O R I G I N A L   P A P E R

Evaluation of the Social Welfare Sector Services/Programmes in Cyprus

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Abstract

Background: Evaluation is used in almost every activity and particularly in processes where the control of reliability and effectiveness is purposefully incorporated in the implementation of the process, as well as in the final outcome. It is a process related to the assessment of the outcome.
Aim: The way in which the evaluations are implemented and the extent to which the outcome of the provided service is evaluated constitutes the subject matter of this research in regard to services and programmes provided in the Republic of Cyprus.
Methodology: The investigation results of the effectiveness of the social sector services in Cyprus are presented with the formulation of specific research hypotheses/questions, which were examined by using the method of qualitative data analysis. The method was used for data collected during structured interviews, as well as archival material and service/administration documents of the agencies.
Results: The majority of the organization of the social sector believes, that they implementing evaluation process, focuses on the technical/financial audit by the relevant state services and in annual activity reports. Contrary to this result, less than 25% take actions after the completion of the evaluation, a significant indication of not conducting evaluations. Furthermore the majority considers that the administrative audit from the relevant state services covers the issue of the existence of experts. However, the results of the longitudinal analysis indicate the opposite. Although the agencies claim to conduct evaluations on an almost regular basis, in reality this does not happen.
Conclusions: For the majority of the organization the evaluation is a type of audit which takes place exclusively to control specific operational parameters with the intention to impose sanctions in case of deviations. What actually happens is a partial, simple recording of the work done in activity reports, as well as the standard audit of accounts and safety issues by state services. These are conventional audits which are not related to conducting scientific evaluations and are confused with them. The research questions and the processing of the results revealed that for the majority of organizations, who they took part, an evaluation culture does not yet exist.

Key Words: Evaluation, effectiveness, feedback process, social sector

Introduction

Evaluation is a necessary element generally used in almost every activity and particularly in processes where the control of reliability and effectiveness is purposefully incorporated in the implementation of the process, as well as in the final outcome/product or service provided. It is a process which is considered self-evident and totally natural, since it is related to the rational organisation of the process and the assessment of the outcome. The good, satisfactory, average or bad result is the major factor to which particular interest is attached, especially at decision-making level, since the continuation, alteration or discontinuation of a specific process will depend on it. Moreover rationalisation trends and the control of tangible and intangible resource allocation used ever more widely have rendered the use of evaluation an integral part of the way that services and programmes are organised and operate (Chelimsky and Shadish, 1997, Rossi and Freeman, 1985, Berk and Rossi, 1990).

The social sector could not remain apathetic either to the trend of rationalising expenses or the control of the effectiveness of its service and programme operation. Even though the social sector services are to a significant extent considered an obvious necessity, and indeed legally instituted and funded through the state budget, however the need to examine their benefit and effectiveness becomes even more imperative (Iatridis, 2002). The way this is implemented and the extent to which correct evaluation processes are used to assess the operation, outcome and the service provided, in a specific number of services and programmes of the Republic of Cyprus, constitute the research endeavour of the current article.

Research Questions

The working hypothesis of the current research was based on the general trend of implementing assessment and control procedures for the operating method and the effectiveness of programmes. These procedures are prescribed in many European Union countries and are strictly implemented for all European programmes, so as to improve the benefits produced for the end-users/recipients. The assessment of the effectiveness of programmes and services of the social sector in the Republic of Cyprus through the use of evaluation procedures was investigated; to do so, specific research hypotheses/questions were formulated. The research questions which were of concern in the effort to test the working hypothesis were the following:

A. Have there been any efforts to evaluate the service or the programme?
B. If yes, of what kind and which were the conclusions?
C. Was it followed by any feedback process?
D. If there has been no evaluation, why is it not being implemented?
E. Are there any specific reasons that hinder such an activity?

The selection of these research questions was based on the premise that the content of evaluation, as a scientific process, is prescribed, has a rational sequence and includes specific structural elements. Hence, the particular research questions were formulated based on the structure of the evaluation process, which can demonstrate in a simple way whether an evaluation culture, in general, exists and is implemented or not (Patton, 1994, Kasimati, 2006).

For most of the research questions the reply options were chosen to be as simple as possible, even single words, without however setting such a limit. Hence, it was clarified to the research participants, in advance, that the form of their answers, whether single words or more extensive/analytical, was completely a matter of personal choice. The fundamental element in the research was to collect answers/information, in any form, to the research questions.

The principal research question which is aimed to be answered in the current research and also forms the primary working hypothesis is whether the evaluation procedures, as prescribed by the applicable legal provisions, as well as by the ethics/practice of administration, are implemented by the agencies of the state, semi-state and private sectors of the Republic of Cyprus.

