

Evaluation and organizational learning in regional development and spatial planning: a reflexive practitioner's perspective

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The paper discusses the role of evaluation in planning, from the perspective of organizational learning effects and reflexive practices that evaluation can induce. The several stages of regional development and spatial planning policies in Portugal, principally after the beginning of the successive programming periods of Structural Funds, represent the empirical base of the paper. The author's approach is built on a reflexive practitioner's view combining research work on territorially-focused public policies at the University with evaluation experience of the EU co-funded regional operational interventions. After an introduction, establishing the main scope and questions addressed, the paper is divided into three sections. Firstly, it presents some conceptual insights on the different ways evaluation resources and practices can be used as powerful instruments in organizational learning-oriented regional development and spatial planning processes and simultaneously as an input for a reflexive practitioner's view. Secondly, the paper tries to show how evaluation identified some crucial gaps in Portugal between spatial planning and regional development policies, identifying some orientations to eradicate them. Finally, in a policy-oriented set of conclusions, the paper argues that the next programming period 2007-2013 will be a critical period for generating more systematic evaluation practices concerning regional development and spatial planning policies. For the first time after 34 years of democracy in Portugal, within a context of no autonomous regions, a National Programme for the Spatial Planning Policy will coexist with Regional Spatial Plans (NUTS II) and innovation and competitiveness-oriented regional development policies. New organizational challenges will appear calling for a more interactive and proactive role of evaluation.

Keywords: evaluation; organizational learning; spatial planning; regional development.