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# How a controversial minimum income scheme can be legitimated by its evaluations: The case of the RSA evaluations in France

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## **Abstract:**

*A social policy reform aiming at reducing poverty by drafting a new minimum income scheme (MIS) can be a very sensitive issue. It causes reluctance and controversies in policy arenas as in public opinion. Studying the political usages of a specific evaluation is a good way to better understand its institutionalization's process. Hence, it's interesting to analyze how and why the policymakers call on evaluation in the policymaking process. It highlights the role played by evaluation in the production, the legitimization and even the reframing of a social policy. The "Revenu de solidarité active"(RSA) is a French MIS designed for the unemployed and poor workers. I propose to analyze two RSA's evaluations: one has been conducted on the RSA experimentation (2008) and the second one was targeting its generalization (2011). I conducted a research on both evaluations with some fifty interviews of political and administrative actors, and a participant observation. This paper is based on a doctoral research about the institutionalization of social policy's evaluation, its stakes and usages in the family and social branch of the French social security (CNAF)<sup>1</sup>. Firstly, it analyzes the composition of the evaluation comity and its inter-institutional perspective, involving different actors, and implying specific perceptions and practices. Secondly, it shows how the first evaluation has been used by political actors to legitimate this MIS through a de-politicization of the debates, despite the weak evidence of the RSA's efficiency. Then it studies how the second evaluation partially reconsiders the RSA's efficiency revealing an important non-take-up phenomenon that still does not lead to question this MIS relevance. More broadly, this paper tries to understand how the political actors use the evaluation praxis in the social policy area. Thus it aims at studying the influence of a policy sector through its specific set of actors, controversies and administrative culture upon the evaluation practices and usages.*

**Keywords:** evaluation; social policy; poverty reduction; RSA; experimentation; policy instrument; legitimation

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<sup>1</sup> Caisse nationale des allocations familiales

Reforming a social policy designed to reduce poverty by drafting a new minimum income scheme (MIS) can be a very sensitive issue, especially in times of crisis and massive unemployment. It causes reluctance and controversies in policy arenas, as well as in public opinion. Firstly, because it refers to the society's referential<sup>2</sup> treatment of poverty (Muller, 2000). Secondly, because redistribution policies need to be legitimate, since those paying are generally not the beneficiaries of such social cohesion benefits (Rosanvallon, 1995). So the questions beg to be asked how are they legitimated and what is the policy evaluation position in this process? It is interesting to analyze how and why the policymakers resort to evaluation in the policymaking process. It leads to better understand the role played by evaluation in the production, the legitimization and even the reframing of a social policy. In this regard, it highlights how the social sector and its controversies influence the practices and the uses of policy evaluation. Studying evaluation practices and their political uses by analyzing a specific evaluation is a good way to better understand its institutionalization<sup>3</sup> process (Lagroye & Offerlé, 2011). To answer these different questions, the RSA case study is an interesting one to look at because a lot of attention was paid to the evaluations.

The "Revenu de solidarité active"(RSA) is a French MIS designed for the unemployed and poor workers. Its three main objectives are to be distributive, so as to fight against poverty of low-income-workers; to offer incentives, to create a financial gap between the job income and MIS in order to entice to return to work; and to simplify the solidarity system. It merges in a same scheme two previous MIS, one linked to the mono-parental family, and the other to unemployment, and two additional incomes linked to professional activity. It calls on different philosophies and concerns a heterogeneous public, in order to promote professional insertion. The significant novelty of this MIS is the sustainable additional income for poor workers, called "RSA activity". It forms part of the European social policy "activation" tendency to offer the MIS beneficiaries incentives to go back to work. It makes permeable the frontiers between social, employment and tax policies in a kind of "French soft workfare" (Barbier, 2002). It reflects deep changes regarding the objectives and the principles of treating those in need in France. The MIS not only tries to address a need, but also to modify the behavior supposed to be at the origin of this situation (Gomel & Serverin, 2012). It's based on the presupposition that MIS beneficiaries do not return to work because they do not have a financial interest in doing so. To a certain extent it establishes financial incentives to return to work as a pertinent regulation model in order to reduce poverty and dependence on MIS.