The point is if besides the clearly conventional controls determined by the legal framework regarding the financial audit of state awarded grants, and the safety measures and operating requirements of the facilities, whether any fundamental procedures are additionally implemented regarding the assessment of the operating manner, the work produced and its benefits (Somers, 1994).

Furthermore, it is investigated whether, based on the assessment's conclusions, any feedback procedures, foreseen for in every evaluation, are being employed and any efforts made to correct or alter the identified difficulties/problems and/or improve the way the programme or service operates, with the objective to enhance its benefits.

Data Collection Tools

The basic tools used to collect the data were structured interviews with the managers of the programmes/organisations, as well as any public documents of the administration (i.e. activity reports, technical studies/audits, internal audits, board meeting minutes), which were used especially to deal with cases of difficulty/inability and/or partial or complete refusal to provide answers. The specific aforementioned research questions were posed to the managers and they were asked to answer them based on what occurs within their area of responsibility. Considerable leeway was given in how the answers could be provided and the participants had the opportunity to provide more extensive answers, but also to report/substantiate based on administration documents and records. For reasons of ethics and protection of personal data there is no mention either of persons or agency and programme information.

The material from the interviews constitutes the primary data which was provided voluntarily by the competent individuals.   The information provided was registered and used unaltered, based on the answers given to the research questions. Depending on the extent, but also the manner in which each participant answered, additional material and information was collected from administration reports on financial or other results, annual activity reports and archival research; these were made available for the purposes of the research, so that the research questions would be covered as extensively as

possible and the substantiation based on the required material would be as complete as possible. This material constitutes the secondary data, in the sense that it had already been made public by the agencies and the programmes of the social welfare sector. In the case of the secondary data, its content was utilised in such a way so that it would correspond to the demands of the research questions.

The collection of research data was made possible through the involvement of students doing their field practice in the specific agencies and programmes, which constituted the research sample. The dispatch of questionnaires to a much larger number of agencies, despite being part of the research plan, was eventually cancelled since the relevant administrative permission to conduct the research was not made available.

Research Methodology and Data Processing Tools

The utilisation and processing of the research data was chosen to take place in two phases. A pilot study was run using the research questions for a limited number of agencies and organisations, in order to timely deal with any difficulties and problems before the full launch of the research. During the first phase there was an initial processing of all the data, so that through the presentation of the results the research hypotheses could be validated or rejected. During the second phase, which spanned a period of three years, there was a comparative cross-referencing of data for as many agencies and programmes, for which data was available for the entire three years, in order a) to validate the conclusions of the first phase and b) to demonstrate the development of the implementation of evaluation procedures through a longitudinal comparative contraposition to discover any progress made.

The main research method used was content analysis, especially for qualitative data, and was applied to the material collected during the interviews, as well as to information from the records and documents of the agencies and programmes that participated in the research. Content analysis was used mainly during the first phase of data processing, which concerned the presentation of the existence and implementation or not of evaluation procedures.

Specifically in the case of the interviews, in regard to the resulting primary material, the qualitative analysis included the processing of the contents to the answers supplied by managers in an objective manner, so that the meaning of their answers would not be distorted.

Hence, answers which displayed elements of doubt, lack of knowledge and/or refusal to answer were recorded and dealt with accordingly per type. Whenever possible and depending on each organisation and the full maintenance of records and reports by the services, these difficulties were sought to be dealt with by completing the answers to the research questions through data from the secondary material. In cases that either material could not be retrieved or of refusal, the answers remained blank with the note 'refused to answer' or 'no answer'.

Content analysis was used mainly in cases of extensive answers, so that the contextual meaning would not be distorted and could therefore be used as reliable answers to the research questions. In the case of secondary material from administration records and reports, processing and explanation was applied to quantitative data and content analysis to written documents/data.

Reports were numerous and the data recorded by the agencies was usually standardised, in order to be suitable for technical and accounts audits. Based on the analysis of the quantitative data and the control indicators, two of the five research questions could be answered clearly.

Material from activity and performance reports of the agencies was used for the remaining three questions.

Content analysis of the written documents/reports provided satisfactory answers to the remainder of the research questions. Additionally, in cases of doubt supplementary data was sought, mainly through clarification questions addressed to other competent persons within the organisations, besides managing directors.

The data from the interviews and the archival material was further processed by classifying it in tables per research question and applying a simple scale of positive (yes), negative (no) or neutral response/answer (do not know/do not answer) for sorting the answers/data. Therefore, the grouping of the answers to the research questions became possible, as was their potential for further codification. The codification of the answers was made by matching the sorting scale of the answers to the relevant quantitative scale with numerical symbols. The conversion of the codified answers to quantitative data and the data feeding to the data recording statistical spreadsheet for the extraction of the final results was realised

following the rules of simple single-factor descriptive statistics.

