

Peer review of the evaluation activities of the Court of Auditors of the Republic and Canton of Geneva

Key facts

The Swiss Federal Audit Office (SFAO) conducted an audit of the evaluation activities of the Court of Audit of the Republic and Canton of Geneva (CdC) at the latter's request. As the state's external supervisory body, the CdC provides independent and autonomous supervision, among other things, of the Cantonal Administration, subsidised entities and public-law institutions. Since 2013, its mission has been to evaluate public policies. It has taken over this activity from the External Commission for the Evaluation of Public Policies.

Between 2013 and 2017, the CdC published seven evaluations. Five others have been initiated or are being implemented. As at 31 December 2017, the CdC had 3.4 full-time equivalent posts under the supervision of magistrates and a budget of nearly CHF 1.2 million. The SFAO considers that the CdC has reached a high degree of maturity in the activities that it has not been carrying out for very long. It is a learning organisation that produces quality reports. The SFAO encourages it to continue along this path. Various opportunities for improvement exist, mainly by strengthening the team's project management skills and making reports more accessible to non-specialists.

Evaluation process in accordance with standards and regular updating of processes

The CdC conducts its evaluations in accordance with the standards of the Swiss Evaluation Society (SEVAL) and the guidelines of the SAIs. It has a practical approach and constantly seeks to improve and adapt its processes. It has developed quality assurance, a task entrusted to a magistrate. The SFAO is of the opinion that a quality magistrate must be in a better position to comment on methodological and planning issues relating to evaluations.

The evaluation team is academically trained and has good business skills. They are familiar with the evaluation process and basic methodological tools. The hiring of an additional evaluator in 2017, a specialist in quantitative methods, gives a new balance to a team initially oriented towards qualitative approaches. The CdC makes little use of surveys and questionnaires although these techniques make it possible to interview many actors or benefit recipients. Similarly, the CdC does not incorporate a comparative perspective which would allow it to examine practices and solutions developed by other communities.

Improve project planning and management

On average the CdC requires 255 days per evaluation. These resources are of an order of magnitude comparable with the practices of other oversight bodies conducting evaluations. The distribution of resources between the preparatory phase and the implementation phase corresponds to known practices.

The SFAO found that the CdC does not plan its evaluations realistically. Indeed, it used significantly more resources than anticipated in the four missions where time estimates had been made. Planning lacks precision when the mission is launched. It is difficult to assign

specific tasks to auditors when the latter could provide added value for the analysis of financial data. In two cases, monitoring by external agents proved difficult or the results did not meet initial expectations. The SFAO believes that more rigorous project management could help to improve efficiency in the conduct of evaluations.

With four people, the evaluation team remains small. Evaluators may find themselves alone when faced with complex subjects with a strong technical component. Magistrates are not necessarily specialists in the field. To remedy this situation, evaluators could receive selectively support from an expert in the field. This would be a reference person during the various phases of the evaluation.

Reports on captivating themes, but a lack of popularisation of the results

The SFAO is of the opinion that the topics evaluated by the CdC are relevant. The majority of evaluation themes are self-reported. The CdC does not set specific priorities for its evaluation missions and refers to the general guidance determined at the beginning of its magistracy. It has selection criteria. In 2017, it decided to review its risk analysis. The SFAO believes that the CdC must seize this opportunity in order to better qualify the risks in accordance with the cycle of a public policy: from a definition of the needs to the effects.

The CdC has developed an iterative approach for conducting its evaluations. This allows it to adapt its approach to new knowledge and overcome challenges such as poor data quality. During the results validation phase, a dialogue is established between the CdC and the entities evaluated. This helps to clarify misunderstandings and points of divergence about factual and contextual elements. The final report is generally well accepted, as are the recommendations.

The reports are comprehensive and present in detail the public policy being evaluated and its context. However, the reports are long, averaging about 100 pages and are addressed to specialists. The SFAO is of the opinion that the CdC must make its evaluation reports more synthetic and accessible to a broad public. Popularisation requires better use of materials which summarise key results.

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