We are going to analyze two RSA's evaluations: one has been conducted on the RSA experimentation (2008) and the second one was targeting its generalization (2011). We conducted a research on both evaluations with some fifty interviews of political and administrative actors, and participant observation. We also lead a research on RSA activity non-take-up. We tried to find as many RSA activity potential beneficiaries as possible in the social security database and wrote to them about their potential eligibility to a representative sample (2500), in order to observe their reactions in comparison to other non-taking-uppers<sup>4</sup> identified (8800). We also realized a telephone survey of 150 non-taking-uppers who did not react to the mail (contact the institution, make an RSA application) to better understand this behavior. This paper is based on an ongoing PhD research about the institutionalization of social policy's evaluation, its stakes and uses in the family and social branch of the French social security (CNAF). Firstly, it will show how the first evaluation has been used by political actors to legitimate this MIS through a de-politicization of the debates, despite the weak evidence of the RSA's efficiency. Secondly, it will study how the second evaluation partially reconsiders the RSA's efficiency revealing an important non-take-up phenomenon, that still does not lead to

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<sup>2</sup> That is to say a representation of reality (societal problems, consequences and possible option to solve it) upon which a policy and its aims are based, implying a certain conception of the role played by this sector in society.

<sup>3</sup> Here we use the concept of institutionalization in a cognitivist perspective, as the establishing process of one set of norms, roles, culture, practices and usages.

<sup>4</sup> People subject to non-take-up

question the relevance of this MIS. Then, it will try to understand if there are specific practices, uses and institutionalization processes of policy evaluation in the social policy sector.

## **I. The RSA experimentation evaluation, a policy instrument to legitimate the MIS**

### **1. The evaluation context**

The emergence of the RSA gave birth to strong debate within the political arena: if there was a consensus to admit that previous MIS had to be reformed, the modalities remained controversial. That is why the High Commission of this reform decided to experiment and evaluate this scheme. The RSA experimentation has been allowed under the TEPA law<sup>5</sup> and is the first experimentation initiative on this scale in France. This law specifies the scheme objectives and the evaluation modalities. In order to contribute to the design of the experimentation and elaborate its evaluation methodology, an evaluation committee was created. It was chaired by François Bourguignon (the director of the Paris school of economics) and composed of institutional and political actors (representatives of the state, of the local general council (LGC), of CNAF), of university actors and qualified personalities (Comité d'évaluation des Expérimentations, 2008, p.3).

### ***An experimentation conceived as a strategic step towards the RSA generalization***

To implement the RSA, a High Commission of active solidarity against poverty was created as a dedicated office (administrative mission). It worked as a “public policy entrepreneur” whose *raison d'être* was the RSA application before the end of 2008. The engagement letter of the President of the French Republic and the prime minister to the High Commission made it clear that “*We want the RSA to be established before the end of 2008, and if possible even before.*” (Haut commissariat aux solidarités actives contre la pauvreté, 2008, p.10). Analyzing the objectives of the pilot phase (p.5) we can understand that it was conceived as a step of the generalization of the RSA to materialize and operationalize the action. It was not aiming to check the relevance of this regulation model to reduce poverty, but rather at providing factual elements about the feasibility and the efficacy of the MIS to justify it, particularly with an evaluation committee. The experimental initiative is designed to legitimate the scheme by its outputs for the political elites and the agents in the fields.

If the TEPA law stated that the experimentation would go on for three years, the High commissioner indicated that for him, it was not designed to run for such a long time. The goal was to pass the RSA reform in 2008, and there was a premeditated strategy to present it as a three-year-long program to ensure actors adhesion and provide evidence to get votes. A high commissioner advisor explained that “*If we kept it (the experimentation) for too long, we would not have had the resources, and enough time to generalize the RSA. For us it was not possible at all to talk about the RSA in the second part of the five-year term, we did not believe in it. [...] We knew know in advance that it would not run for three years, but we had to say it to share commitment. It would not have run for more than two years, but if we had announced for six month it would not have had any effect*”. As the evaluation report states, experimentation evaluation must enrich the reflections made on the RSA generalization, to learn from social experiment practice, and to contribute to an improvement to the effectiveness of a return to work incentive mechanism.

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<sup>5</sup> The TEPA law (Travail, de l'Emploi et du Pouvoir d'Achat) in favor of work, employment and purchasing power, has been promoted the 21th August of 2007.