For the second phase of the research, comparative contraposition of the data was applied to those agencies and programmes for which data was available for three consecutive years. In particular the existing data was extracted to a percentage format in order to ensure statistical validity, regarding the inductive comparison and to minimise statistical error, due to the dissimilarity of the sample used over time, but also to facilitate the comparative demonstration. The comparison focused mainly on the second, third, fourth and fifth research questions. The purpose of the comparative inductive analysis was predominantly to ascertain progress in the process of applying evaluation procedures over time. The point is if indeed the conclusions drawn from the assessment of the operating procedures of the agencies and programmes are utilised in the manner foreseen in evaluations and do not remain just a conventional procedure of recording and drafting for an activity report. Furthermore, it could be ascertained whether tools are beginning to be used, such as the investigation of the opinions of users/service recipients, which help accomplish the objectives of the project of each service and programme. Consequently, based on the results of the second phase, inductive reasoning was used to compare the conclusions of the first phase of the analysis, in order to support the wider research hypothesis of the existence and implementation or not of evaluation procedures and culture.

Sample

The agencies and orgasnisations which participated in the research were selected randomly with the sole criterion of belonging in the sector providing welfare services. The desire to cooperate with the relevant ministry, in order to gain access to as large a number of agencies and organisations as possible, was unfortunately not realised and the relevant request was turned down by the welfare services.

Therefore, the research plan, regarding the dispatch of questionnaires to a much larger number of agencies and organisations, was not implemented since the necessary accompanying document was not made available.

Due to the same reason the sample is limited to agencies and organisations which accepted to participate voluntarily, without requesting administrative permission to do so. The sample was selected from a list of agencies with which the university cooperates and is part of the wider number of agencies of the welfare sector in the Republic of Cyprus.

The sampling process was realised through the inductive method, in an effort to collect a satisfactory and representative number of agencies, so that generalisation would be possible. The demonstrable lack of access permission limited the size of the sample below the statistically acceptable level of 10%, with the consequence of increased possibility of error and inability to generalise the results.

The agencies which constitute the sample come from all five provinces of the Republic of Cyprus, but only from the free areas. Their distribution by province is random, as is the representation of agencies from larger urban areas and less populous regions, which however is proportional.

Larger urban areas have a larger number of services and programmes of the welfare sector compared to rural regions. Furthermore, most state and semi-state agencies of the sample come from urban areas.

These parameters ensure to a great extent the random dispersion of the sample and spatial representation.

Difficulties

The difficulties that arose while conducting the research can be divided in two categories: a) difficulties to access the sample in order to ensure statistical adequacy and representation and b) difficulties concerning the way in which the concept of evaluation and its implementation process is perceived and understood both in the answers of those interviewed, but also in archival material.

In the first category, the fact that the relevant ministry and the social welfare service did not respond to our request to access the agencies and services of the welfare sector resulted in a limited number of participating agencies and hence in the inability for statistical generalisation of the results.

What was mainly observed in the second category was the ignorance and confusion on the part of those interviewed, regarding the meaning and content of the concepts of evaluation and audit.

Specifically, many managerial staff from the agencies participating in the research referred to evaluation, both verbally and in their written reports; however, what they really meant was the financial/accounts audit of state subsidies, as well as the technical audits of safety and infrastructure.

Hence, in order to answer the research questions, further clarification, regarding the concept and implementation procedures of evaluation and its difference from an audit, became necessary on numerous occasions,.

Results

The majority of managers answered positively to the question on conducting evaluations. It seems that state services are more responsive compared to private agencies.

They justify this fact by assuming that as official government agencies which have been assigned the authority to supervise and control, they are also able to conduct evaluations. In reality, however, the state status does not constitute a criterion for conducting scientific evaluations.

The most important criterion for conducting scientific evaluations is knowledge of the subject matter, coupled with experience in the use of the proper tools.

Contrary to the results of the first question, the answers regarding feedback indicate that the overwhelming percentage of those interviewed have not initiated any action utilising the results of the evaluation. Additional to the results, less than a quarter of those interviewed answered that no actions were being taken after the completion of the evaluation. This fact constitutes a significant indication, which further reinforces the perspective of not conducting evaluations, despite allegations to the contrary, since there can be no evaluation without feedback.

