

# Thematic Network ,Policy and Project Evaluation Methodologies‘

## TRANS-TALK

### Executive Summary

The TRANS-TALK Thematic Network was set up in January 2000 under the Fifth Framework Programme with the objective to provide a networking platform for those involved in the field of transport evaluation; explore the conceptual and empirical problems in contemporary transport evaluation; and develop guidelines that help improve transport evaluation.

The launch of the TRANS-TALK thematic network reflects the renewed strategic interest in transport evaluation. This has different sources – conceptual, empirical and policy-relevant.

At the conceptual level, this renewed interest in transport evaluation is related to the realisation that the conventional methods for evaluation that apply to infrastructure appraisal, like cost-benefit analysis, are not adequate to address contemporary challenges to transport policy. At the empirical level, there is, on the one hand, the problem of choice among a multitude of methodologies and, on the other, the problem of measurement and comparison. Finally at the policy-relevant level, there is today an intensified demand for evaluation that looks at the (long-term) outcomes of policy rather than alone its (short-term) direct outputs.

**Current state and main trends.** Transport-specific evaluation frameworks exist in most Member States of the European Union, albeit mainly for infrastructure assessment at project level. These are used for ex-ante evaluation or appraisal, and for the prioritising and phasing of projects.

The appraisal of transport infrastructure relies mostly on cost-benefit (CBA) and multi-criteria analysis (MCA). Road and rail projects are the ones most commonly subjected to CBA. Analytically CBA is widely used for the so-called direct transport impacts. Among environmental impacts, noise and local air pollution are included in appraisal across Member States but they are valued in monetary terms only in half. The treatment of indirect socio-economic impacts is uneven.

At the programme level, and with few exceptions, the drawing of transport master plans is common practice in EU Member States at least for one mode – most frequently again road. Policy or multi-modal master plans, on the other

hand, are less common, in part because of the remaining co-ordination problems between relevant agencies or policy institutions.

At the European level we find no integrated or harmonised evaluation framework to apply to projects, programmes or policies that are of common interest or added value. This is in part the result of the lack of harmonisation with regard to transport data, forecasts, models or scenarios. The other reason for the absence of a harmonised evaluation framework is largely political, and related to the demand for flexibility by Member States in view of the subsidiarity principle.

*Recommendations:*

*At the policy level there are two types of evaluation that are relevant, namely, output evaluation at regular intervals to examine or check whether the action points or measures announced have also been implemented; and outcome evaluation at the short-, medium- and long-term for the purpose of monitoring with reference to broad impact indicators. A combined monitoring system combining output- and outcome-specific indicators is a support tool that no decision-making level can do without, if policy evaluation is to be taken seriously.*

*The level of detail of the evaluation of a programme's results or outcomes depends on the character of the programme. Some programmes are so multifarious that evaluation can only be carried out at the aggregate level, as with policy. Other programmes are more clearly delineated, thus allowing the application of more detailed evaluation techniques.*

*At the project level, a certain degree of harmonisation is called for with regard to the background assumptions to guide forecasting exercises. The same applies to transport data and documentation.*

*In view of the conflicting interests whether there should be (or not) a harmonised evaluation framework for transport, the open co-ordination method should here be used as prescribed by the recent White Paper on European Governance.*

**Pressures for change.** The gradual consolidation of the European Union as a polity, with own institutions, an own redistribution budget, own policy networks and agendas and own decision processes, represents a challenge to evaluation in the European context. This is not least because of the subsidiarity principle which prescribes that the Union may only intervene where there would be an added value from this intervention. Only there does not always exist either clarity or agreement as to how to define and measure this added value.

At the more technical level of information, being able to evaluate the European-added value also means being able to rely on at least a minimum set of

harmonised data inputs, and, in part, modelling outputs, including projections and forecasts. Data availability and comparable information remains a problem. Furthermore, our knowledge on the underlying travel behaviour of individuals and of companies and how this might differ across countries is still not adequate.

At a different level, the process of European integration has tended to strengthen the deliberative aspects of evaluation. In the European context and in view of the character itself of the Union, evaluation is more often than not seen as part of a negotiation and deliberation process, through which socially desirable transport actions are gradually identified. This implies promoting both stakeholder involvement in evaluation and a stronger emphasis on transparency and accountability.

