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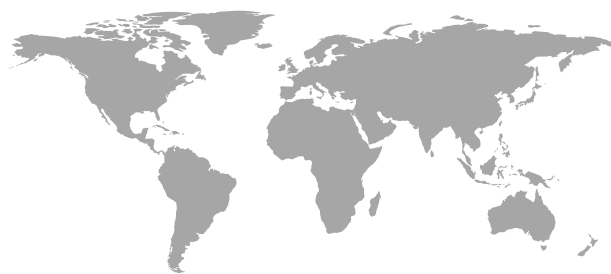
EVALUATION CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

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Evaluation Capacity Development in the Republic of Ireland

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This paper discusses the development of the government of Ireland's evaluation system. One key influence was the evaluation requirements as part of accession to the European Union. Another, internal driver was the government's efforts to improve value-for-money from all areas of public expenditure.



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Evaluation Capacity Development (ECD) helps build sound governance in countries—improving transparency, and building a performance culture within governments to support better management and policymaking, and to strengthen accountability relationships—through support for the creation or strengthening of national/sectoral monitoring and evaluation systems. A related area of focus is civil society, which can play a catalytic role through provision of assessments of government performance. OED aims to identify and help develop good-practice approaches in countries, and to share the growing body of experience with such work.

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FOREWORD

The Operations Evaluation Department (OED) of the World Bank has a long-standing program of support to strengthen monitoring and evaluation (M&E) capacities in developing countries, as an important part of sound governance. As part of this support, OED has prepared a collection of resource material including case studies of countries which can be viewed as representing good-practice or promising-practice. This resource material is available electronically at: <http://www.worldbank.org/oed/ecd/>

OED is accumulating considerable experience from these efforts to help countries strengthen their monitoring and evaluation systems—known generically as *evaluation capacity development* (ECD). Many developing countries with which OED works, and in particular middle-income countries, express strong interest in the M&E systems adopted by developed countries. Ireland is one such country: it initially developed its government evaluation system in response to the requirements for accession to the European Union. The system has subsequently been strengthened for internal reasons, related to the government's wish to improve the value-for-money obtained from all areas of public expenditure. This has been reflected in the government's *Expenditure Review Initiative*.

From the perspective of developing countries, Ireland provides a number of lessons about success factors and impediments to developing an M&E system. One lesson is that strong external pressures, linked to the availability of significant resources, can be a key catalyst in initiating an M&E system. (An analogy for poor countries is the requirement to prepare *Poverty Reduction Strategies*, with related M&E systems, in the context of debt relief under the *Highly Indebted Poor Country* initiative.) Once in existence, an M&E system can be used for additional, nationally-driven purposes. Of course, country demand and incentives to utilize M&E information can be expected to be very important for the institutionalization and sustainability of such a system. The Irish case again underlines the difficulty of ensuring a direct link between M&E information and budget decision-making and other resource allocation processes. Formal procedures and practices may be necessary to establish direct links.

Another lesson is the merit of periodically reviewing progress in developing such a system, and reorienting the system—sometimes substantially—as a result. Ireland is continuing to pilot further improvements to its evaluation system.

The small pool of evaluators in Ireland has been a constraint on the system, although this has enabled them to develop rapidly their understanding of the requirements of the system. The small skills pool has underlined the importance of using this resource carefully; it has implications on both the demand and supply sides. On the demand side, it suggests the importance of not trying to develop an overly complex or demanding system; instead, it is better to focus on the most cost-effective M&E activities, where these activities are determined by the likely utilization of the M&E information which the system is producing. On the supply side, there would be merit in working to expand the limited capacities in a planned manner—for example, via targeted training, curriculum development, on-the-job skills development, secondments, networking support, regular review of M&E quality, or period contracts with consulting companies. Where there is reliance on civil servants to undertake evaluations, it is particularly important to ensure they are sufficiently trained and are provided with adequate guidelines and other support to enable them to function effectively.

This paper was prepared by Richard Boyle, a senior research officer at the Institute of Public Administration, Dublin, Ireland. Much of the material on which this paper is based was originally prepared for input to an online guide on the evaluation of socio-economic development produced by the European Commission (<http://www.evaled.info>). OED's task manager for this paper was Keith Mackay.

The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author, and do not necessarily represent the views of the World Bank.

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ABBREVIATIONS

CSF	Community Support Framework
DCRGA	Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs
DSFA	Department of Social and Family Affairs
ECD	Evaluation Capacity Development
ERCSC	Expenditure Review Steering Committee
ERI	Expenditure Review Initiative
ESF	European Social Fund
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MIF	Management Improvement Framework
NDP	National Development Plan
NESC	National Economic and Social Council
NUTS	Nomenclature of Territorial Statistical Units
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PVG	Performance Verification Group
SMI	Strategic Management Initiative

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this paper, two main drivers of evaluation capacity development in the Republic of Ireland are examined. One external to Ireland relates to the development of evaluation capacity since the 1980s as a result of the Structural Funds support for Ireland from the European Union. The second, internal driver is the Irish government's attempts since the late 1990s to develop an evaluation culture across all areas of public expenditure.

Evaluation Capacity Development and the EU Structural Funds

Since 1989, evaluation of the EU Structural Funds has been a formal requirement of those member states receiving this financial assistance, and has led to significant developments in evaluation practice in Ireland. The funds are applied through a number of operational programs which are run under a joint Irish-EU agreed Community Support Framework (CSF) plan. Each operational program is subject to ex ante, intermediate, and ex post evaluation, as is the CSF as a whole.

In terms of evaluation capacity development, a particular focus of attention in this paper is the creation of independent evaluation units. These units represent the development of specific evaluation expertise within the public service, which was not there before. General lessons from the development of the units of interest to others interested in building evaluation capacity in their operations can be discerned and are outlined in the paper. Other lessons on evaluation capacity development are also drawn out.

Evaluation Capacity Development and General Public Expenditure

There has been a renewed interest in the evaluation of public expenditure in Ireland in the 1990s and early 2000s. The Irish government instigated an Expenditure Review Initiative (ERI) in 1997. Key features of the ERI system explored in the paper include: a central steering committee to oversee the process as a whole, known as the Expenditure Review Steering Committee (ERCSC); a central secretariat to service the ERCSC and coordinate activities; joint spending department/Department of Finance steering groups to oversee and undertake individual reviews; spending department determination of expenditure programs to be reviewed and taking the lead role in reviews; and reporting via the steering group and central steering committee to the minister responsible for the program to be reviewed and the Minister for Finance, respectively.

In 2001, the Comptroller and Auditor General conducted a value for money audit of the ERI, to examine the extent to which the ERI achieved its objectives in the period 1997-2000. As a follow on from the Comptroller and Auditor General's study, the ERCSC reviewed practice to date and developed proposals to improve the ERI process. These proposals were considered and agreed by government. From the point of view of evaluation capacity development, a number of initiatives that have taken place since 2002 are of interest, principally (a) the establishment of a network of reviewers to provide training and other support, (b) the introduction of a formal system of quality review of reports, (c) the introduction of a system to monitor the impact of expenditure reviews, and (d) a review of the ERI conducted by the ERCSC in 2004. In 2005, attention is being given to encouraging political engagement and debate with the ERI, and thus enhancing the prioritization of the review process. An additional theme that is also receiving increasing attention is the need for the expenditure review process to link more effectively with other public service modernization initiatives.

Key Drivers of, and Barriers to, Evaluation Capacity Development

In summarizing the lessons learned from the experience of evaluation capacity development over the last twenty years, the paper identifies a number of key drivers of change, and barriers to be overcome. Among the key drivers are:

- The external ‘push’ to institutionalize evaluation from the European Union has had a significant effect on evaluation practice. This external push to promote evaluation has been a key determinant in systematizing the approach to evaluation compared to what had been a very ad hoc approach previously.
- The central support functions, of the evaluation unit of the National Development Plan (NDP)/CSF on the one hand and the ERI central steering committee secretariat on the other, have been influential in promoting and developing evaluation. Two aspects of their work, in particular, stand out from the perspective of evaluation capacity development. One is the development and spread of good practice, through the use of guidelines, the promotion of common approaches, the development of networks and the like. The second is the review role of such central units, taking a periodic overview of development, and promoting subsequent change and development. These functions will continue when the two units are merged in 2007.
- With regard to the issue of review, it is clearly important that evaluation capacity and practice is subject to formal, periodic scrutiny. The review of the ongoing evaluation function in the 1994-1999 CSF period by the central evaluation unit, and the value for money audit of the ERI conducted by the Comptroller and Auditor General, were both influential in terms of identifying strengths and weaknesses in evaluation capacity and suggesting ways forward. Similarly, the 2004 review carried out by the ERCSC was important in taking stock of progress made and limitations remaining in the expenditure review process.
- The independent evaluation units established during the 1989-1993 and 1994-1999 CSF periods were an important and innovative approach to building evaluation capacity where evaluation was not a significant function previously.
- The linking of evaluation capacity building in the ERI with the public service modernization program provides a supportive context for the spread of evaluation practice. Proposals to develop linkages between expenditure review and management information, resource budgeting and performance verification payments should further strengthen the linkage between evaluation and other resource allocation initiatives.
- Developments in independent quality assessment, networking, training and educational support for the supply side of evaluation have been well received, both by those participating in the events and by those with responsibility for spreading evaluation practice. Early indications are of a positive impact on the development of an evaluative culture. These actions are seen as contributing to a gradual improvement in the overall quality of expenditure review reports being produced.

