriety standards apply to the evaluator's respect and fairness versus persons and groups affected by the evaluation. Accuracy standards eventually refer to the validity and relevance of the information used.

Monitoring is mainly descriptive, and contrary to evaluation a permanent task. Its function is to continuously provide to policymakers, sponsors, the implementing institution/agency and the general public data that are suited to describe input, output, effectiveness and efficiency of promotional activities. Based on these information, temporal performance, compliance to planned development and possible target deviations are supervised and controlled.

These general principles can be used to derive some concrete guidelines and criteria concerning concept and implementation of (first) monitoring and (then) evaluation of the SME-loan programme conducted by the Development Bank. Monitoring needs information to survey and control the programme's input, output, achievement of targets and the performance of the on-lending mechanism. The accounting and credit departments normally generate these input-, output- and on-lending mechanism-data, as they are necessary for the controlling anyway. The data to assess the targets have to be asked from the SME-beneficiaries. They should be collected within the standard credit application procedure to save costs for SMEs and the Development Bank. Therefore, it would be recommendable to conceive an integrated application form (online or physical) that collects data for controlling, monitoring and (partly) evaluation. Regularly, e.g. semi-annually, the bank should issue monitoring-reports that are targeted towards policymakers, the business community and the general public.

Evaluations should be done in larger time intervals, for example every 2 - 4 years. A meaningful evaluation study should deal with the following issues: Relevance, effectiveness/impact, efficiency and sustainability. A critical issue is the independence and impartiality of the evaluator. The optimal solution might be to have the evaluation done by a team that consists of external staff (leader of the evaluation) and subordinated internal team members. For transparency reasons, the evaluation report has to be published.

Once such a "state of the art" evaluation and monitoring system is successfully established in the Development Bank, its application can spread across all branches of government, with the overall aim to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of public support to the economy.

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1. Introduction

The gradual tightening of fiscal space as a result of a difficult economic environment is one of the short- to medium-term economic issues Belarus is facing¹. In this situation, increasing the efficiency of public spending is an important goal, which is recognised by Belarusian policy-makers.

Evaluation and Monitoring are tools to supervise and control (Monitoring) and to systematically investigate, assess and develop (Evaluation) promotional activities with respect to their objectives, achievement of objectives, effects and efficiency. Activities can be policies, projects or programmes of ministries, public authorities, agencies or Promotional Banks (PB) – for example a SME-loan programme of a PB. Each major promotional activity should be evaluated to gain the respective lessons learnt. In the last decade because of the growing scarcity of public funds significance, importance and potential merit in particular of evaluation steadily has increased.

The aim of this paper is to utilise available international best practice as an input for the discussion in Belarus on Evaluation and Monitoring. A special focus is put on the relatively new SME loan programme conducted by the Development Bank of the Republic of Belarus.

The paper is structured as follows: In the following chapter, we will provide the basics of evaluation and monitoring. Chapter 3 deals with the specific case of SME-loan programmes by Promotional Banks, and its monitoring. Chapter 4 consequently deals with the evaluation of such a programme. Chapter 5 summarises the main results. In the Annex, we provide as an example some German evaluation standards, which are partly influenced by further international standards.

2. Evaluation and Monitoring: An overview

2.1. Evaluation: Functions, Requirements, Procedures

In order to achieve their functions, the tools Monitoring/Evaluation have to comply with a set of general requirements concerning contents, procedures and methods, which will be further explained below.

2.1.1. Functions and tasks of evaluations

Evaluations have 4 overall target functions: Insight, supervision, learning and legitimisation. Evaluations shall make promotional activities (PA) transparent, they shall systematically analyse them and comprehensibly as well as objectively assess them. Thus they contribute to a fair and critical discussion of PA amongst the relevant stakeholders, i.e. sponsor, agency, beneficiaries, state and general public. This discussion can result in modifications of the PA ranging from unaltered continuation via amendment to termination. **In short, to learn how to make it better should be the general aim of each evaluation.**

2.1.2. Requirements to evaluations

In order to fulfill its functions and tasks in the very beginning of the evaluation process, or even before, the following questions have to be discussed and (as far as possible) consensually decided upon amongst the (important) stakeholders of the PA – policy/sponsor, operating institution/agency, beneficiaries, and other affected parties:

- Object and matter of the evaluation?
- Purpose and aim of the evaluation?