## 2. The evaluation methodology and its limits: a tension between scientific methods and political objectives

The experimental evaluation method aims at measuring the impact of financial incentive to return to work for MIS beneficiaries, according to the “activation” theoretical approach to fight against poverty. The evaluation design has been profiled on a quasi-experimental<sup>6</sup> method, comparing test territories chosen by LGC with control territories (not subject to the treatment) defined by the members of the evaluation committee (L'Horty & Goujard, 2008). The common framework was fixed by the state targeting the two previous MIS recipient groups, leaving some degree of choice to the LGC about the RSA design (experimental territories, criterion for eligibility, personal accompaniment, etc.). Thirty three LGC experimented different designs of the RSA from November 2007 to June 2009, with beginnings staggered over time. The evaluation was completed by a qualitative approach that we will not develop here, because it has not been mentioned in the political discourse.

The experimental evaluation method was built within tensions between scientific objectives, characterized by methodological exigency, and political objectives (Allègre, 2010; Okbani, 2009, 2013). The study of the internal and external validity of the experimental protocol underlines the considerable limits of the evaluation results. Both were submitted to political constraints from the state, and from the LGC strategic goals, which deeply limited the objectivity and the relevance of the produced evidence. We are going to point out the political issues of the experimental evaluation method of the RSA impact, underline its main limits, in order to demonstrate the evaluation instrumentalization to legitimate the RSA and its incentive mechanism.

### ***A restrictive evaluation centralized on the return to work financial incentive efficacy***

The experimental protocol and its evaluation have been defined in a restrictive approach. Indeed, it only leads to analyze the return to work financial incentive on the MIS beneficiaries and not the general impact of the scheme. Firstly, the experimental RSA only targets the MIS beneficiaries returning to work and not the low-income workers also targeted by the RSA, in spite of this being its major innovation. Secondly, the experimental evaluation method does not measure the RSA's impact upon poverty reduction, although this is stated as one of its main objectives. This extract illustrates this point *“In the experimental phase, one capital aspect of the RSA, the support for poor working families was not implemented. Hence, experimentations do not teach anything about RSA impact on poverty reduction”* (Comité d'évaluation des Expérimentations, 2009, p. 25). To a certain extent, the evaluation deals with the “financial stimulus” to go back to employment (Gomel & Serverin, 2009). It leads to test this regulation model to reduce poverty, imposed by politics, without really measuring the poverty reduction impact and without questioning its relevance in implementation. Furthermore, the main part of the experimentation runs on increasing unemployment, reducing the impact of financial incentives to return to work (Allègre, 2010).

The evaluation design clearly implies political issues. The evaluation question's orientation tends to reduce the political debate focusing on the financial incentive to work, disregarding other possible effects (scheduled or unscheduled) of the RSA. Evaluation, as any policy instrument<sup>7</sup>, implies specific representation and particular problematization regarding the issues (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007).

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<sup>6</sup> RSA beneficiaries were not randomized, it is not a randomized experimentation (L'Horty, 2009, p. 24).

<sup>7</sup> A policy instrument is « a technical a social scheme which organize specific social relations between public power and its recipients according to representations and significations that it carries» (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2005, p13).

### ***An inadequate time frame to observe the scheme efficacy***

The experimentation did not complete the initial official term, because the RSA was extended to the whole population on June 2009. All in all, LGC experimented for seventeen months on average, with only eleven month on average where they were not informed (professional and beneficiaries) about the generalization<sup>8</sup>. Firstly, one of the main differences between experimental RSA and the previous additional income is the sustainability of the RSA which becomes more interesting financially after twelve months (Allègre, 2010). The experimentation and evaluation timing did not really allow any analysis of how RSA beneficiaries could react better on sustainable financial incentives than temporal ones. The impact measured by evaluation is more about incentive discourse (increase income promise) than real financial gain (Gomel & Serverin, 2009).