Among the main barriers to evaluation capacity development identified are:

- Without the strong external push and formal requirement for evaluation, demand may vary. In the case of the 2000-2006 CSF period, where Structural Funds are a much smaller part of the total National Development Plan, the decision was made to abolish the departmental-based independent evaluation units and develop the central evaluation unit. In the changeover period, the evaluation expertise built up in the departmental-based units was lost to the system, and developing and maintaining the staff complement of the enhanced central unit has proved problematic.
- As a small country of less than 4 million people, the number of potential suppliers of professional evaluation services in Ireland is limited. There is a strong reliance on a small pool from which to draw evaluation expertise. The corollary of this point, however, is that a strong working relationship can be developed with professional experts who have developed a good working knowledge of the specific requirements of evaluation practice.
- It is possible to set over-ambitious goals and targets for evaluation practice. The ERI requirement that all expenditure programs be evaluated every three years was found to be clearly unachievable. Attention needs to be paid to defining the reach and scope of evaluation practice.
- Where program personnel, with little if any previous evaluation expertise, are used to evaluate programs the quality of resulting reports can in some instances be problematic. Sufficient training and support for this work is needed. So too is the prioritization of the evaluation work among the many other tasks such public servants are required to do.
- Without formal procedures and practices to integrate evaluation into decision-making, the impact of evaluation may be limited. This, in turn, may lead to decision-makers questioning the merits of putting effort into building evaluation capacity.

1. BACKGROUND

Ireland is a parliamentary democracy with a written constitution. It has a population of fewer than 4 million. Evaluation has been practiced in the public service for many years, with an interest in rational analysis and its application to planning and budgeting evident from the 1960s. But it is only from the late 1980s onwards that a systematic approach to evaluation practice and evaluation capacity building has been apparent, and it is this latter period that is the focus of interest of this paper. Attention is given specifically to two drivers of evaluation capacity building. One external to Ireland relates to the development of evaluation capacity in association with the introduction and development of the Structural Funds support for Ireland from the European Union. The second, internal driver is the Irish government's attempts since the late 1990s to develop an evaluation culture across all areas of public expenditure, not just the Structural Funds. Lessons learned from the Irish experience of evaluation capacity development are outlined.

2. A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW¹

As a relatively centralized state, much of the demand for, and supply of, evaluation has been generated at the central government level, and it is this level that is the primary focus of the paper. This demand has been somewhat patchy, but has been complemented by demand emanating from the European Union for the evaluation of European-funded support for Ireland, which has been a significant feature of the economy in the 1980s and 1990s.

In the late 1960s, in line with many other countries, there was an interest in rational analysis and its application to planning and budgeting. A report on the development of social research in Ireland (Friis 1965) called for objective studies of social programs and the development of trained social researchers. A report into the organization and operation of the public service notes: 'Skills in cost/utility techniques are scarce not only in the public service but in the country generally; there is an urgent need for their development in the public service. It is necessary that operating units of the public service should have the skills to apply these techniques to proposals for new expenditure and it is also necessary that those charged with central policy advice should be familiar with a technique that will be more and more used to justify proposals for increased expenditure' (Public Services Organisation Review Group 1969).

In response to these demands, a number of initiatives were taken to develop evaluative skills. The Department of Finance set up an analysis section, whose role was to provide training for a number of staff each year, to be placed as analysts in departments. The section developed links with Trinity College Dublin, which provided a course in public sector analysis, statistics and project evaluation. The analysis section also provided technical advice on issues related to project or program evaluation. An Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) was set up as an independent, nonprofit-making body, to provide research and advice on social and economic issues, including evaluation studies. Many of the state-sponsored bodies also developed evaluation skills within their agencies. Bodies such as FÁS (employee and training policies) and IDA Ireland (attracting foreign enterprises to Ireland) developed expertise in project evaluation, often using cost-benefit analysis.

¹ This section is largely derived from work undertaken by Boyle (2002).

However, despite these initiatives, in the 1970s and into the 1980s evaluation was limited in scope and largely peripheral to decision making. As one senior civil servant notes, while Ireland had a reasonably well-developed system for the evaluation of individual projects, it did not have a strong tradition of evaluation of policies and programs (Tutty 1994). The status of evaluation can be illustrated by the fact that many of the analysts trained by the analysis section were given work in other areas of departmental activity, once placed in departments, by the departments themselves.

Also in the 1980s, interest in evaluation as a tool of good governance took a backseat against the drive to control public expenditure, given an economic crisis with high taxation, borrowing, inflation, and unemployment. Poor economic conditions meant that the emphasis was put on cutting back on expenditure rather than examining its use in detail. The then secretary of the Department of Finance reflected official thinking in a statement: 'The issue here is not management of the public finances, but control ... techniques of management, while of some value, are no answer' (Doyle 1987).

One significant exception to this scenario of limited interest in evaluation in the 1980s is the area of European Union (EU) expenditure in Ireland. This is one area where demand for evaluation has been consistent and systematic. Ireland has been a major beneficiary of funding support from the EU. Tied to this expenditure has been a requirement to evaluate EU-funded programs. In the 1980s, this had significant impact in two main policy areas: industrial training and employment creation schemes, and anti-poverty and other community development programs. Interestingly, a distinctly different approach to evaluation was taken in each of these areas, as Murray (1992) notes: 'In the labor market area, evaluation has tended to focus on quantitative measurement of outcomes involving the use of complex statistical modeling techniques. With community development initiatives, qualitative methods concerned with process description rather than outcome measurement holds sway'.

Since 1989, evaluation of the EU Structural Funds has been a formal requirement of those receiving the assistance, and has led to further developments in evaluation practice in Ireland. The funds are applied through a number of operational programs which operate under a joint Irish-EU agreed Community Support Framework (CSF) plan. Each operational program is subject to ex ante, intermediate, and ex post evaluation, as is the CSF as a whole.

Outside of EU expenditure, there has been a renewed interest in evaluation of public expenditure in Ireland in the 1990s and early 2000s. As part of a more wide-ranging program of management reforms, there has been an emphasis on program review and evaluation. To this end, in 1997, the government approved a series of expenditure reviews to be carried out as part of a new system of comprehensive program expenditure reviews. The intention is to institutionalize evaluation of expenditure programs as part of the wider agenda of public service reform.

3. THE EUROPEAN STRUCTURAL FUNDS FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR IRELAND

Ireland has been a major beneficiary of funding support from the European Union (EU). Tied to this expenditure has been a requirement to evaluate EU-funded programs. Since 1989, evaluation of the EU Structural Funds has been a formal requirement of those receiving the assistance, and has led to significant developments in evaluation practice in Ireland. The funds are applied through a number of operational programs (sub-divided into ‘measures’) which are run under a joint Irish-EU agreed Community Support Framework (CSF) plan. Each operational program is subject to ex ante, intermediate, and ex post evaluation, as is the CSF as a whole.