¹ See GET Belarus Policy Paper PP/01/2015: „The role of fiscal transparency in raising the efficiency of public expenditure“ for more details.

- Assessment criteria of the evaluation?
- Procedures and methods to be used?
- Who shall perform the evaluation?

Furthermore, it is highly important that the stakeholders also clarify the concrete and concise targets of the PA to be evaluated and the indicators by which the achievement of these targets is to be measured and appraised. This might seem trivial, however it is necessary as very often policy and sponsors formulate for PA only imprecise and diffuse targets, which can't be assessed in an objective manner.

Science and practice have developed different sets of requirements or standards that contribute to high quality, usefulness and utility of evaluations. The standard set proposed by the German Society for Evaluation (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Evaluation – DeGEval) is comprehensive and widely spread (see Annex). It is based on the standards for program evaluation of the US Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation. The DeGEval – set contains 25 single standards merged in 4 topics that reflect the functions and tasks of good evaluations. These topics are: Utility, feasibility, propriety and accuracy.

Utility standards shall ensure that purposes and information needs are clarified. Feasibility standards try to warrant a realistic, diplomatic and cost-conscious conduct of evaluations. Propriety standards apply to the evaluator's respect and fairness versus persons and groups affected by the evaluation. Accuracy standards eventually refer to the validity and relevance of the information used.

Significant single standards are:

(U3) Evaluator credibility and competence:

This includes trustworthiness, as well as methodical and professional competence.

(F1) Appropriate procedures:

The burden of the procedures to the affected groups should be reasonable and adequate with regard to their merits for the evaluation.

(P4) Unbiased conduct and reporting:

This single standard aims to impartiality. The evaluator should know, take into account and report different views and suggestions.

(A2) Context analysis:

The evaluator should keep in mind and reflect the environment and its influences on the promotional activity.

(A3) Described purposes and procedures:

This includes concise descriptions as well as a accurate and precise documentation.

(A5) Valid and reliable information:

The data used and interpreted should be reliable and valid with regard to the evaluation-questions.

The single standards U3 and P4 cover also the decision whether the evaluator should be an internal or an external team or institution (see also chapter 3). If an external evaluation is chosen, then by default the evaluator should be contracted by an open competitive bidding.

2.1.3. Concrete questions to be answered by evaluations

Evaluations that comply with the functions and standards set out so far should deal with the following questions and issues. There are objects of the inquiry and likewise assessment criteria. Below, they are only roughly outlined in order to illustrate the underlying concept (see OECD, DAC criteria for evaluating development assistance).

1. Relevance:

Are the targets of the PA under evaluation comprehensibly founded? Do they suit to the needs and priorities of the target group? Is the target group reasonably defined?

2. Effectiveness/Impact:

How far does the PA attain its targets? Does its output comply with the planned output? Is the PA's instrument accepted by the target group? What are the intended and non-intended impact and effects of the PA (directly and indirectly, short-term and long-term)? Can the causality of the PA for the observed impact and effects be demonstrated, i.e. what would have been observed if there had been no PA?

3. Efficiency:

Output or benefit of the PA in relation to its input or costs? Could an alternative approach (mechanism, procedure, and instrument) attain a better efficiency?

4. Sustainability:

Do the PA's impact/effects persist over time? Is the PA financially and environmentally sustainable?

The causality of the PA, respectively the question whether the target group picks up the PA's beneficial incentive without any or only minor alterations of its behaviour ("windfall gain") is decisive for the judgment on the measure. To convincingly demonstrate causality the evaluator has to apply state-of-the-art statistical and econometric tools of empirical research concerning impact or effect. Descriptive statements and subjective or qualitative views and appraisals do fail here. To the relevant tools belong randomised field-experiments or quasi-experimental methods by which control or comparison groups can be designed.