*Recommendations:*

*The evaluator must ask and document whether a policy, programme or project was implemented and/or how successful it was, yet must also inquire into those factors, specific to the decision context, that have facilitated or obstructed its implementation.*

*Complex decision-making procedures call for a new culture of evaluation that places more emphasis on deliberation, especially with regard to appraisal. At the minimum level this involves making conceptual and methodological choices transparent to allow reflective discussion – making evaluations open for critical review is a major step towards establishing a deliberation culture in evaluation. At the maximum level, the evaluation should be thought of as simulating a decision process and use methods for gathering different opinions and bringing different actors together to discuss issues of common concern.*

**A multiplicity of methods.** There are several methods or tools that can be used for evaluation. These can be classified according to four dimensions: (a) the analytical framework from which they emerged; (b) their suitability for policy, programme or project evaluation; (c) their suitability for different phases of policy analysis, and (d) the extent to which they rely on statistical or mathematical methods or models, or alternatively make use of quantitative methods.

Several problems can arise by failing to be explicit about the underlying assumptions of analytical frameworks used in evaluation. One frequent result is the subsequent failure to be clear about the objectives of evaluation exercises. Another possible outcome are serious misunderstandings between those who commission and those who are assigned the task of evaluation. Perhaps the most serious problem is the failure to understand or rightly interpret the results of an evaluation exercise and, in the case of multi-tier evaluation exercise, to integrate the various results.

*Recommendations:*

*The multiplicity of evaluation methods can be mistaken to imply that everything goes, more specifically that either any (desirable) result is possible to deliver if the choice of methods is carefully thought through, or that differences in evaluation results are methodologically grounded. Absolute relativism is however not the conclusion to draw from the multiplicity of methodologies. Robust findings will remain even when using different methodologies.*

*Quality standards apply with regard to the use of methods. Failure to apply these standards can lead to distorted evaluation results.*

*In dealing with uncertainty of estimations in evaluation, sensitivity analysis and the use of scenarios is recommendable.*

**Technical challenges.** Scientific inquiry has progressed with regard to several contemporary difficult issues for transport evaluation, like transport and economic development; network effects and European-added value; time, term and uncertainty; the welfare basis of evaluation; and environmental valuation.

Some open questions remain. These are in part technical, in part conceptual. Disagreement or lack of clarity with regard to concepts and definitions of terms have, therefore, to be resolved in advance.

*Recommendations:*

*The review of contemporary evaluation challenges in transport has revealed a series of subjects for which research is needed.*

*For some areas, the type of research which is currently needed is more of a technical, development or demonstration type. In other areas, there is a lack of either empirical information or of conceptual elaboration. Research programmes need to distinguish between these two types of research priorities.*

**A better integration of technical and political perspectives.** Transport evaluation has till now been mainly technocratic in focus. As a result, there is a weak link between the community of transport professionals who undertake the analysis and decision-makers or their policy advisers, which can result in communication failure.

The role of the evaluator is in that problematic because it represents (or ought to represent) an intermediary position between the politician who decides and presents, and the scientist who studies and criticises. Therefore important for evaluation perceived as a process is that different functional roles are represented through the setting up of appropriate teams.

The political interest in evaluation is only a problem if it is one-sided, reflecting vested interests or not accountable. This is also why evaluation ought not to be the monopoly of government or dependent on governmental or state funding. It should also not be primarily or solely carried out internally.

Finally there are two other important factors for promoting the better integration of political and technical perspectives in evaluation. The first is realism – evaluation is a science of interpretation and in that neither a substitute for decision nor for deliberation. The second factor is organisational and reflects the fact that evaluation is a process. Just as it is important for evaluation teams to reflect on the production and dissemination of knowledge, recognising that these are two different functions that might also have to be separated at the personal level, commissioning agencies need to recognise that evaluation does not end with the commissioning of a study but that it is important to install procedures that ensure that the evaluation results are monitored and, once available, reach those that need them in the most appropriate format.

*Recommendations:*

*The better integration of technical and political perspectives in evaluation requires changes from both the technical and from the political side. More realism and a greater willingness to co-operate are minimum requirements. Beyond this, the different functions of evaluation, on the one hand, and of politics on the other, have to be recognised and respected.*

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