In examining evaluation capacity development in Ireland with regard to evaluating the Structural Funds, it is useful to look at developments covering the last three Community Support Framework (CSF) periods: 1989-1993, 1994-1999 and 2000-2006. As noted by Hegarty (2003):

During both the 1989 to 1993 and 1994 to 1999 periods, Ireland was treated as an Objective 1 region. Total structural funds expenditure in Ireland amounted to 4.2 billion euro (*U.S. \$5.5 billion at May 2005 exchange rates*) under the CSF 1989 to 1993 and 5.8 billion euro under the CSF for 1994 to 1999, equivalent to about 1.7 per cent of average GDP over the entire period. In the current 2000 to 2006 programming period, Ireland has been designated as comprising two NUTS II regions:² the Border, Midland and Western region (which enjoys Objective 1 status to 2006); and the Southern and Eastern region (which qualifies for transitional Objective 1 funding to 2005). Including the 4 per cent performance reserve, the total structural funds allocation to Ireland under the CSF 2000 to 2006 amounts to 3.2 billion euro. This is equivalent, on an annual basis, to about 0.4 per cent of 2001 GDP.

The 1989-1993 CSF period saw the establishment of two independent evaluation units, the European Social Fund (ESF) program evaluation unit and the Industry evaluation unit. But a major expansion of evaluation capacity and output occurred during the 1994-1999 CSF, and this period represents the first structured attempt to build evaluation capacity for the Structural Funds in more than a relatively ad hoc manner. During the 1994-1999 period a central evaluation unit was established based in the Department of Finance, and a third independent evaluation unit was set up, covering agriculture and rural development. External evaluators were also appointed to evaluate operational program expenditure and the CSF as a whole (for details see CSF Evaluation Unit, 1998).

In the 1999-2006 period, where Structural Funds are a much smaller proportion of the National Development Plan (NDP) the independent evaluation units have been abolished, with the capacity of the central evaluation unit being increased to take on extra responsibilities and a significant use of external evaluators to conduct the mid-term evaluation of the operational programs and the NDP as a whole. The implications of these developments and changes for evaluation capacity development are outlined below.

3.1 Evaluation Capacity Development During the 1994-1999 CSF

With regard to evaluation, annualized expenditure on evaluation, with the exception of one small operational program where expenditure was higher, was about 1 per cent of total annual co-

² Nomenclature of Territorial Statistical Units (see www.csfinfo.com/htm/irelands_regions/index.htm)

financed CSF public expenditure for each operational program. Total evaluation expenditure to end of 1997 including the mid-term evaluation process and the cost of the central CSF evaluation unit was just over 1.2 per cent of total co-financed CSF public expenditure (CSF Evaluation Unit, 1998).

The institutional arrangements for CSF evaluation were quite complex. Six of the nine operational programs appointed an external evaluator (typically a consultancy firm); one operational program had an independent evaluation unit; one operational program had an independent evaluation unit plus an external evaluator; one operational program had neither an independent unit nor an external evaluator; and the ESF evaluation unit, the management structure of which was not integrated with CSF management structures, was responsible for the evaluation of six operational programs.

In practice, in the conduct of ongoing evaluation, independent units and external evaluators operated quite differently. The work of the independent units tended to focus on in-depth measure level (equivalent to project) evaluations. The work of external evaluators tended to be in the form of analysis of individual issues, shorter reports of broad focus, and oral advice. Some of the external evaluators adopted a 'watchdog' role whereby they raised questions and issues of concern at Monitoring Committee meetings and elsewhere (CSF Evaluation Unit, 1998).

In terms of evaluation capacity development, the independent evaluation units are of particular interest. They represent the development of specific evaluation expertise within the public service, that was not there before. They also, as a review of the ongoing evaluation function found, contributed:

... in a general way to the fostering of a more evaluative and analytical culture within the public service ... The extent of our reliance on a limited pool of available and suitable qualified private consultants is already problematic. Without the units, we would be more reliant on this small pool (CSF Evaluation Unit, 1998, p. 30).

The development of these independent evaluation units is discussed below. This is followed by a discussion on the role of the central CSF evaluation unit.

Establishment of Independent Evaluation Units

The European Social Fund (ESF) evaluation unit was established in January 1992 on the initiative of the European Commission, to evaluate the effectiveness of all human resource development measures supported by the ESF. It was located in the Department of Labour. In August 1993, the Industry evaluation unit became operational. It was responsible for monitoring and evaluation of measures financed through the operational program for industrial development. It was located in the Department of Industry and Commerce. In late 1993, major changes in the structuring of government departments saw the main functions of the Departments of Labour and Industry and Commerce, including the two evaluation units, merged in a new Department of Enterprise and Employment (now entitled the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment). Also, in 1995, an analysis and evaluation unit was established to monitor and evaluate aspects of the operational program for agriculture, rural development and forestry (hereafter, the unit is referred to as the Agriculture evaluation unit).

These three evaluation units were separate and independent from the Irish national administration. Studies carried out under their auspices were independent and not subject to veto by the national administration. The ESF evaluation unit was 100 per cent funded by the EU

Commission. The Industry evaluation unit was 75 per cent funded by the EU Commission, with the remaining funds coming from the national administration.

Focus, scope and coverage of the evaluation units. The three evaluation units focused on the evaluation of measures that made up the operational programs, rather than investigating broad policies. Both formative and summative ex-post evaluations were carried out, whereby judgments were made as to the process of managing various measures and programs, and the effectiveness of particular interventions. The studies had a clear public accountability focus, being concerned with the benefits gained from the expenditure of public money. In terms of timescale, evaluation studies in the units would normally be expected to take between six and twelve months to complete. Evaluators would normally have, or have access to, necessary analytical back-up such as software packages and so on.

In essence, the scope of the evaluations carried out in the units can be said to cover the ‘middle ground’ in the evaluation of Structural Funds—between the evaluation of the operational programs as a whole at the one extreme, and the one-off ‘ad hoc’ evaluations of individual projects and measures at the other extreme. The approach to evaluations carried out in the units usually involved agreement of the objectives for the study with the stakeholders involved, fieldwork using quantitative and qualitative methods to obtain information, and preparation of reports. The detailed approach applied by the ESF evaluation unit is set out in Box 1.

With regard to the follow-up of reports, in the case of the Industry evaluation unit, after the report had been considered by the steering group and subsequently finalized, it was circulated to the responsible person(s) in the Irish administration to obtain a formal response to the recommendations contained in the report. A paper setting out the main recommendations and the official response (e.g. whether a recommendation was accepted, and the approach and time frame for implementation, or whether rejected, and the reasons why), plus a summary of the report, formed the basis for deliberations by the monitoring committee. Copies of full reports were available to members of the committee on request. The intention was that the monitoring committee takes decisions on which recommendations it wished to have implemented. These recommendations would then be the main focus of follow-up reports—either specifically or through the annual reports—to the committee concerning implementation of the recommendations.

Staffing and resourcing the evaluation units. The staffing structure for the units varied. The ESF evaluation unit had one manager, seven evaluators, and five support staff, though staff turnover and slow recruitment meant that actual capacity was often below this level. The Industry evaluation unit staff complement fluctuated from eight staff in the early days (five evaluators and three support staff) to five later on (four evaluators, one of whom managed the unit, and one support staff). The Agriculture evaluation unit had a staff complement of one manager, two evaluators and one support staff, but actual employment levels were often lower, with one evaluator being common.

The evaluation units were staffed with people from a range of backgrounds from the civil service, wider public service and the private sector. The manager of the ESF evaluation unit and one of the managers of the Industry evaluation unit came from the Department of Labour, and the Department of Industry and Commerce respectively. They therefore had a good background knowledge of the departments and their role and involvement in Structural Funds allocation and monitoring. The background of the evaluators varied between those involved in public administration, or working in tertiary education, or self-employed conducting small-scale

evaluation work at the local level, or the private sector. Those evaluators who came to the units from public sector organizations normally did so by being seconded from their organization.

Box 1: European Social Fund (ESF) Program Evaluation Unit—Evaluation Model

<i>Phase of Evaluation</i>	<i>Methodologies</i>
1. Preliminary research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desk research
2. Examine context for program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of secondary literature, national and international • Consultation with relevant information sources
3. Clarify objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structured interviews and consultation with stakeholders i.e. those involved in policy determination. Co-ordination of programs and delivery
4. Development of a framework for the research process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consolidation of first three phases
5. Fieldwork <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy makers • Head office personnel • Trainers • Trainees • Employers • Other interest groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A range of methodologies is used including quantitative and qualitative research methods: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Surveys (postal and face to face) - Focus groups/workshops - Structured interviews - Consultations
6. Consolidation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conclusions and recommendations are based on analysis of the information gathered, using the following methodologies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Statistical analysis - Content analysis - Thematic analysis - Meta analysis
7. Consultation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft report forwarded to responsible Department/Agency • In-depth consultation/clarification • Report finalization
8. Submission of reports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simultaneous submission to Department of Enterprise and Employment, and European Commission

Source: National Economic and Social Council 1995, p. 96.