Secondly, more than anything, this kind of experiment needs time to involve actors, to allow them to understand the scheme, how it works and its internal and external issues (for agents and beneficiaries). According to the actors in field interviews, they *“did not have the time to launch the administrative machinery”* and to analyze its effects. The evaluation only takes into account the short-term reactions (not stabilized) without allowing observing learning reactions. For example, a RSA beneficiary can first find the scheme interesting and change his mind and vice versa. North American experiments show that when we evaluate additional income effect, initial effect can become non-significant after a while, and that is why the observing time is such an important parameter (Allègre, 2008). In the RSA experimentation case, the first positive effects were later contradicted. If, in the intermediary evaluation report, the return to work rate is 30% higher in the test territories than in the control ones on average in the first five months (Comité d'évaluation des Expérimentations, 2008), in the final report, after fifteen months, this rate is 9% on average, on the limit of statistical significance (Comité d'évaluation des Expérimentations, 2009).

### **3. Experimentation and evaluation uses as a source of legitimacy in political discourse and decision-making**

In spite of the scientific limits pointed out to measure the RSA efficacy, the intermediary evaluation report constituted the basis for the debate and the vote of the RSA generalization (in December 2008, twenty years after the previous MIS vote in 1989) without waiting for the final evaluation report (May 2009), published after the political decision. It reveals the instrumental relationship between the political and scientific approaches in the evaluation process (Barbier & Matyjasik, 2010; Weber, 1919). As outlined by an evaluation committee member *“Indeed, the RSA generalization has been decided before all the experimental conclusions were drawn. The impact study results were not available when the scheme generalization was decided. Here, as elsewhere, the evaluation did not precede the decision”* (L'Horty, 2009, p. 27). Intermediary results (whereas marginally significant and highly questionable) gave evidence of the RSA efficacy. The High Commission “political entrepreneur” role and the symbolic calendar worked as a window of opportunity (Ravinet, 2010; Kingdon, 1984) to put the RSA on the political agenda and pass the law. If generalization was already planned this situation questions the admissibility of the experimental approach and its evaluation. We can really wonder how the High Commission could have post-planned or cancelled the scheme for which it had been appointed.

The experimental evaluation method gives tangible elements on the financial viability of the RSA, of its actors social acceptability, of its operational readiness and its efficacy (Okbani, 2009). In spite of the limits we pointed out, it gives hard evidence and accountable the applicability of

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<sup>8</sup> The generalization declaration could change the actors investment and beneficiaries behavior.



the MIS, offering to the politicians outputs legitimization in the political arena and for field workers. Through an independent evaluation committee, the evaluators “scientifically” produced quantified evidence of the RSA efficacy, politically neutralized, that the legislator could use in the debate to generalize the scheme. It provides legitimization for the policymaking process, for passing the law and for the public authorities. The evaluation’s results are persuasive political and administrative arguments, and any High Commissioner advisor would agree that : *“It’s the main reason for why experimentation with evaluation have to be made [...] it’s really really strong in terms of conviction and legitimization”* (June 2009).

Although the intermediary evaluation results were nuanced, scientifically questionable and finally overturned, they have been used as evidence in the political discourse and debate, but also in the law to legitimate the RSA efficacy. That is what we can see in one of the High Commissioner’s speeches to the National assembly: *“We build on outcomes, on facts, on testimonies, on trajectories [...] and not on ideology. This is the experimentation realized under the provisions that you voted last July, and which intermediary results have been forwarded to you in an independent evaluation committee report. In 33 voluntary localities, 46 experimental zones had been compared to its control zones. These experimental territories concerned more than 100 000 MIS beneficiaries. The return to work rate in the experimental zone is 30% superior than the return to work rate in the control zones. [...]. The evaluation committee considered that this is a statistically significant gap, and I am pleased that the experimental General Council Presidents reflected that in this Hemicycle”*(25/09/08). This legitimization mode was quite efficient because the discussion and vote was very short.

The evaluation methodological choices can be compromised, oriented and invested by political objectives to produce rational evidence of the scheme efficacy, without questioning its relevance or its inducted effects. It tends to reduce the democratic debate focusing on what the evaluation try to measure. The evaluated controlled object (financial incentive to return to work) and the de-politicization operated by the “scientific” apparatus (evaluation committee, efficacy indicator) fit into a perspective of rationalization. It produced instrumentalization evaluation results in the political debate and contributed to legitimate the RSA and its social policy activation referential.