2.2. Monitoring of promotional activities

Monitoring has the function to continuously provide to policymakers, sponsors, the implementing institution/agency and the general public data that are suited to describe input, output, effectiveness and efficiency of PA. Based on these information, temporal performance, compliance to planned development and possible target deviations are supervised and controlled. Monitoring is mainly descriptive, given the targets and their underlying rationale are accepted and not challenged. Causality is not questioned, respective studies are mostly not undertaken, and unintended or non-direct effects are not in the (main) focus of observations.

Contrary to evaluation, monitoring is a permanent task to generate information necessary for the operative management of PA, and there is an overlapping with controlling. Evaluation is conducted only in larger temporal distances and, given its higher cost-intensiveness, only for major PA.

3. Monitoring of a SME-loan programme of a Promotional Bank

The general statements made so far are now used to derive some concrete guidelines and criteria concerning concept and implementation of (first) monitoring and (then) evaluation of a promotional SME-loan programme.

The key elements of the loan-programme of the PB:

- Long-term credits are extended to a precisely defined SME-target group.
- The loans are channeled via selected on-lending commercial banks (CB).
- The interest rate is subsidised with regard to comparable credits in the market. Sources of subsidisation could be the budget or foreign donors.
- The credits are bound to finance fixed capital investment of the target group.

The underlying basic assumption of the programme is that due to insufficient appropriate long-term financing the investment activities of the target group is suppressed. The programme's

central direct target is to increase investments. It is expected that the promoted target group will generate a higher turnover and new jobs, caused by increased investments. Indicators to measure these targets are investments, sales, employment and their respective growth (before and after investment).

Monitoring needs information to survey and control the programme's input, output, achievement of targets and the performance of the on-lending mechanism. Apt indicators for this purpose might be:

Input: Accumulated subsidies; subsidisation intensity i.e. the gap between comparable market interest rate and programme final borrower interest rate.

Output: Number and accumulated volume of credits.

Targets: Number of SME-borrowers, investment, sales and job numbers - before and (planned) after investment. (Maybe additionally: Branch, region, legal form, key indicators of balance sheet and profit and loss account. Anyway, these maybe-data are needed for evaluation purposes)

On-lending mechanism: Number and volume of channeled credits per on-lending bank; qualities of on-lending i.e. speed; regional, sectoral or size discrepancies.

The PB's accounting department and its credit department (the credit application entry point) normally generate these input-, output- and on-lending mechanism-data, as they are necessary for PB's controlling anyway. The data to assess the targets have to be asked from the SME-beneficiaries. They should be collected within the standard credit application procedure to save costs for SME and PB as well. Therefore, it would be recommendable to conceive an integrated application form (online or physical) that collects data for controlling, monitoring and (partly) evaluation.

Regularly, e.g. semi-annually, the PB should issue monitoring-reports that are targeted towards policymakers, the business community and the general public.

4. Evaluation of a SME-loan programme of a Promotional Bank

Evaluations should be done in larger time intervals, for example every 2 - 4 years. According to the reasoning above (see Ch. 2) a meaningful and high quality evaluation study should deal with e.g. the following issues:

Relevance:

- Is the programme's underlying basic assumption (totally or partly) flawed?
- Are all SME in the target group financially suppressed, or only specific SME-groups, as for example innovators, startups, distinct branches etc.?
- Is investment of the target-SME impeded by lack of long-term credits, or rather of equity finance?
- Is uncertainty with respect e.g. to general macroeconomic conditions a more important hurdle to invest?

Effectiveness/Impact:

- What share of the target-SME was reached by the programme?
- Input/Output: Discrepancies between actual values and planned values? Reasons for these discrepancies? Increase of investment, sales and employment?
- To what extent are these increases caused by the programme? Were they triggered by other reasons (e.g. business cycle effects, fiscal policy, reduction of bureaucracy (less red tape), alleviation of export etc.)?

Efficiency:

- Relation of input to output measured for example by the ratio accumulated subsidies/increase of investment or increase of sales or (net) increase of employment?