A key criterion for employment in the units was work experience. This was particularly important for the credibility of evaluators going out into the field, to the executive agencies, to gather data. Young graduates straight out of tertiary institutions were not seen as having sufficient credibility to interact with senior managers in agencies. A background of working experience in analysis and evaluation was seen as enhancing the standing of the evaluator, and subsequently their ability to conduct evaluation studies.

Creation and Role of Central CSF Evaluation Unit

Evaluation arrangements under the 1994-1999 CSF were strengthened from previous arrangements, with the formal requirement for prior appraisal, mid-term review and ex-post evaluation. In this context, the Department of Finance recognized the need for improved co-ordination of evaluation activities. In particular, it was recognized that there was no proactive, systematic approach to avoiding duplication of work and to ensuring best practice in methodology. Smaller programs were also recognized as needing assistance/advice in commissioning or undertaking evaluations. Given the volume of evaluation work, and the considerable cost in national and EU resources, coordination and advice was seen to be necessary so as to get value for money from the work being undertaken.

To achieve better co-ordination, it was decided in 1996 to establish a central evaluation unit, based in the Department of Finance. This unit was funded under the Structural Funds CSF Technical Assistance operational program. The main tasks identified for the unit were:

- setting up and maintaining a central register of evaluations;
- reviewing the methodology used in the evaluations carried out with a view to identifying best practice and making recommendations for future evaluations;
- reviewing the work programs for evaluation of the operational programs, with a view to identifying the scope for coordinating evaluations and avoiding duplication;
- examining requests for evaluations from the regional authorities, and making recommendations in this matter;
- reviewing the adequacy of the performance indicators for the CSF, and making recommendations for their improvement or for alternative indicators where appropriate; and
- considering the arrangements for mid-term review of the CSF and the operational programs, and making recommendations in the matter.

The staffing of the central evaluation unit was comprised of one senior evaluator who managed the unit, one evaluator and support staff. It was agreed that the evaluators would be employed on a temporary, one-year, non-pensionable contract basis in the first instance, with the possibility of extension for further periods (with the option of secondment if an existing public servant took up a post).

In practice, and particularly from the perspective of evaluation capacity development, the central evaluation unit played a key role in the identification and dissemination of good practice in evaluation. One particularly helpful role was the production of good practice guides and reviews of practice, including:

- proposed working rules for cost-benefit analysis;
- proposals for CSF performance indicators for the 2000-2006 programming period; and
- review of ongoing evaluation function in the CSF.

In particular, this latter document, concerning the review of the ongoing evaluation function in the CSF, is widely seen as promoting a common shared understanding of the purpose and focus of evaluation of the Structural Funds in Ireland. One particularly helpful part of the review from this perspective was the outlining of the approach that should be taken to ongoing evaluation work appropriate in a CSF context. Five key evaluation questions were identified:

- *Rationale* (is there a market failure?)
- *Continued relevance* (to what extent do the objectives remain relevant in the light of external developments?)
- *Effectiveness* (are we meeting our objectives?)
- *Efficiency* (are benefits commensurate with costs, and could it be delivered more economically?)
- *Impact* (what are net effects or changes in the socio-economic situation that can be attributed to the program?)

These five evaluation questions have subsequently been used to guide evaluation activity and provide a common approach to the evaluation of the Structural Funds, as is discussed further below.

Summary of the Role of Dedicated Evaluation Units for Evaluation Capacity Development

The creation of these three departmental-based evaluation units and the central evaluation unit in Ireland represents an interesting and innovative approach to building evaluation capacity in a situation where evaluation was of a relatively lower order priority prior to their creation. While the scope and remit of the units varied significantly, some general lessons from the development of the units of interest to others interested in building evaluation capacity in their operations can be discerned:

Internal versus external evaluation. The units were clearly and explicitly independent of the national administration. However, in practice they had very close links with government departments. Physically, the units were located in offices within departments. Most of the managers and some of the evaluators came from government departments or associated agencies, and therefore knew the system well. This closeness facilitated access to information and, in general, the units encountered an attitude of free access to information in departments. Through the departments, the units had access to the executive agencies, and the authority needed to ensure they got the required information. So, in terms of internal versus external evaluation, the units may be said to represent a hybrid that attempted to capture elements of both. They did not have the close ties to programs or measures that staff working on them have, but neither did they have the distance and perhaps lack of understanding of the system which once-off external evaluators sometimes bring to studies. Rather than being described as internal or external evaluation units, they are better seen as independent evaluation units.

Managing the units. The role of unit manager is an important one in that they have to manage both (a) internally, the activities of the unit, and (b) externally, the environment within which the unit operates. A background in the area under scrutiny, preferably with a policy related element to the work, is an advantage in managing this situation.

Employing evaluators. Evaluators must have sufficient skills and expertise to command credibility in the system in which they operate. This involves having a mixture of analytical and evaluative skills and some work experience. In terms of recruitment practice, the one-year contract model caused some problems. Turnover tended to be quick, and recruitment of replacements slow. A longer contract was widely seen as being more advisable in the future.

Developing and overseeing the work program. A steering group or committee to oversee the work of the unit provides a useful oversight. Steering arrangements for the Industry evaluation unit were widely seen as being good practice, with some of the other committees being over-large and focused on policy as opposed to quality of evaluation issues. The Industry evaluation unit steering committee agreed terms of reference for individual evaluations and approved draft reports from a quality perspective. The membership of the committee was small, including representatives from the main departments and agencies with responsibility for the operational program, the European Commission, and three independent technical experts. The steering committee did not concern itself with policy issues as such.

Dissemination and follow up of reports. Mechanisms need to be put in place to ensure that recommendations contained in evaluation reports are followed-up, and that the report findings are disseminated in the most appropriate manner to those who find them of relevance.

Promotion of good practice. The central evaluation unit, in particular, had a key role to play in the promotion of good practice with regard to evaluation of the Structural Funds. The development and promulgation of good practice guides and periodic reviews of practice are important elements in promoting a common approach and the development of a shared evaluation culture among the main participants.

3.2 Evaluation Capacity Development During the 2000-2006 CSF

The CSF for 2000-2006 is part of a much larger National Development Plan (NDP) for Ireland. The NDP proposes 50 billion euro (*U.S. \$65 billion*) of public investment between 2000 and 2006. Of this total, the CSF accounts for 5.4 billion euro, of which the EU is providing 3.2 billion euro, with the Irish government providing the remainder. The context for evaluation activity related to the Structural Funds is, therefore, quite different to that which applied during the 1994-1999 period. The strong economic growth in Ireland during the 1990s means that, relatively, the Structural Funds, while still important, are a much smaller element in the overall public expenditure plans.

In this context, the Department of Finance reviewed and revised evaluation arrangements. A decision was made not to continue the departmental based independent evaluation units. Instead, the central evaluation unit was expanded, and renamed the NDP/CSF evaluation unit. The monitoring committee for the technical assistance program sets the work program for this central unit. The unit has a staff complement of five evaluators and two administrative staff. Evaluators are employed on three-year contracts. The unit has a budget of 4.6 million euro over 2000-2006.

In line with the guidance developed by the central evaluation unit during the 1994-1999 period, an agreed overall evaluation approach to the NDP and CSF was established. This indicates that evaluations must address the key questions of rationale, continued relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and impact. Hegarty (2003) notes the importance of this agreed approach for evaluation practice:

The adoption of this evaluation approach has provided a valuable “anchor” for the NDP/CSF evaluation process. In particular, the adoption and communication of this schema has helped create a greater awareness and understanding of the purpose and focus of evaluation work among program managers and other stakeholders. The key evaluation questions underpin both the design of evaluation work programs and terms of reference for individual evaluation projects.

The NDP/CSF evaluation unit has conducted some ongoing evaluation work itself. The unit has also contracted out evaluation work to independent, private suppliers of evaluation. The main evaluation suppliers in this context have been relatively small, specialized providers (either small firms, or smaller parts of larger consultancy and accountancy firms, usually with a strong focus on economic evaluation expertise). One organization, the Economic and Social Research Institute, through the development of a macro-economic model capable of being used to assess the impact of Structural Funds in the Irish economy, has developed particular strengths for macro-level evaluation of the Structural Funds at the ex-ante, mid-term and ex-post stages. Thus the dependence on a relatively small market for evaluators in Ireland, noted in the 1994-1999 CSF, continues. However, the counterpoint to this issue is that the small number of firms involved have, over the years, built up specialized expertise which is tailored to the requirements of Structural Funds evaluation, with a good working knowledge both of the techniques needed and also the social and political context within which the evaluations take place. The smallness of the market for Structural Funds evaluators within Ireland therefore has both weaknesses but also some strengths with regard to evaluation capacity development.