This particular question gave the option of multiple answers and there were many participants who stated that they proceed with evaluation, which is focused on various elements. For this reason the percentage sum is over one hundred. However, it is obvious that the evaluation being conducted focuses to a great extent on the technical/financial audit by the relevant state services and on recording the work carried out within the organisation in annual activity reports. The percentage of those giving no answer is remarkable. Given the fact that the percentage of those who did not give any answer to this particular question is double compared to those who, in the first question, answered that they do not conduct evaluations, gives rise to reasonable questions in regard to managers' knowledge on evaluation issues. It could also be clearly considered as an indication of low credibility of the answers to the first question.

Results of the implementation of evaluation procedures
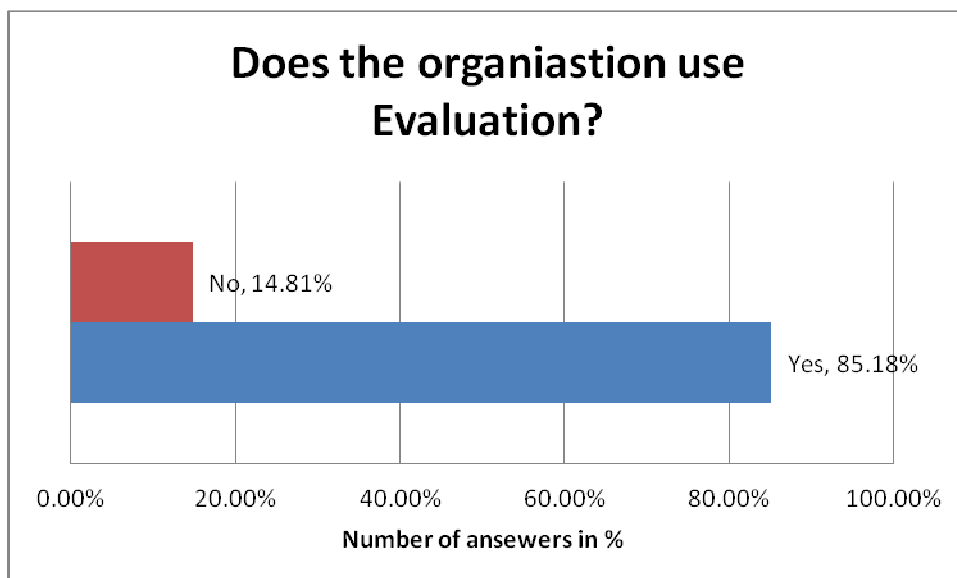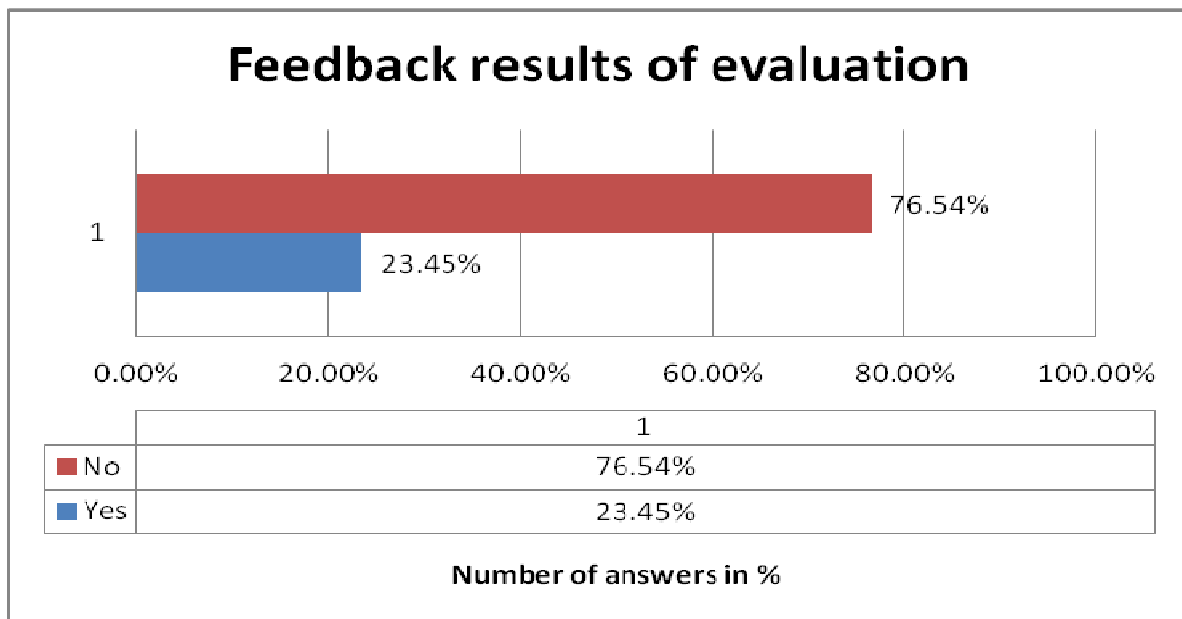
Figure 1
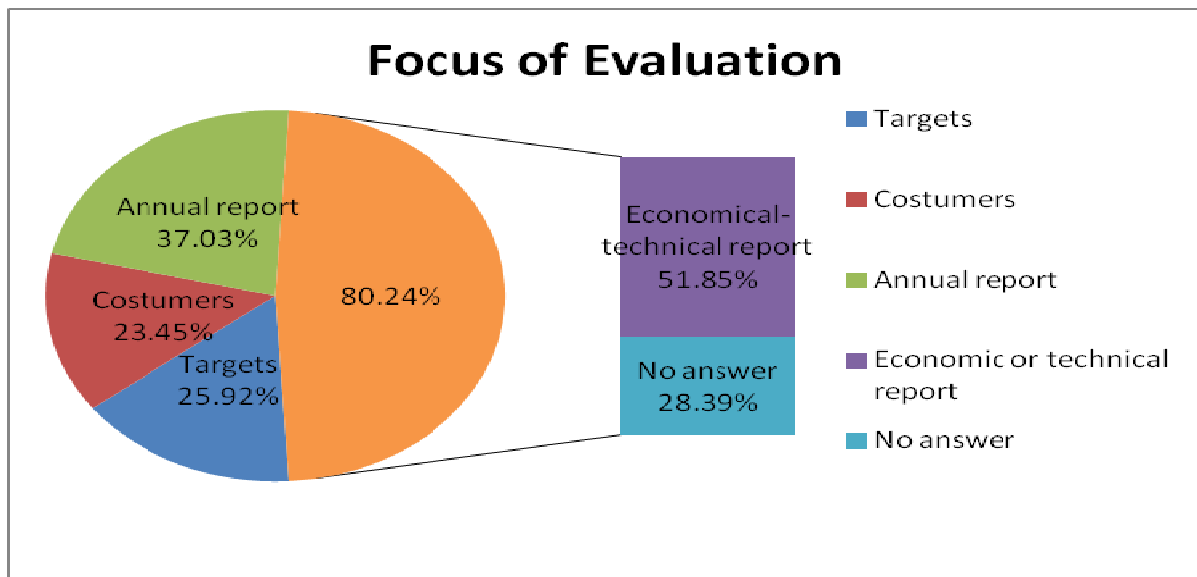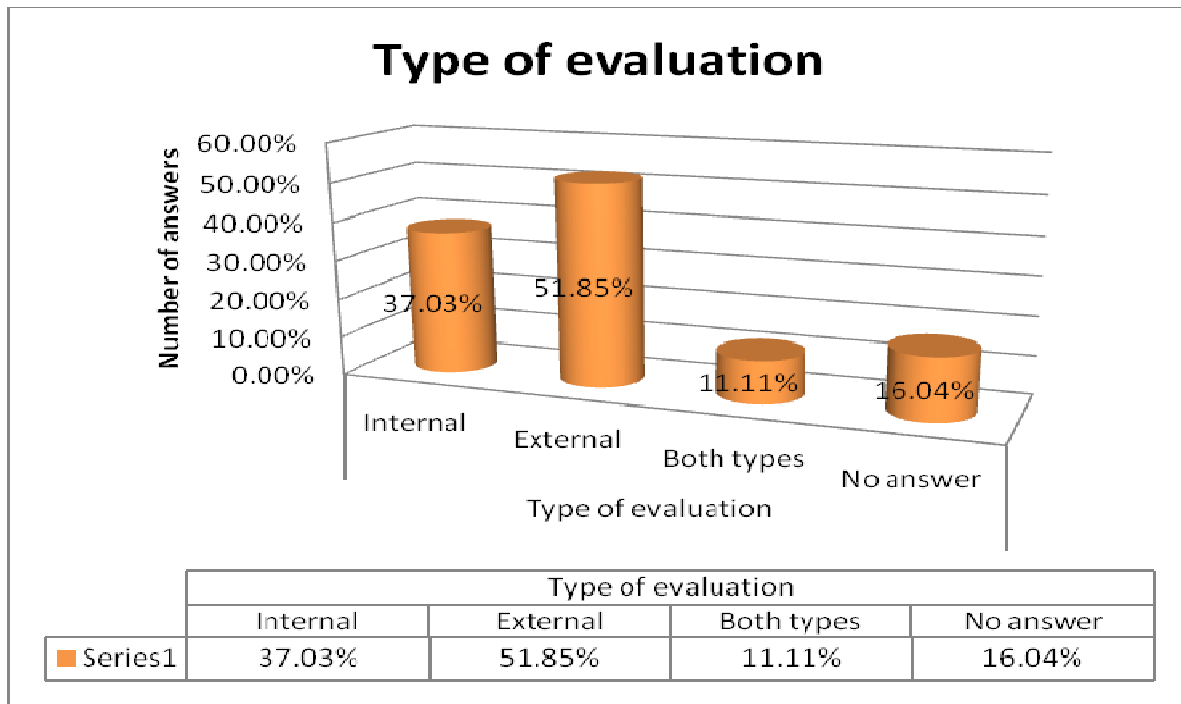
Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