As any policy instrument, evaluation embodies values, fed by social interpretation and precise conceptions of a regulation model. It implies an oriented problematization of the issues at hand, and contributes to convey a particular representation of the targeted public. In the experimental RSA’s evaluation case, it contributes to legitimate the regulation model of financial incentives to work for MIS beneficiaries. It leads to crystalize a MIS beneficiaries’ representation who does not return to work because he has no financial interests to do so. It can be quite stigmatizing for this public, previously regarded as citizens who have to receive help to integrate society because they are victims of adverse circumstances. The fact is that the generalized RSA implementation shows that other parameters can be taken into account in the return to work, besides the financial gain.

## **II. The generalized RSA’s evaluation: analyzing the non-take-up without questioning the political relevance**

### **1. The NEC evaluation and the important RSA non-take-up**

The law generalizing the RSA provides that a National Evaluation Committee (NEC) be set up<sup>9</sup>. It is composed of representatives from LGC, the State, CNAF, public employment service, qualified

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<sup>9</sup> Article 32 of law n° 2008-1249 voted the 1st December 2008 to generalize the RSA.

personalities and RSA beneficiaries<sup>10</sup>. Chaired by François Bourguignon, the NEC must provide an evaluation report in 2011. Different kinds of analysis have been led by working groups regarding the scheme implementation, the RSA non-take-up, the RSA poverty and labor market impact, but also about RSA governance, its financial costs and its effects on routes for employment for the MIS' beneficiaries. In this part we will analyze more precisely the non-take-up question, which is a transversal issue in the evaluation.

In spite of the evidence efficacy provided by the experimentation evaluation, in the aftermath of the MIS implementation an important gap is observed between the estimation of RSA eligible<sup>11</sup> and effective beneficiaries. The RSA activity part, targeting a new public of low-income-worker is particularly underused. Although they have a right to this additional income, lots of potential beneficiaries do not apply for this scheme delivery, there is an important non-take-up (Math & Van Oorschot, 1996; Warin, 2006). Indeed, two years after the RSA implementation, the NEC evaluation report estimates that there is 50% RSA non-take-up and 68% specifically on the RSA activity. That raised some questions for political and institutional actors in charge of the scheme. In practice, the non-take-up is not a RSA particularity, and can appear to be normal if we take into account the implementation time of a new scheme. For example, the previous MIS for unemployed<sup>12</sup> took three or four years to stabilize, and an investigation estimates its non-take-up rate at 33% (Chastand, 1991) or 53%(Terracol, 2004). Nevertheless, the high non-take-up rate of the RSA activity brings questions about why the plan cannot target these eligible beneficiaries.

### ***The non-take-up and its issues***

The non-take-up notion aims at giving meaning to society representations and opinions on service delivery. It questions the reception of offers and their effectiveness between expected and real impacts, but also its relevance and its meaning for the (non) users. Studying non-take-up implies to analyze managerial and political dimensions. The political approach can report a lack of interest, a disagreement, and can be viewed as an exit (Hirschman, 1970), or reveal different kinds of impossibilities. Non-take-up behavior is a social relation to service delivery and to its institutions. In the social sector this phenomenon is even more important because of the difficulties in accessing one's rights and non-take-up accumulation situation are analyzed as one of the main causes of poverty (Warin, 2009, 2010). Working on non-take-up implies deep questioning of the adequacy between public needs and demands, and the service delivery. Analyzing such a phenomenon can be considered as a performance and relevance indicator to evaluate a scheme or the administrative system which implements it, or to know better the targeted public characteristics, needs and representations.

## **2. Evaluation results and its limits**

### ***RSA evaluation, revealing the non-take-up reasons?***

The evaluation report shows an important non-take-up, as put forward by the NEC national survey<sup>13</sup>. It contributes to identify the non-taking-uppers' profile, their representations, their RSA knowledge and behaviors. The evaluation report *"aims to quantify the extent of the non-take-up [...] and its reasons. It must feed into the reflection on the possible levers to reduce this*

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<sup>10</sup> In the continuum of the RSA's experimental evaluation committee, but in a largest perspective. (Cf. p.25 of the final report, 2011)

<sup>11</sup> Estimations of RSA potential beneficiaries has been made in 2007 by a public institutions working group.