In general terms, the disbandment of the departmental-based evaluation units and centralization of evaluation efforts into one evaluation unit based in the Department of Finance has led to some reduction in capacity for the evaluation of Structural Funds within the public sector. The central evaluation unit itself, even with the extended contracts for evaluators, has had some difficulties in maintaining staffing levels. And the kind of detailed evaluative information provided by the departmental-based units has not, in the main, been replaced by the operational program-level evaluations carried out on contract by private suppliers.

4. GENERAL PUBLIC EXPENDITURE: THE EXPENDITURE REVIEW INITIATIVE

Outside of EU expenditure, there has been a renewed interest in the evaluation of public expenditure in Ireland in the 1990s and early 2000s. In the improved economic climate of the 1990s, more thought has been given to the management of the public service, so as to help maintain the competitive economic climate. For example, in 1993, the Comptroller and Auditor General (Amendment) Act was passed. This act gave a mandate to the Comptroller and Auditor General to carry out value-for-money audits, and to examine the adequacy of departments' mechanisms for evaluating the effectiveness of their operations. In 1994 a Strategic Management Initiative (SMI) was introduced to enhance the strategic capabilities of managers in the Irish public service (and particularly in the civil service). Arising from the SMI, the government introduced a program of management change for the civil service entitled *Delivering Better Government* in 1996, and a Public Service Management Act in 1997, the first substantial reorganization of central government since 1924. These reforms were influenced by managerialist developments in public management in other OECD countries (Boyle, 1997). More recently, an influential state body, the National Economic and Social Council, has called for the development of an evaluation culture within the civil service (National Economic and Social Council, 2002).

As part of this broader process of public service modernization, in 1997 the government announced an Expenditure Review Initiative (ERI). The ERI proposed the agreement between the Department of Finance and spending departments of schedules of reviews to be carried out, with the aim of ensuring that all areas of expenditure are subject to review at least once every three years. Despite the name, the ERI is intended as a broad evaluation of government programs, and is not limited to examining expenditure alone: the outcomes of that expenditure are a key focus of concern. The approach taken was heavily influenced by the Australian evaluation system established in the 1980s, following a visit by a group of senior civil servants to Australia in 1994 (Byrne et al. 1995; Mackay, 1998).

Key features of the ERI system include: a central steering committee to oversee the process as a whole, known as the Expenditure Review Steering Committee (ERCSC); a central secretariat to service the ERCSC and coordinate activities; joint spending department/Department of Finance steering groups to oversee and undertake individual reviews (sometimes with the assistance of dedicated personnel or outside consultants); spending department determination of expenditure programs to be reviewed and taking the lead role in reviews; and reporting via the steering group and central steering committee to the minister responsible for the program to be reviewed and the Minister for Finance respectively. Two main aims were identified for the ERI:

- to provide a systematic analysis of what is actually being achieved by expenditure in each program; and
- to provide a basis on which more informed decisions can be made on priorities within and between expenditure programs (Department of Finance, 1997).

The intention was to create a whole of government evaluation strategy. Through institutionalizing and formalizing the demand for evaluation, the ERI was intended to stimulate evaluation capacity development in government departments. An evaluation culture within spending departments was to be encouraged. It was recognized that before the ERI, the capacity of government departments to carry out evaluations varied considerably, both in terms of technical skills and availability of resources. In some departments, evaluation was seen as relatively well developed. This was particularly the case in departments with a significant level of EU-funded programs. In other

departments, little or no review of expenditure was undertaken. The Department of Finance issued guidelines on the ERI that showed it was intended to provide information for decision-making about whether or not there is a continuing need for programs and, if so, how the delivery of the programs might be improved. The main issues to be addressed were efficiency, effectiveness, relevance and prioritization of spending. To facilitate a focus on these issues, a template for terms of reference that departments should take account of when developing specific terms of reference for individual expenditure reviews was issued by the Department of Finance. This template is set out in Annex 1. An example of a 'typical' expenditure review is given in Box 2.

Box 2: A 'Typical' Expenditure Review

While a typical expenditure review is in many ways a misnomer, as each review has its own particularities, the review of the Sports Capital Programme is an example of a good review carried out in the Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism which had little previous experience to draw on, and which followed central guidance well.

The Sports Capital Programme is the primary means by which the State provides financial support towards the provision of sporting facilities at local, regional and national levels. The expenditure review made it clear that the effectiveness of the Sports Capital Programme had up until the time of the review been restricted by the absence of a clearly-defined strategy for the provision of sports facilities. The review also recommended that such a strategy to be informed by a national audit of sports facilities. A new inter-agency working group has been set up in 2005 to conduct the audit and oversee the development of a sports facilities strategy.

A steering group in the department completed the review over a nine-month period, with one person allocated the main responsibility for drafting the report. The early days of the review were taken up with clarifying the terms of reference and establishing project management procedures. Data gathering proved a challenge, with surveys issued to a sample of grant-aided projects and a sample of unsuccessful applicants, and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, being the main approaches used. On the basis of the survey data and interviews, a small number of case studies were chosen for more in-depth investigation. Once this data-gathering exercise was complete, analysis and documentation of the information followed. The draft report was subject to independent quality assessment.

There have been two phases of the ERI to date. The first phase covered the period 1997 to 2001. The second phase, covering the period 2002-2004, was initiated in June 2002 following a government decision that made modifications to the process. These modifications followed on from a value for money audit of the ERI. An internal review of the ERI carried out by the Expenditure Review Central Steering Committee in 2004 has triggered a third phase of development from early 2005.

4.1 ERI 1997-2001: Assessment of Initial Implementation

In 2001, the Comptroller and Auditor General conducted a value for money audit of the ERI, to examine the extent to which the ERI achieved its objectives in the period 1997-2000. Among the main findings of this audit were:

- The aim of reviewing all expenditure programs every three years was not achieved.
- Many departments were slow to start work on their reviews, and slow in carrying them out once started. By the end of 2000, 62 of the total of 118 planned reviews had been carried out.
- The arrangements for carrying out reviews under the ERI varied from department to department. The most common choice was to rely primarily on the line managers in the area under review to carry out most of the work. In a few cases, staff in specialized evaluation units took the lead role. A few reviews were contracted out to private suppliers. (See Box 3 for practice in the Department of Social and Family Affairs, widely regarded as a good-practice case).

Box 3: Building evaluation capacity in the Department of Social and Family Affairs

The Department of Social and Family Affairs (DSFA) is widely seen as a leader of good practice with regard to carrying out expenditure reviews. In a quality assessment of a sample of reviews carried out by departments for the value for money study undertaken by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General, the review chosen from the DSFA received the highest quality rating. The Department has undertaken more reviews than any other department or office.

The Department introduced a two-tier structure for ensuring reviews are undertaken:

- A high-level committee chooses review topics in line with departmental priorities and oversees the ERI process. This high-level committee is chaired by the Secretary General and includes representatives from reviews underway, the finance division, the program evaluation unit, and the Department of Finance.
- A steering committee is created for each individual review. The steering committee is typically made up of the program manager and representatives from the finance division, the public expenditure division of the Department of Finance, and the program evaluation unit. The committee may also include representatives from other affected sections of the department and other departments/agencies depending on the topic. The steering committee is responsible for drafting terms of reference and submitting them for approval to the high-level committee; planning and conducting the review; agreeing methodologies; writing the report; and liaison with the quality assessor.

In practice, much of the work of writing the review falls to the program manager in the area under scrutiny. The Department has a small program evaluation unit that provides support and coordination for both the high-level and steering committees.

- The quality of the expenditure review reports varied considerably. Of a sample investigated, the evaluations tended to be better at review of objectives and assessment of cost efficiency than in identifying and assessing performance indicators or evaluating effectiveness.
- Nevertheless, the review process directed attention to many policy areas not regularly or well analysed before. Overall, the process was found to provide some additional assurance that government expenditures were being spent in a well-directed manner.

- While there was still a wide variation in evaluation capacity, the review process had helped the introduction and development of the concept of evaluation in areas of the civil service where previously it had either been non-existent or poorly understood.
- Building up stronger support mechanisms, central guidance and impact reviews should be the priorities in developing the review process. In particular, a comprehensive strategy for the development of the ERI should be put in place, there should be a systematic process of quality assessment of reviews, and a formal process for monitoring review impacts. (Comptroller and Auditor General, 2001).