In the fourth question, regarding the type of evaluator used, the results showed that in the case of financial and technical audits, evaluations are conducted mainly by external evaluators. Cases of internal evaluators refer to audit procedures which are usually carried out by the boards.

The percentage of organisations that did not answer this question is significant, even though they stated that they do conduct evaluations, a fact which gives rise to specific questions regarding the answers provided to the first and third questions.

Figure 5
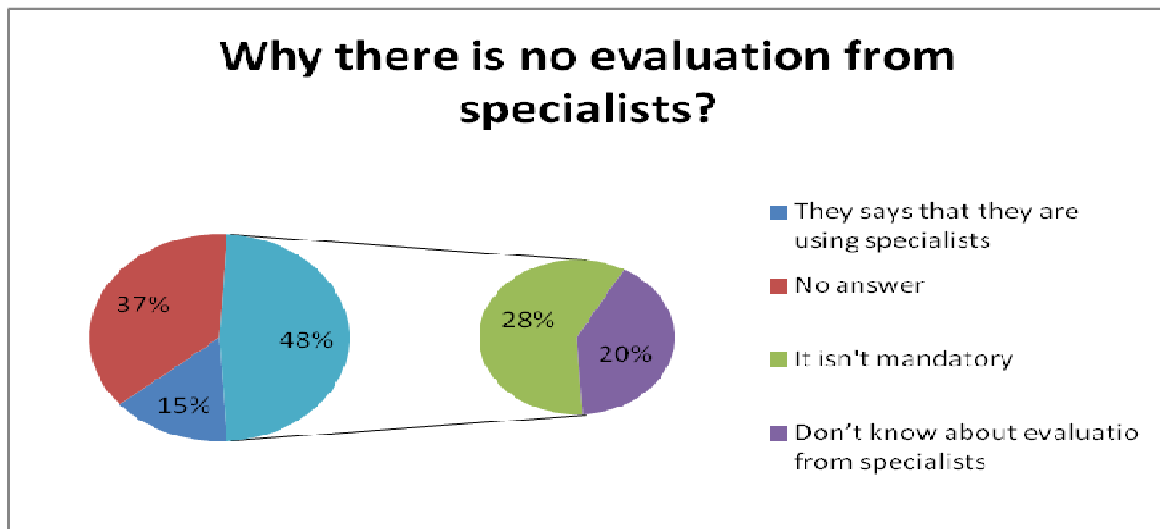
The reasons for not using expert evaluators vary, with the overwhelming majority almost avoiding to answer the question. A significant percentage replied that they were not aware that it should be conducted by experts. One third also stated that they are not obligated to use experts. This result casts doubt to the findings of the first question, i.e. whether scientific evaluation is actually conducted or if the procedure is confused with managerial and financial/technical audits. The fact that the majority considers that the administrative audit and even more so the audit by individuals from the relevant state services covers the issue of the existence of experts and external evaluators, proves the contradiction, but also the ignorance on issues of conducting evaluations.

