With an open but critical view

Summary of the research project to create a manual for ex ante evaluation of counterterrorism policy

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1. Background and goal of the manual

The Dutch government has over the years increased its attention for how to evaluate policy in an accurate way. The WODC memorandum on the evaluation of judicial policy of 2010 contains for example a number of conditions for a successful evaluation of policy on the basis of ex ante, ex durante and ex post evaluations (in addition to overview studies and policy audits). At the same time, this area is not developed evenly throughout policy areas. In 2018, RAND Europe conducted a follow-up study of the 2010 study "Anti-terrorism policy and evaluation research; framework, applications and examples." It concluded that despite the (large) amount of policy initiatives that were developed in regard to counterterrorism, the (scientific) knowledge underlying these initiatives was still limited. (RAND 2018). The growth in the number of evaluation studies and the use of primary data for this were described as positive evolutions. However, the authors concluded that this was still an underdeveloped field, and that the existing evaluation studies had methodological limitations.

When drawing up and formulating new policy, policymakers within the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) are bound by Article 3.1 of the Accountability Act 2016. This article prescribes that proposals, intentions and commitments must contain an explanation that discusses the effectiveness and efficiency of the policy instruments that will be deployed. A temporary writing guide was also attached to this, to facilitate the writing of such an explanation. Building on this obligation and the lessons and recommendations of the RAND investigation, the Minister of Justice and Security has expressed the intention to make a manual available for setting up and conducting thorough evaluation research within the NCTV-wide domain of crisis management, cybersecurity, counter-terrorism and state threats. In order to give the manual sufficient focus, this study concentrates on one domain, namely counterterrorism.

The two main issues that prompted this research are:

1. There is a need for clarification on the purpose, design and implementation of various forms of evaluation research.

2. There is a need for guidance on preparing for an evaluation of policy, based on the previously identified forms of evaluation research.

This study answers three research questions. The first is a preliminary question that makes it possible to shape the manual. The second and third research questions together form the content of the manual.

1. What is the current knowledge about the different forms of policy evaluation?

2. How can ex ante evaluations be designed so that they are most suitable for the evaluation of (proposed) policy and legislation within the NCTV domain of counterterrorism?

3. How can objectives be operationalized within the counterterrorism domain, intended mechanisms identified and indicators distinguished?

2. Development of the manual

2.1 State of the art concerning (ex ante) policy evaluation

In a first step, it was necessary to map the current knowledge about policy evaluation by analyzing relevant reference works, paying attention to the distinction between rational-analytical policy evaluation (mainly measuring through quantitative analyses), constructivist policy evaluation (mainly understanding through qualitative analyses), and contextual-realistic policy evaluation (understanding mainly through a combination of both qualitative and quantitative analyses). In this phase, international networks on evaluation research were also explored, such as Better Evaluation, which by developing a Rainbow Framework provided an overview of both steps to be taken and research methods to collect and analyze data. Members of the supervisory committee also provided input on further relevant literature. This provided the groundwork for constructing the manual.

2.2   Focus of the manual

The manual has as its primary aim to assist in carrying out an ex ante evaluation by going through the various steps in a structured way. These steps are also linked to the Integral Assessment Framework, because answering the questions therein helps to comply with the legal obligations of art. 3.1 of the Accountability Act 2016. In this way, following the manual ensures both the accurate execution of an ex ante evaluation and the realization of the relevant legal requirements.

The manual assumes that an ex ante evaluation will take place at the start of the policy cycle, focusing on the agenda-setting and policy-making stages. At the same time, it also takes into account that this chronology is not always followed: sometimes there is a need to prepare an ex ante evaluation while, for example, the policy implementation phase has already started. This has an impact on the implementation options, which is also discussed.

At the end of the manual, ex durante evaluations (during the policy implementation stage) and ex post evaluations (during the policy assessment stage) are also discussed, and why it is a good idea to think about these evaluations while you are still at the beginning of the policy cycle. Will these ex durante and ex post evaluations be handled qualitatively or quantitatively? What type of evaluation is aimed for: effectiveness evaluations, efficiency evaluations, or explanatory (process) evaluations? That influences the data that must be gathered from the start on. Quantitative evaluations can be measured along the Maryland Scientific Methods Scale (MSMS). In essence, the highest scale of the MSMS is an experimental setting and the lowest scale is observations in a natural environment. Striving for the highest scale may be important or less important, depending on the purpose of the evaluation. If this also necessitates the collection of qualitative data, as is often the case with realist evaluations where contextual information is paramount, and where the main aim is to learn from the evaluation, this must be clear from the start.

2.3   Content of the manual

As already stated, the manual consists of several steps:

--> Step 1: Determining that there is political and/or administrative attention to the phenomenon
--> Step 2: Determining the problem to be solved
--> Step 3: Identifying the reasons for government action
--> Step 4: Identifying actors that can be involved in policy implementation
--> Step 5: Defining the policy goals and formulating them SMART-C

--> Step 6: Elaboration of the framework for the intervention logic
--> Step 7: Develop possible policy measures and policy instruments
--> Step 8: Make a choice which policy measures and policy instruments will be implemented
--> Step 9: Checking the internal and external consistency of the chosen policies and instruments

The intention is to go through all the steps in the above order. It is possible that a step has already been completed in the past (for example identifying the reasons for government intervention), so that less time has to be spent on this step.

At each step, research methods that enable implementation are referenced, and a concrete example is given for clarification. The research methods are further elaborated in the annex "methods and techniques". With each research method, a choice has to be made between time and resources spent on implementation on the one hand and validity of the method on the other. It is then up to the user to make their own choice. However, the advice is given to strive for the highest possible validity, taking into account the time one has and the resources that one can spend.