

Getting the most of evaluation in the age of RCTs and big data: an EU perspective

Bradford Rohmer Kristiansand, 21 September 2018





## Agenda

- 1. What I'm going to talk about
- 2. Background
- 3. Illustrative examples
- 4. Concluding observations
- 5. Where to go from here: questions and discussion

## What I'm going to talk about



Advances in evaluation thinking and what it means in the EU context:

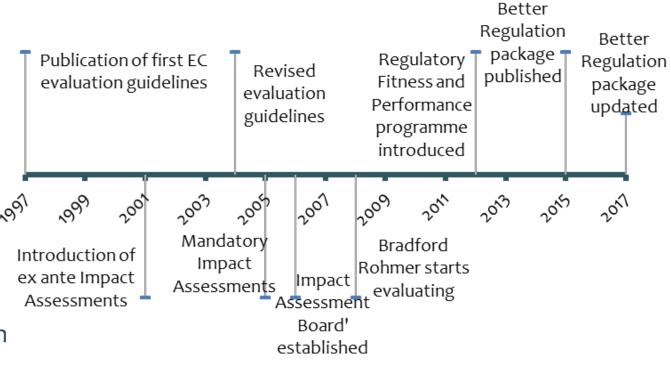
- Institutional and governance trends
- Putting new methodologies into practice
- Good and bad practices
- Practicalities for us "practitioners" / consultant mercenaries

### **Background – evaluation in the EC**



# Three 'eras' of evaluation in the European Commission:

- From 1997: evaluation mainly as obligation
- 2000s: central guidance, introduction of ex ante impact assessments, going beyond mere accountability
- 2015 onwards: Better
  Regulation package
  aimed at standardising
  and improving evaluation
  practice and governance



### Background – evaluation advances



**Realist Evaluation** 

Regression discontinuity analysis

Theory of change

General Elimination Methodology

**Contribution Analysis** 



Big data

Randomised control trials

Difference-in-difference

Multi-criteria analysis

Computable general equilibrium modelling

Outcome Mapping

Propensity score matching

**Qualitative Comparative Analysis** 

### Illustrative examples



- The next slides focus on examples of what these trends have meant in practice
- A lot of this depends on who commissions an evaluation, and for what purpose
- To help show this I've defined three 'types' of evaluation commissioners
- No one really fits 100% in a specific 'type'; indeed most people have elements of all three



The nerds



The politicos



The bureaucrats

### The nerds



#### Key features:

- Convinced about evaluation and its learning potential
- Keen to use exciting (especially quantitative) evaluation methods
- Often far from policy- and decision-making

#### Pros:

- Willing to think outside the box and try new things
- Supportive of daring consultants

#### Cons:

- Overly optimistic view of possibilities
- Difficulty linking evaluation to policy needs
- Can misdirect energy that would be more usefully applied to 'traditional' methods



The nerds

## The politicos



#### Key features:

- Influential at the senior level
- Direct interest in the results of an evaluation
- Little experience of evaluation/social research

#### Pros:

- Very engaged throughout evaluation process
- Can help open doors, ensure consultants get needed data, etc.
- Ensures evaluation results are really used

#### Cons:

- Difficult to engage on methodological aspects
- Care more about the outcome than impartiality or methodological robustness
- Can be prone to manipulating evaluation governance processes or findings



The politicos

### The bureaucrats



#### Key features:

- Focused on processes, rules, hierarchy
- Often have long experience with evaluation and / or the commissioning authority

#### Pros:

- Commitment to ensuring all procedures and guidelines are followed
- Can help secure evaluation independence

#### Cons:

- Can be too rigid and impractical, especially given the iterative nature of social research
- Sometimes unconcerned with how the evaluation fits into the big picture



The bureaucrats

### In other words...



"Have you considered regression discontinuity analysis to reverse engineer control and treatment groups?"





"The success of our programme isn't clear enough – send me a revised version by tonight or we terminate the contract!"



"My hierarchy has instructed me to make sure you include 8 case studies in the evaluation."

### **Concluding observations**



- New and advanced methodologies really add value, but they rely on certain conditions, early planning and the right monitoring / baseline data
- Guidelines and standardisation help, but these don't automatically fix all structural problems
- It takes a long time to build a real evaluation culture, but 'champions' in high places can help
- This puts a lot of pressure on the needs, motivations and capacity of individual clients / commissioners of evaluations
- Competitive bidding procedures are in many ways good and probably necessary, but they also create perverse incentives for practitioners, and make it hard for each side to learn from each other
- The upshot is that consultants point out lots of problems (cf. this presentation) but have a hard time doing anything to fix them

### Where to go from here?



- Do the issues I described sound familiar to the situation in Norway?
- What ways of dealing with them have worked well / less well?
- What is the experience of impact evaluation and novel / advanced methodologies in Norway?
- What support could evaluation practitioners give to commissioners of evaluation to improve the situation?







# Thank you

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