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**How evaluation can contribute producing social impact in social science research**

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## **Introduction**

The paper deals with evaluation of social impact of research projects in social sciences. Social impact is mostly defined as an effect that research could produce beyond the academic context in terms of benefits on societal and institutional challenges, including also impact on the political side (Penfield et al., 2014).

The interest to deepen issues of social impact evaluation in social sciences (SS) derives from the limitations of using traditional approach based on input-output-outcome measurements; SS are characterized by effects that are more difficult to be singled out than those produced in other areas of science, and measurements provide very poor and often biased understanding of the phenomenon (Reale et al., 2017).

The paper wants to demonstrate key determinants of generating impact in the different types of interactions with non-academic actors involved in the projects, discussing what implications this can have on evaluation criteria and methods. Also, the evaluation of factors depriving quality and innovativeness of research produced are discussed.

## **Theoretical framework**

The theoretical approach focuses on research process (Spaapen and van Drooge, 2011) and contribution to the impact generation (Mayne, 2012), instead of attribution of impact to research activities; in this respect it is of crucial importance to shed light about the generating mechanisms that transform knowledge into actionable goods, and the network of actors involved (Joly et al., 2015).

Social impact could be strengthened by participatory involvement of different social actors through productive interactions (Molas-Gallart, 2012; Wiek et al. 2014); the positive effects of these interactions are closely related to the ways in which researchers and stakeholders communicate about research, its goals and societal demand (Molas-Gallart, 2012). Thus, social impact is a consequence of a process in which knowledge and expertise circulates to achieve specific objectives that are relevant for the progress of society (Spapeen and Van Drooge, 2011). A participatory approach could affect deeply the sustainability of research so it must be implemented since the beginning of projects (Talwar et al., 2011).

Under a slightly different conceptualization, social impact is generated through translation of actors involved in the process (Joly et al, 2015), which co-define their interests along the so-called impact pathway (Walker et al., 2008; Joly et al. 2015). In both cases, the role of stakeholders is at the core of impact production, and understanding features affecting their involvement is still a low explored issue.

## **Method and data**

The paper is based on five in depth case studies of projects, funded respectively under the European Programs FP6 and FP7 in social sciences. In three cases a social impact became visible just after the project completion. In two cases impact did not emerge. The case studies selected are developed under the IMPACT-EV EU-Project, which are illustrative examples of modes for stakeholders' involvement in research actions.

Four aspects of actors' involvement have been considered, which are signaled by the literature as important features for generating impact:

- Modalities and communications between actors involved in the projects;
- Timing – timely interactions during the project and after the project completion determining the impact pathway;
- Language – capability to develop mutual understanding between researchers and stakeholders;
- Outcomes – co-creation of results with transformative effects on science and society.

Cases follow a standardized structure, developed through triangulation of information from different sources, namely information from documentary analysis (characteristics of the call under which the project has been funded, reports and deliverables produced, other administrative documents), data and indicator on research outputs (bibliometrics and other web-based resources), interviews with researchers, coordinators, and stakeholders involved in the activities.

## **Results**

Results showed that, for successful cases, theory-based approaches of non-academic actors' involvement, building a common language, in combination with organizational features promoting collaborations, and careful timing of the interactions are all important elements to be considered in ex-ante evaluation -the presence of them in the design of the project should improve the likelihood that an impact might occur.

In the same vein, the mentioned items should be assessed over the project implementation, in order to understand whether the research activities were properly developed to achieve the objective of producing impact.

However, in ex-post assessment the linkages between scientific outputs and impact is an issue that deserve attention in order to avoid a trade-off between pursuing an impact and the quality of the research outputs. Evaluation plays an important role to ascertain the extent to which the claim of less innovativeness of research output can be controlled through empirical evidences and indicators.

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