<sup>12</sup> Revenu minimum d'insertion (RMI) – minimum insertion income

<sup>13</sup> This survey has been realized by DARES (Direction de l'animation de la recherche, des études et des statistiques). It has been made in two steps : first, by phone to interview 15 000 homes, with 6500 eligible on the RSA "socle" for unemployed or really few employed, 7000 RSA activity eligible (low income workers), and 1500 with incomes at the limit of eligibility. Second step, in face to face with 3340 interviewed coming from the same sample.



*phenomenon.*”(Comité National d’évaluation du RSA, 2011, p. 47). It studies the non-take-up rate on the different RSA components, non-taking-upper family characteristics, the potential amount of their benefits and the non-take-up reasons (Cf. scoreboard). It also develops the non-take-up effect on the poverty reduction objectives.

Possible reasons of the non-application (multiple answers allowed)	Non-taking-uppers who never had the RSA, and do not exclude being eligible (%)
Reasons reflecting a lack of knowledge	68
Do not know enough about the RSA	47
RSA is for the unemployed	30
Do not know where to make the application	30
Thought that it was automatic	7
Financially manage on his own	42
Matter of principle	27
Application process too complicated	20
Did not have time	11
Situation is going to change	10
Fear to lose other rights	3
Not financially interesting	3

Source : DARES Face to face qualitative Survey, beginnings of 2011 (Comité National d’évaluation du RSA, 2011, p. 61)

Lack of knowledge or bad understanding of the MIS appears as the first statistical reason of non-take-up for the NEC. 33% of the non-taking-uppers do not identify the RSA activity and think that the scheme is only for the unemployed. This situation questions the communicated information quality, even if other factors can play a part, such as the personal difficulties to identify oneself as a poor worker. The report underlines a non-take-up linked to the poor worker professional instability, relatively less deteriorated living conditions and lower RSA amount. The survey also reveals that 42% of the interviewed answered that they could manage financially on their own, and that 27% do not ask for the RSA as a matter of principle because they “*do not want be dependent on social help, and feel a debt gratitude for State*”. The RSA non-taking-uppers feel less poor (42 %, rather than 63 % for RSA beneficiaries). We can note that these explanations underline a willingness to manage by themselves without a MIS, even if it is with lower incomes. It contributes to illustrate that return to work mechanism can obey to other motives than financial incentive.

Furthermore, a complex application process to benefit from the RSA also appears to be a significant non-take-up reason (20%). This complexity to enter and to continue to receive RSA benefits can represent a substantial obstacle in the case of professional instability situations (at the time of the survey, 60% of employed potential beneficiaries are non-taking-uppers while 32% are unemployed). Basically, precarious employment and income instability are ones of the main characteristics of RSA activity beneficiaries which renewal on 32% on average each quarter. The report also sheds light on the fact that RSA non-taking-uppers have lower potential RSA amounts, which reveals that RSA application imply a physical and psychological cost regarding the waiting RSA amount. The report evaluation shows that 3% of non-taking-uppers do not apply for the RSA because it’s not financially interesting. It should be understood that these 3% are 30% of non-taking-uppers who know about the RSA, never received it but think they can benefit from it (Okbani & Warin, 2012).

The NEC concludes that “*a better information about RSA can’t be sufficient to completely resolve the non-take-up problem if it is in part linked to RSA low interest consequences or a matter of principle.*” (Comité National d’évaluation du RSA, 2011, p.15). The RSA evaluation revealed the non-take-up phenomenon, a scheme unscheduled effect, undetected by the evaluation experimentation. It also made explicit the non-take-up reasons, centralized on the RSA lack of knowledge and its non-application. In fact it was the first survey of this magnitude about this

phenomenon in France, presenting it as a public question (Warin, 2011). It is interesting to comment on this evaluation non-take-up approach.

### ***RSA evaluation limits: a willingness not to question the relevance ?***

Analyzing the RSA evaluation report, we can note that the non-take-up question is dealt with in quite a descriptive perspective, without taking into account the political approach which is, as we saw, one of the non-take-up study specificity. The evaluation intends to precise the non-take-up reasons, in order to encourage the best access to rights and reach the poverty reduction objectives, but the relevance of the RSA is not questioned. Besides the lack of RSA knowledge, the scheme non-acceptation and its reasons are underdeveloped. If the conclusion underlines the apparent low interest for the RSA or the matter of principle, it does not deeply interrogate the service delivery non-reception and its regulation model. However, the report and its source documents contain tangible elements for further analysis about these questions.