- Ratio of credit volume extended to investment or sales or employment before and after investment?
- Assessment of these and other efficiency indicators for alternative promotional actions/procedures as for example investment grants, improved depreciation allowances, tax relief.

Sustainability:

- Do the changes in the investment or job-creation behaviour of the promoted SME sustain or do they fade away over time?

The data for monitoring and controlling are by far not sufficient to satisfyingly and convincingly answer these evaluation questions. Therefore, further information for causal research and causal analysis of promoted and non-promoted SME-investors has to be collected in special surveys. Only by such data-basis, reasonable comparison or control groups are composed.

A critical issue of every evaluation is the independence and impartiality of the evaluator. This demand is also a guideline for the decision on internal or external evaluation. Generally, internal evaluation is under the latent suspicion to be biased and not fully transparent. However, it has some genuine advantages as for example smaller costs and higher know-how on procedures and details of the evaluated programme. The latter point seems particularly important for an on-lending loan programme. The optimal solution might be to have the evaluation done by a team that consists of external staff (leader of the evaluation) and subordinated internal team members.

The assignment of the evaluation contract to an external institution has to be the result of a competitive bidding. Moreover, it should be excluded that a conflict of interests exists due to other business connections between the evaluator and the PB, or the sponsor of the programme.

Because of the requirement "transparency", the evaluation report has to be published.

5. Concluding remarks

Increasing the efficiency of public spending is an important goal for Belarus, as the fiscal situation is becoming increasingly tighter. In order to conduct such efficiency assessment, the authorities need the appropriate tools.

For a wide range of state activities – e.g. policies, projects or programmes conducted by ministries, public authorities, agencies or the Development Bank, Evaluation and Monitoring are such tools to supervise and control (Monitoring) and to systematically investigate, assess and develop (Evaluation) promotional activities with respect to their objectives, achievement of objectives, effects and efficiency. These tools are internationally recognised, and extensive international best practice is available.

In order to start with the regular application of these tools, the recently established SME-loan programme of the Development Bank is a good starting point for two reasons. On the one hand, it would help to obtain important "lessons learnt" for the improvement of the loan programme, which means its effectiveness could be gradually improved over the future. On the other hand, the successful establishment of a "state of the art" evaluation and monitoring process in this area can support its wider application across all branches of government, with the overall aim to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of public support to the economy.

6. Annex: Evaluation Standards (DeGEval-Standards)

The following Evaluation Standards were ratified by the general assembly of the DeGEval – Gesellschaft für Evaluation (Evaluation Society) on October 4th, 2001. They are the result of a two-year discussion and preparation process which included a membership survey, an appointed Standards Committee, and a review process.

The twenty-five DeGEval-Standards are organised in four groups. This structure as well as many Standards, including titles and descriptive statements, were stimulated by the „Program Evaluation Standards“ of the US-American „Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation“ and adapted to the requirements of evaluation in Germany and Austria. The DeGEval-Standards were also inspired by the Swiss adaptation of the Joint Committee Standards which provides a generalisation of these standards from educational to more diverse settings. In its German original, this short version of the DeGEval-Standards is accompanied by a 30-page document which includes a clarification of the aims and the scope of the Standards, definitions of evaluation and other key concepts, an overview of different approaches to evaluation, comments on the application of the Standards, and a description of the development of the document itself as well as the review process.

For more information, please see <http://www.degeval.de> or contact Wolfgang Beywl (wolfgang.beywl@univention.org), former Chair of the Standards Committee and board member of the DeGEval – Gesellschaft für Evaluation.

Evaluations should feature four basic attributes:

Utility – Feasibility – Propriety – Accuracy

Utility

The Utility Standards are intended to ensure that an evaluation is guided by both the clarified purposes of the evaluation and the information needs of its intended users.

U 1 Stakeholder Identification

Persons or groups involved in or affected by the evaluand should be identified, so that their interests can be clarified and taken into consideration when designing the evaluation.

U 2 Clarification of the Purposes of the Evaluation

The purposes of the evaluation should be stated clearly, so that the stakeholders can provide relevant comments on these purposes, and so that the evaluation team knows exactly what it is expected to do.