4.2 ERI 2002-2004: Central and Departmental Responses to the Value for Money Audit

As a follow-on from the Comptroller and Auditor General's study, the central steering committee with overall responsibility for the ERI (the ERCSC) reviewed practice to date and developed proposals to improve the ERI process. These proposals were considered and agreed by government. From the point of view of evaluation capacity development, a number of initiatives that have taken place since 2002 are of interest, principally (a) the establishment of a network of reviewers to provide training and other support, (b) the introduction of a formal system of quality review of reports, (c) the introduction of a system to monitor the impact of expenditure reviews, and (d) a review of the ERI conducted by the ERCSC in 2004.

A Network of Expenditure Reviewers

In order to address the need for more support and guidance for reviewers, a network for people involved in conducting expenditure reviews from government departments was established. This network is maintained by the secretariat to the central steering committee (the secretariat is composed of two staff). There are three main aspects to the network:

- The provision of training support.* A three-module training program has been developed for staff doing expenditure reviews. As most reviewers are civil servants who often do not have any expertise in evaluation, the training gives basic information on how to proceed. As well as this training program, other ad hoc training events are organized on a periodic basis, such as guest lectures by experts on particular topics.
- The provision of extranet support for reviewers.* The secretariat has established an extranet for the network, hosted by the Centre for Management and Organization Development in the Department of Finance. This extranet is intended to keep reviewers up to date with developments, provides links to source documentation and other resources for conducting reviews, and has a chat facility. Access to previous review reports is also available through the site, so that reviewers can see if similar issues/methodologies have been used before.
- The promotion of discussion and debate on the ERI.* The network is used as a sounding board for discussion on issues regarding future developments of the ERI. For example, the proposals for quality assessment of reviews and procedures to track the use of reviews were discussed with members of the network and amended before being applied in practice.

A Formal Independent Quality Review Procedure

A significant finding of the value for money study of the ERI was the variable standard of many of the review reports. From the point of view of evaluation capacity development, it was important that the quality of reports be enhanced, so as to improve the usefulness and relevance of the product. To this end, the ERCSC has introduced a formal procedure for the independent assessment of the quality of reports produced under the ERI. A panel of independent evaluation experts has been established (drawn from research institutions, academics and consultants). An evaluation expert listed on the panel may be invited by departments to tender for the quality assessment of draft expenditure review reports prepared under the ERI. An evaluation expert may also be asked to offer specific advice at the initial stages of expenditure reviews in relation to terms of reference, planning the review, performance indicators and evaluation methodology. The intention here is to supplement and help develop the skills base of reviewers by using independent expertise to enhance the quality of reviews. The department concerned meets the fee charged by the evaluation expert. Experts are contracted as independent external reviewers; they are not asked to carry out any part of the expenditure review. Generally, experts are employed for between 2 to 5 days (mostly at the lower end) for this quality review work.

In the assessment process, the evaluation expert is required to prepare an initial draft of their assessment report and forward it to the department. A meeting between the evaluation expert and the department may be necessary at this stage. The evaluation expert should take on board any comments made by the department to the extent they consider appropriate before submitting a final assessment report. It is clearly stated in guidance that the objective of the assessment is to comment on the quality of the evaluative process and methodologies, rather than on any policy recommendations set out in the report. The department then considers the assessment report and makes any changes to the draft expenditure review report it judges necessary. The final expenditure review report, together with the quality assessment report, is submitted to the ERCSC for information.

The assessment must have regard to the following criteria or questions, derived from guidelines for the ERI produced by the Department of Finance:

1. Are the terms of reference appropriate to the ERI?
2. Does the evaluation report comprehensively address the terms of reference?
3. Is the overall analytical approach adequate and are the methodologies utilized robust?
4. Does the report address potential future performance indicators that might be used to better monitor the performance of the program?
5. Are the conclusions and recommendations of the evaluation supported by the analysis carried out?
6. Comment on the structure, presentation and clarity of the report (Department of Finance, 2003).

The guidance also notes that the assessment should include any recommendations that the evaluation expert wishes to make on the process of evaluation within the department.

In establishing the panel of independent evaluation experts, the ERCSC also recognized that the committee itself has its own independent role in relation to quality assessment. As part of this process, the ERCSC sends periodic questionnaires to a sample number of evaluation experts on the panels which carried out assessment reports. In this questionnaire, the evaluation expert is asked for their views on issues such as the operation of steering committees, the quality of evaluative capacity within departments, and the role and relevance of expert assistance. The intention here is to use the panel as an additional data source on how evaluation capacity is developing within departments, and what issues consequently the ERCSC can be addressing or promote that will further enhance capacity and quality.

It should also be noted with regard to more informal quality review that all expenditure review reports must be published on the website of the department or office undertaking the review. This aids transparency, and also allows public contestability of the report analysis and findings. (See, for example, the website of the Department of Social and Family Affairs: http://www.welfare.ie/publications/exp_rev/).

Tracking the Impact of Expenditure Reviews

None of the departments involved in the ERI up to the period covered by the value for money audit adopted formal systems to follow up on the impact of the reviews they carried out. However, in the second phase of the ERI initiated in June 2002, the ERCSC introduced a system for the assessment of the impact of reviews.

Under the review arrangements, it is specified that the primary responsibility for implementation of recommendations made in expenditure review reports rests with departments themselves. The review is complete when the Secretary General of the department signs it off. Each review must be published on the website of the department and laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas (parliament). It is intended that this will open the reviews to greater scrutiny by the Oireachtas and by the general public.

Centrally, from the spring of 2003, meetings are taking place between the ERCSC and Secretaries General of departments on a rotating basis at which the impact of reviews, the quality of reviews, and views on the ERI generally are discussed. The aim here is to promote the engagement of top management in the process of building an evaluation culture within departments, and also to get an overview of the management perspective on the ERI.

Finally with regard to general impact of the ERI, the ERCSC has decided to publish its own periodic reports on the ERI. The first such report was published in October 2004 (Department of Finance, 2004) and forms the basis for discussion in the next section.

The ERCSC Review

The report of the ERCSC to the Minister of Finance (Department of Finance, 2004) highlights the committee's views on developments that have taken place under the ERI since June 2002:

- The number of expenditure reviews to which departments/offices have committed themselves is reasonable, taking into account other evaluations underway under the NDP and as sectoral studies. (The government approved 52 reviews to be undertaken in 2002, comprising 21 'rollover' reviews from the earlier phase of the initiative, 29 new reviews, and two cross-departmental reviews).

- There were slippages in the completion of reviews in comparison with the approved program. (At the time of the ERCSC review, all of the 2002 reviews should have been completed. But in practice, of the 52 approved reviews, approximately half had been completed, one quarter were still ongoing, and a quarter had been overtaken by other evaluations or a decision had been made to not proceed or to defer the review).
- The topics selected for review have tended in some cases to be relatively small scale or to account for a small percentage of the overall budget of the department/office.
- The evaluative capacity of departments/offices was found to be variable, with some deficiencies in some departments/offices in terms of planning, managing and resourcing the expenditure review process.
- The extent to which expenditure reviews are driving decisions on the allocation of resources is not clear.
- There is scope to build on the synergies that exist between the ERI and other elements of public service modernization.
- Overall, the ERI has led to improvements in the approach to evaluation and the evaluation culture of departments and offices.

The report therefore presents something of a mixed picture. Despite the introduction of the additional support following on from the review of the Comptroller and Auditor General, several departments and offices were still not delivering reviews on time. And the impact and comprehensiveness of many reviews was open to question. However, the report notes that it is still early days for the changes introduced in 2002 to have impacted comprehensively. Improvements are expected over the next two to three years as the new arrangements are bedded in and as the impact of training initiatives are progressively felt. The report also contains specific recommendations aimed at addressing the identified shortcomings (see Annex 2 for details).

Also on the more positive side, the review process was seen to have contributed to building improved evaluation practice with a range of issues being addressed by reviews. This latter, more positive interpretation is supported by the views of Secretaries General of government departments with whom the ERCSC met in compiling their report. Overall, the Secretaries General stressed that reviews had resulted in better information and advice, and so were a useful contribution to policy development. Although not necessarily directly influencing decisions on resource allocation, the reviews were seen as usefully contributing to resource allocation decisions made in the Estimates process. Direct contribution to resource allocation decisions should not be viewed as the only criterion against which to judge expenditure reviews. Box 4 gives an example from the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs that shows how and why one department is engaging more effectively with the ERI process.