Figure 6
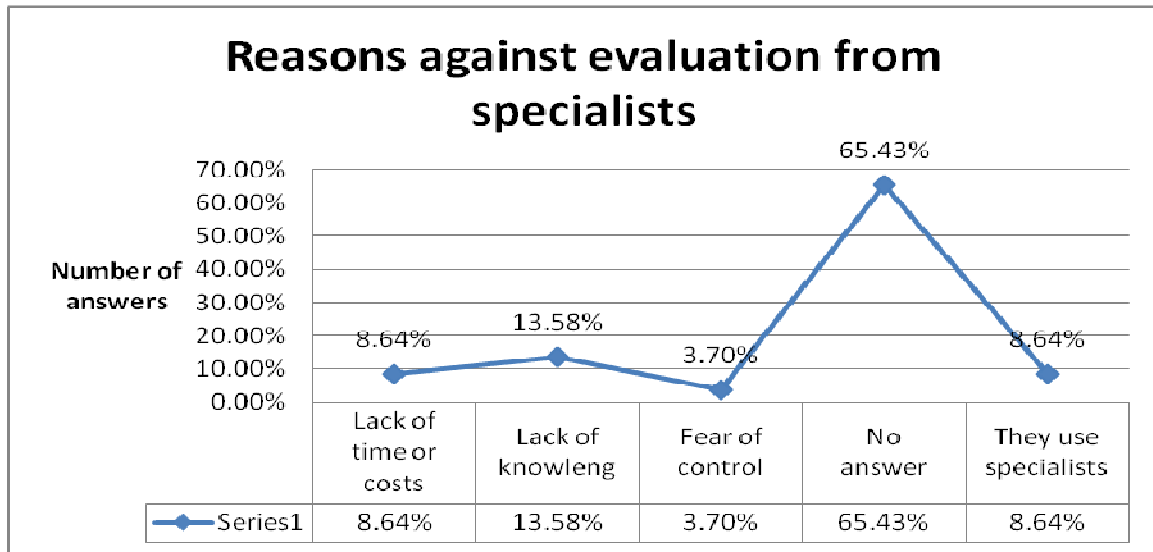
Avoidance to answer was the predominant trend for this question as well. From those who did reply, it emerged that lack of knowledge to conduct a proper evaluation, lack of time, high costs, but also fear of the results are significant factors which affect evaluation implementation. Furthermore, it is important to note the percentage of those asserting that there are no reasons hindering the use of experts, and that indeed evaluations are conducted by experts. The supporters of this category come from state agencies, which, as previously mentioned, claim to conduct evaluations.

A comparison to the first question reveals that conducting evaluations displays fluctuations and is not maintained stable either in absolute or percentage values. Based on the procedures foreseen by evaluations, normally one would expect some continuity in conducting this effort. However, the results of the longitudinal analysis indicate the opposite. Although the agencies claim to conduct evaluations on an almost regular basis, in reality this does not happen; instead they remain attached mostly to procedures of technical/financial certification and internal audit. In the second question there is an apparent improvement of the percentages in regard to conducting feedback procedures, which however are not confirmed by the findings of the next comparative contraposition.