U 3 Evaluator Credibility and Competence

The persons conducting an evaluation should be trustworthy as well as methodologically and professionally competent, so that the evaluation findings achieve maximum credibility and acceptance.

U 4 Information Scope and Selection

The scope and selection of the collected information should make it possible to answer relevant questions about the evaluand and, at the same time, consider the information needs of the client and other stakeholders.

U 5 Transparency of Values

The perspectives and assumptions of the stakeholders that serve as a basis for the evaluation and the interpretation of the evaluation findings should be described in a way that clarifies their underlying values.

U 6 Report Comprehensiveness and Clarity

Evaluation reports should provide all relevant information and be easily comprehensible.

U 7 Evaluation Timeliness

The evaluation should be initiated and completed in a timely fashion, so that its findings can inform pending decision and improvement processes.

U 8 Evaluation Utilisation and Use

The evaluation should be planned, conducted, and reported in ways that encourage attentive follow-through by stakeholders and utilisation of the evaluation findings.

Feasibility

The Feasibility Standards are intended to ensure that an evaluation is planned and conducted in a realistic, thoughtful, diplomatic, and cost-effective manner.

F 1 Appropriate Procedures

Evaluation procedures, including information collection procedures, should be chosen so that the burden placed on the evaluand or the stakeholders is appropriate in comparison to the expected benefits of the evaluation.

F 2 Diplomatic Conduct

The evaluation should be planned and conducted so that it achieves maximal acceptance by the different stakeholders with regard to evaluation process and findings.

F 3 Evaluation Efficiency

The relation between cost and benefit of the evaluation should be appropriate.

Propriety

The Propriety Standards are intended to ensure that in the course of the evaluation all stakeholders are treated with respect and fairness.

P 1 Formal Agreement

Obligations of the formal parties to an evaluation (what is to be done, how, by whom, when) should be agreed to in writing, so that these parties are obligated to adhere to all conditions of the agreement or to renegotiate it.

P 2 Protection of Individual Rights

The evaluation should be designed and conducted in a way that protects the welfare, dignity, and rights of all stakeholders.

P 3 Complete and Fair Investigation

The evaluation should undertake a complete and fair examination and description of strengths and weaknesses of the evaluand, so that strengths can be built upon and problem areas addressed.

P 4 Unbiased Conduct and Reporting

The evaluation should take into account the different views of the stakeholders concerning the evaluand and the evaluation findings. Similar to the entire evaluation process, the evaluation report should evidence the impartial position of the evaluation team. Value judgments should be made as unemotionally as possible.

P 5 Disclosure of Findings

To the extent possible, all stakeholders should have access to the evaluation findings.

Accuracy

The Accuracy Standards are intended to ensure that an evaluation produces and discloses valid and useful information and findings pertaining to the evaluation questions.

A 1 Description of the Evaluand

The evaluand should be described and documented clearly and accurately, so that it can be unequivocally identified.

A 2 Context Analysis

The context of the evaluand should be examined and analysed in enough detail.

A 3 Described Purposes and Procedures

Object, purposes, questions, and procedures of an evaluation, including the applied methods, should be accurately documented and described, so that they can be identified and assessed.

A 4 Disclosure of Information Sources

The information sources used in the course of the evaluation should be documented in appropriate detail, so that the reliability and adequacy of the information can be assessed.

A 5 Valid and Reliable Information

The data collection procedures should be chosen or developed and then applied in a way that ensures the reliability and validity of the data with regard to answering the evaluation questions.

A 6 Systematic Data Review

The data collected, analysed, and presented in the course of the evaluation should be systematically examined for possible errors.

A 7 Analysis of Qualitative and Quantitative Information

Qualitative and quantitative information should be analysed in an appropriate, systematic way, so that the evaluation questions can be effectively answered.

A 8 Justified Conclusions

The conclusions reached in the evaluation should be explicitly justified, so that the audiences can assess them.

A 9 Meta-Evaluation

The evaluation should be documented and archived appropriately, so that a Meta-Evaluation can be undertaken.

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