Box 4: Engaging with the expenditure review process – the case of the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs

The Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (DCRGA) is a relatively new department, being established by government in June 2002. This new department brings together a range of functions previously undertaken by a number of departments. The Department is becoming an active player in the expenditure review process. Three factors in particular are influencing the high degree of engagement of the Department with the process:

- The Secretary General of the Department has taken an active interest in ensuring that expenditure reviews are carried out and taken seriously. He has a background in policy analysis and interest in the issue. He wants the Department to have more of a focus on the outcomes it is achieving.
- The representative from the public expenditure division of the Department of Finance, who liaises with the DCRGA on expenditure reviews, is a champion of the process. This engagement means that there is external pressure for good reviews to complement the internal pressure from top management.
- Attention is being given to training staff undertaking reviews, and trying to ensure that people with the interest and skills needed actually undertake the reviews.

4.3 ERI 2005 Onwards: Next Steps

The ERCSC report (Department of Finance, 2004) was the subject of discussion at a meeting of the Finance and Public Service committee of the Oireachtas (parliament) in March 2005. The committee endorsed the recommendations in the report, while expressing concerns about the limited impact of expenditure reviews to date and the fact that many of the reviews are not completed on time. This discussion at the political level is part of a process aimed at getting more political engagement with the expenditure review process. To date, political input has been limited. One of the recommendations of the ERCSC report is that, as well as placing review reports before the Houses of the Oireachtas, departments/offices should forward copies to the clerks of the appropriate Oireachtas committees. The intention here is to encourage political engagement and debate, and thus enhance the prioritization of the review process.

An additional theme raised by the ERCSC report that has not received much attention to date is the need for the expenditure review process to link more effectively with other public service modernization initiatives. This absence of linkage was highlighted by the National Economic and Social Council (NESC, 2002) in a review of public expenditure management, when they noted with regard to expenditure reviews that: "...in some cases there appears to be too much emphasis on compliance (i.e., a successful outcome means completion of a certain number of reviews) and not enough on using the reviews to make better allocation decisions and to improve strategic planning more generally". With such thoughts in mind, the ERCSC report identifies a number of developments that could improve the linkage between the ERI and other changes:

- A Management Information Framework (MIF) project is underway that is intended to equip departments and offices with enhanced financial management information and reporting systems. Under the MIF, performance indicator groups have been established in all departments and offices to review and enhance the performance indicator base for

management information and reporting. It is recommended that there should be greater coordination between the ERI and MIF. The MIF should support the provision of more, better and timely data for expenditure reviews. In turn, expenditure reviews should help develop and refine performance indicators and identify appropriate data requirements for management purposes.

- A pilot project in two departments, due to be reported on in 2005, is seeking to promote closer linkage of strategic and business planning, and resource allocation, to performance measurement based on output and outcome indicators. This pilot Resource Allocation and Business Planning project, as it is known, is using expenditure reviews carried out in the two pilot departments to inform developments in the program areas affected. It is intended that mainstreaming of the project will further encourage the use of data from expenditure reviews in the resource allocation and business planning process.
- Initiatives are underway to encourage public service managers to seek out and exploit efficiencies. From 2002, savings generated during the course of a year as a result of specific policy measures taken by a minister can be retained and applied to another higher priority program. In the 2004 budget, the Minister for Finance announced the introduction of rolling 5-year multi-annual capital investment envelopes, enabling departments and offices to better plan and manage their capital programs. Expenditure reviews are being promoted as ways of facilitating the identification of practices that will contribute to the effective implementation of these new expenditure management arrangements.
- Under the terms of *Sustaining Progress* (2003), a social partnership agreement between the government and social partners (employers, trade unions, and key social and voluntary sector representatives), procedures are set out for verifying improvements in organizational performance in return for public service pay increases. To determine that conditions for payment are met, performance verification groups (PVGs) are in operation in sectors of the public service (civil service, local authorities, justice, education and health services). The PVG makes an assessment of progress with regard to implementation of the modernization agenda based on the provision of action plans by organizations, and the subsequent provision of progress reports. The ERCSC report recommends that future departmental progress reports should detail the current expenditure review plans that relate to the sectors for which they are responsible and report on progress in finalizing the expenditure reviews set out in those plans. This is intended as an additional incentive to departments to complete reviews on time and to quality standards: failure to do so could adversely affect the PVG assessment of departmental performance.

A further new development in this phase of the ERI is an institutional one, relating to the central support body. After the current National Development Plan runs out at the end of 2006, it is intended to merge the expenditure review central secretariat and the NDP/CSF evaluation unit. The intention is to have one central unit in the Department of Finance with overall responsibility for coordinating evaluative effort with regard to all public expenditure across government departments and offices. It is intended that this central evaluation unit will continue with coordinating activities such as maintaining the network of expenditure reviewers, producing reports on progress, issuing guidance, and commissioning external evaluations of major operational programs. It is also intended that the unit will undertake some evaluation work, particularly in relation to cross-departmental programs and some major capital project evaluations.

5. TRAINING, EDUCATION AND SUPPORT FOR EVALUATION CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

It is worth briefly noting some of the supply side support that has been developed to increase the professionalization of evaluation practice in Ireland. In general, historically, Ireland has a very strong tradition of applied social sciences, and disciplines such as psychology and economics have provided a basic grounding for many evaluators. However, until relatively recently, there have been few systematic attempts to develop evaluation skills.

The network of expenditure reviewers for the ERI has already been mentioned. This is limited to civil servants who are involved in conducting evaluations under the ERI. It is, however, an important resource and is seen as an important sounding board when new proposals affecting the ERI are being considered. Apart from this network, an Irish Evaluation Network was established in 2002 for all those interested in public service evaluation, whether from the public or the private sectors. This network has run a number of seminars, workshops and conferences, and established a website and directory of members. The Irish Evaluation Network is an informal network overseen by a steering group composed of public servants, academics and consultants with an interest in evaluation (for more details see <http://www.policyinstitute.tcd.ie/aboutthe.php>).

There have also been recent initiatives on the educational front. The Centre for Management and Organization Development in the Department of Finance, in 2002, put out to tender for the provision of a two-year masters degree in policy analysis and a one-year diploma in policy analysis. Both of these educational programs have a strong focus on expenditure review and evaluation practice. The programs, which are provided by the Institute of Public Administration from 2003, are open to civil servants. Participation in the program is linked to promotion to assistant principal grade; this encourages enrolment in the masters degree, and has led to a high level of demand for participation. The first masters graduates will qualify in 2005. The ERCSC report (Department of Finance, 2004) recommends that departments make effective use of graduates from the program to support the ERI, and that graduates from the program be encouraged to assist in their departments'/offices' reviews through participating in steering committees, mentoring and the like.

Other educational programs with a strong evaluation component include a masters degree in economic policy studies run by the Policy Institute at Trinity College Dublin, and a masters degree in economic policy evaluation and planning run by University College Galway.

6. CONCLUSIONS: LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE DEVELOPMENT OF EVALUATION CAPACITY IN IRELAND

A number of general lessons for those interested in building evaluation capacity emerge from the Irish experience to date. These lessons can be divided into (a) drivers that encourage evaluation capacity development, and (b) blockages to evaluation capacity development.