Specifically, what can be seen from the longitudinal analysis regarding the focus of the evaluation is that the practices of activity reports and financial/technical audits continue to be used and indeed at an increasing rate. These are practices which contravene the prerequisites of conducting evaluations, as is the non-use of experts, but also of specific tools for monitoring the overall operation of the service or programme. The non-use of tools for conducting scientific evaluations, except in a few cases, in combination with the longitudinally recurring answer of not being obligated to do so, affirms the doubt that the implementation of actual evaluation and feedback procedures is limited.
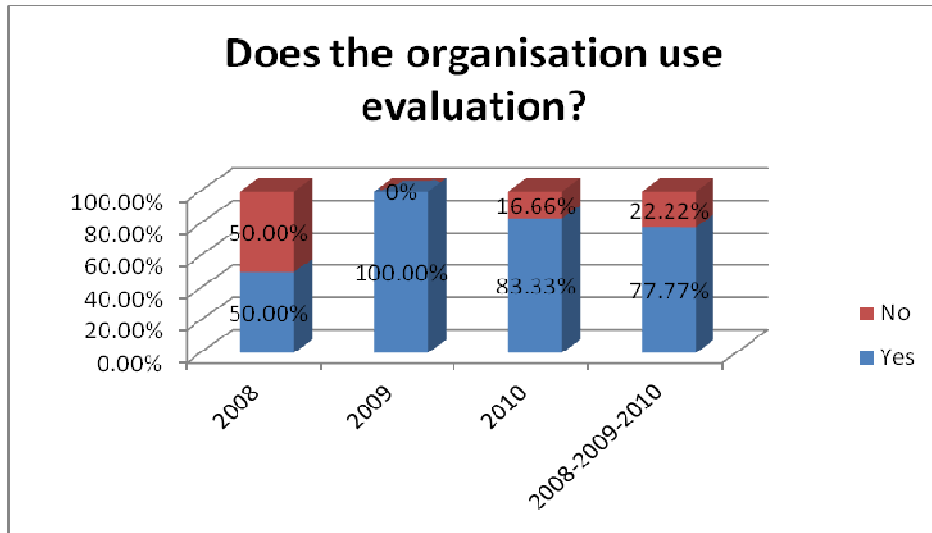
Comparative longitudinal presentation
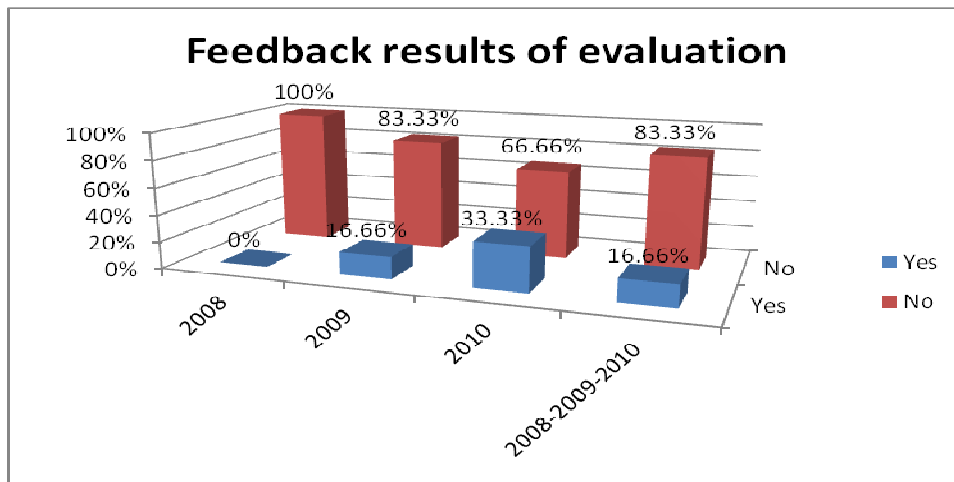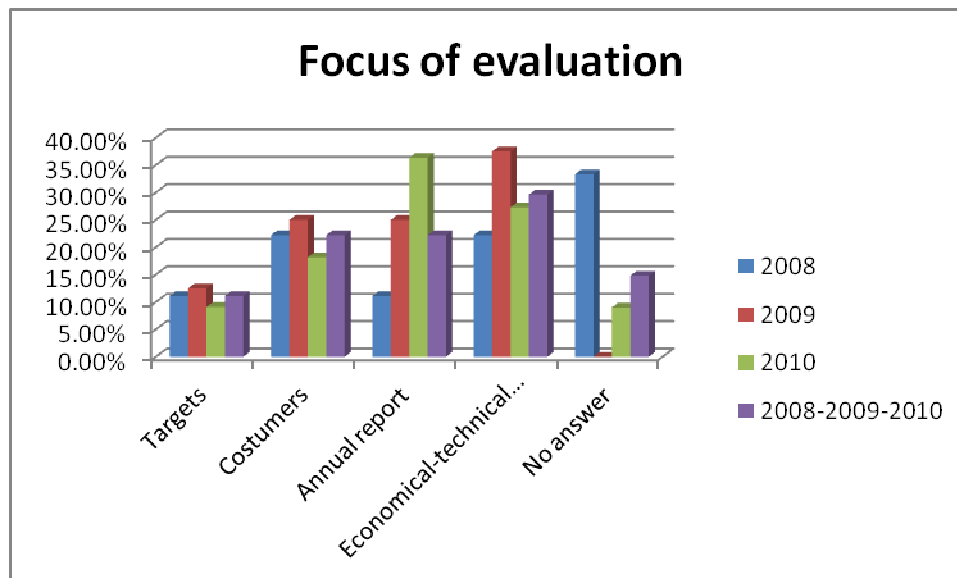
Figure 7

Figure 8

Figure 9

Conclusions

The careful study of the research results indicates that there are significant discrepancies which refute part of the answers given, since they are both in logical/research, as well as statistical contradiction.

Assessing the results of a project by comparing the situation prevailing prior to its implementation to the condition prevailing afterwards is a common mistake. The error of logic at this point is that it is being assumed that the only factor affecting the values of interest is the project under study. The single most correct comparison is the one between a situation, as defined after the implementation of the project and the situation that would have been defined if the project did not exist.

Hence, many believe that the evaluation is a type of audit which takes place exclusively to control specific operational parameters with the intention to impose sanctions in case of deviations; however, it is a process whose sole aim is to assist the smooth implementation and guidance of the project.

Specifically, while the majority states that evaluation takes place, it does however remain limited to activity reports and financial/technical audits, does not use experts, does not utilise whichever results from conducting elementary user satisfaction surveys, does not use cost-benefit tools, and even though it is

unknowledgeable of the use of the specific tools, claims that evaluation is conducted by experts.

Except in the case, especially, of state services which consider being experts and possessing the knowledge to conduct evaluations, the larger percentage of those interviewed refuses to answer as to why they do not use experts.

The research questions and the processing of the results revealed that for the majority of organisations in the social sector, an evaluation culture does not yet exist.

What actually happens is a partial, simple recording of the work done in activity reports, as well as the standard audit of accounts and safety issues by state services. These are conventional audits which are not related to conducting scientific evaluations and are confused with them.

Most of the social sector organisations seem to maintain the prescribed conventional audits, since they either do not know or are not obligated to conduct evaluations.

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