6.1 Drivers of Evaluation Capacity Development

Among the key drivers are:

- An external ‘push’ to institutionalize evaluation has had a significant effect on evaluation practice. As Hegarty (2003) states: “...it is clear that the requirements of EU regulations have helped promote an evaluation culture and capacity in Ireland.” This external push to promote evaluation has been a key determinant in systematizing the approach to evaluation compared to what had been a very ad hoc approach previously. The requirement to develop evaluation was taken seriously.
- The central support functions, of the NDP/CSF evaluation unit on the one hand and the ERI central steering committee secretariat on the other, have been influential in promoting and developing evaluation. While small in terms of staffing complement, both units have played a significant role in developing and spreading an evaluation culture. Two aspects of their work, in particular, stand out from the perspective of evaluation capacity development. One is the development and spread of good practice, through the use of guidelines, the promotion of common approaches, the development of networks and the like. The second is the review role of such central units, taking a periodic overview of development and promoting subsequent change and development. These functions will continue when the two units are merged in 2007.
- With regard to the issue of review, it is clearly important that evaluation capacity and practice is subject to formal, periodic scrutiny. The review of the ongoing evaluation function in the 1994-1999 CSF period by the central evaluation unit, and the value for money audit of the ERI conducted by the Comptroller and Auditor General, were both influential in terms of identifying strengths and weaknesses in evaluation capacity and suggesting ways forward. Similarly, the 2004 review carried out by the ERCSC was important in taking stock of progress made and limitations remaining in the expenditure review process. The publishing of expenditure review reports on departmental websites also facilitates a more informal review process through public scrutiny of the reports.
- The independent evaluation units established during the 1989-1993 and 1994-1999 CSF periods were an important and innovative approach to building evaluation capacity where evaluation was not a significant function previously. The general lessons from the creation of these units, summarized in section 2.1, are useful for others thinking of adopting a similar approach.
- The linking of evaluation capacity building in the ERI with the public service modernization program provided a supportive context for the spread of evaluation practice. While this link has not been a major driver in practice across all departments, in

those departments which have engaged more enthusiastically with the modernization program, it has been an additional spur to the development of an evaluation culture. The engagement of top management—through Secretaries General involvement in and reporting to the ERCSC—has also given impetus and standing to capacity building initiatives. The proposals in the ERCSC report to develop linkages between expenditure review and management information, resource budgeting and performance verification payments should further strengthen the linkage between evaluation and other resource allocation initiatives.

- Developments in independent quality assessment, networking, training and educational support for the supply side of evaluation are too recent to enable rigorous judgments to be made as to their contribution to evaluation capacity development. However, they have been well received, both by those participating in the events and by those with responsibility for spreading evaluation practice. Early indications are of a positive impact on the development of an evaluative culture. The view of the ERCSC is that there is a gradual improvement in the overall quality of expenditure review reports being produced.

6.2 Barriers to Evaluation Capacity Development

Among the main barriers are:

- Without the strong external push and formal requirement for evaluation, demand may vary. In the case of the 2000-2006 CSF period, where Structural Funds are a much smaller part of the total National Development Plan, the decision was made to abolish the departmental-based independent evaluation units and develop the central evaluation unit. In the changeover period, the evaluation expertise built up in the departmental based units was lost to the system, and developing and maintaining the staff complement of the enhanced central unit has proved problematic.
- As a small country, the number of potential suppliers of professional evaluation services in Ireland is limited. There is a strong reliance on a small pool from which to draw evaluation expertise. The corollary of this point, however, is that a strong working relationship can be developed with professional experts who have developed a good working knowledge of the specific requirements of evaluation practice.
- It is possible to set over-ambitious goals and targets for evaluation practice. The ERI requirement that all expenditure programs be evaluated every three years was found to be clearly unachievable. Attention needs to be paid to defining the reach and scope of evaluation practice.
- Where program personnel, with little if any previous evaluation expertise, are used to evaluate programs the quality of resulting reports can in some instances be problematic. Sufficient training and support for this work is needed. So too is the prioritization of the evaluation work among the many other tasks such public servants are required to do. In some cases, ERI work was seen as an add-on to an already hectic workload.
- Without formal procedures and practices to integrate evaluation into decision-making, the impact of evaluation may be limited. This, in turn, may lead to decision-makers questioning the merits of putting effort into building evaluation capacity.

- On a detailed point of employment of evaluators to evaluation units, the experience of the independent evaluation units was that one-year rolling contracts were problematic. These led to high turnover of staff, and there were subsequent delays in recruitment. The NDP/CSF evaluation unit, to ensure some stability in the employment base, provides three-year contracts. In the future, the intention is to make increasing use of specially trained civil servants (who have completed the masters degree in policy analysis) to help staff the central evaluation unit, on a secondment basis.

6.3 Final Comments

Given the limited and somewhat varied experience in building evaluation capacity in Ireland up to the 1980s, significant steps have been taken to build evaluation capacity in the last twenty years. While the development of evaluation practice and culture is a continuing issue, there are now good examples of well-institutionalized evaluation practice. Much of this progress was initially stimulated by the formal requirement of the EU for the evaluation of Structural Funds support. The challenge for Ireland now is to further strengthen the evaluation culture that has developed as the external requirement diminishes in relative importance. The Expenditure Review Initiative provides a process for enhancing evaluation capacity development across the public service.

Annex 1: Terms of Reference Template for Reviews of Expenditure Programs

To examine and report on program X with a view to:

- a) Identifying its objectives.
- b) Considering the extent to which these objectives remain valid and compatible with the mission and current strategy of the department.
- c) Evaluating the extent to which these objectives have been achieved.
- d) Establishing the level and trend of (1) the cost and (2) the staffing resources associated with the program activity.
- e) Defining the outputs associated with the program activity and identifying the level and trend of those outputs.
- f) Commenting on how efficiently and effectively the program has achieved its objectives.
- g) Evaluating the degree to which the objectives warrant the allocation of public resources on a current and ongoing basis.
- h) Examining the scope for alternative policy and/or organizational approaches to achieving the objectives on a more efficient and effective basis.
- i) Specifying suitable performance indicators which can be used to monitor and evaluate the program in the future.

Source: Department of Finance, 1997.

Annex 2: Recommendations of the ERCSC Report on the Expenditure Review Initiative³

- 1) Departments/Offices should review their ERI arrangements with a view to securing more timely completion of expenditure reviews in accordance with Government decisions on ERI. Departments/Offices should decide on future expenditure review topics as early as possible in anticipation of the next review cycle.
- 2) The Management Advisory Committee in each Department/Office should designate one of its members to coordinate and report to it on the expenditure review process within the organization. Expenditure reviews should be noted in Statements of Strategy and Business Plans, and included as key priorities in the Performance Management Development System (PMDS—i.e., appraisal) role profiles of the staff concerned. Where possible, full-time staff input should be planned for at crucial stages in the review process, for example, in report drafting.
- 3) In future progress reports on the modernization action plans to be submitted to the Performance Verification Groups under the terms of *Sustaining Progress*, Secretaries General should detail the current expenditure review plans that relate to the sectors for which they are responsible and report on progress in finalizing the expenditure reviews set out in those plans.
- 4) Each review report should clearly indicate what percentage of the organization's total budget the review covers and state the specific business factors underlying the decision to review the program/activity in question.
- 5) Departments/Offices should ensure that effective and independent steering committees are put in place for all reviews. The steering committees should be seen clearly to act independently and to exercise direct, hands-on responsibility for the conduct of reviews. They should include personnel from outside the line divisions that operate the programs/areas being reviewed and, insofar as possible, from other Government Departments/Offices or bodies.
- 6) The Expenditure Reviewer's Network Committee should continue to keep under review and make proposals to the ERCSC aimed at strengthening the range of central support offered to Departments/Offices (taking into account any relevant suggestions made by the independent Quality Assessment Reviewers and wider developments such as those detailed in Chapter 3 of the Report.
- 7) The Expenditure Reviewers' Network Committee should assess the particular demands of expenditure review on the smaller Offices and propose what actions it considers necessary to reduce the administrative burden of the ERI on the smaller Offices while maximizing the benefits that internal evaluation can bring.

³ Department of Finance, 2004.

- 8) Departments/Offices should put systems in place to ensure that the response to ERI recommendations by their organizations is tracked and reported regularly to their Management Advisory Committees.
- 9) Departments/Offices should use their Annual Reports to report formally on all forms of evaluation activity, including expenditure reviews, and to detail progress in implementing recommendations set out in evaluation/review reports and the impacts achieved as a result.
- 10) In addition to laying completed expenditure review reports before the Houses of the Oireachtas, Departments/Offices should forward copies of expenditure review reports to the Clerks of the appropriate Oireachtas Committees.
- 11) Departments/Offices should intensify their efforts to develop performance indicators designed to map progress in adding value and should ensure that there is greater coordination between the ERI process and their MIF cross-Divisional Performance Indicators Groups in the development of performance indicators.
- 12) Departments/Offices should consider how the work of the trainee analysts in the Masters Program in Public Policy Analysis could be strategically focused on the analytical requirements of Departments/Offices, including supporting the ERI, in particular, the cross-departmental reviews. Graduates from the program should also be encouraged to assist in their Departments'/Offices' reviews through participating in steering committees, mentoring, or otherwise.

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Other Recommended Reading

- OED. 2004. *Evaluation Capacity Development: OED Self-Evaluation*.
- OED. 2002. *Annual Report on Evaluation Capacity Development*.
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