On one hand, answers reflecting the application process complexity and the instability situations refers to a kind of *scheme form refusal*, a kind of a *complication non-take-up* (Okbani, 2010). The complexity calls on the fact that the RSA operation modality can be unsuitable for the low-income-workers target, mostly in professional instability situation. Although they are eligible to lower RSA amount, RSA benefits imply considerable administrative formalities notably for temporary workers, self-entrepreneurs and self-employed. Indeed, after three month of non-eligibility (full time work) they have to make another complete RSA application<sup>14</sup>. The phone survey led by the Gironde CAF with some 150 RSA activity non-taking-uppers revealed that 15% of the respondents are in a situation of complexity non-take-up. They explain that «*administrative formalities are too complicated, too long and not properly explained*» and that the RSA application can be intrusive. Although it has elements to do so, the RSA evaluation does not question this unsuitability.

On the other hand, the answers referring to “Financially manage on his own”, “matter of principle” or “it is not financially interesting” in the NEC survey can be associated to a *content refusal*, a kind of “*voluntary non-take-up*” (Okbani, 2010). These non-taking-uppers, mainly employed, are searching for alternatives or are in denial ; in a matter of principle linked to psychological barriers (symbolical identification violence to the “MIS beneficiary-poor-workers” social group, fear from stigmatization, culpability feelings, lack of legitimacy); refusing for political reasons (receiving welfare) non-interested). They can also be in a cost/advantages perspective, where the RSA amount is not enough to compensate the physical or psychological application cost.

The CAF telephone survey points out that only 43% of the respondents think that the RSA is a good scheme. It highlights that 28% of the interviewed knowing the RSA, also know their eligibility but do not ask for it because of psychological barriers (Okbani, 2010). For some of them it is a kind of “self-exclusion” from the scheme linked to the stigmatization fear/refusal to be identified as a “RSA beneficiary institutional category” and its negative social images of the MIS beneficiary which have to be activated to work. It can be observed as a lack of legitimacy feelings “*there are people who need it more than me*”, but also as a distancing reaction for not being considered as part of the poor-workers targeted public, to preserve self-esteem. Some of them explain their non-application as a matter principle because of social injustice feelings “*solidarity help when we work is not embarrassing but it should not even exist*”. Some few non-taking-uppers also used discriminatory stereotypes about RSA beneficiaries “*Those who do not work are lazy, they take advantages of the situation*”.

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<sup>14</sup> The 1<sup>st</sup> day of the fourth month the beneficiary is automatically deregistered and it is administratively necessary to remake the demand process.

These answers dealt with identity questions or RSA refusal identification. According to J.-C. Barbier *“Indeed, for people who live, permanently or more or less temporarily, in poverty situation, the essential is not about economic logics or reform functionality, but about the look that the society they live in, necessarily nationally situated, is casting on them.”* (2008, p.18)<sup>15</sup>. In this perspective it is not surprising that non-take-uppers feel less poor than the RSA beneficiaries. The RSA social image and the activation referential representations which it is based on can imply scheme rejecting phenomenon, without even talking about all the social help fraud debates which can carry a negative image of the RSA, affecting the access to benefits and distorting its questioning (Okbani & Warin, 2012), .

### ***An activation non-take-up paradox***

The RSA only partially reached its target, and NEC evaluation tries to understand the non-take-up reasons, interweaving the non-taking-uppers. It does not clearly question the MIS construction, its operating model according to the targeted public, and even its activation referential. However the respondent answers and the non-take-up researches leads to interrogate the gap between activation scheme, carrying specific representation of the targeted public, and the important RSA activity non-take-up which can reveal scheme and counterpart refusals (psychological identification cost, stigmatization fear, application complexity). This important non-take-up demonstrates that the financial incentive to return to work is not the only vector of upturn to work because a significant majority of those eligible for the RSA activity go without. There seems to exist a structural paradox between RSA activation referential (that is to give financial incentive to return to work in order to reduce poverty and assistance) and the non-take-up (eligible beneficiaries prefer working and living without this help as a matter of principle, even if it is financially disadvantageous). The evaluation does not really deal with this, nor with the political non-take-up approach, and mainly concludes that it is a question of lack of knowledge surrounding the RSA.

## **3. The RSA non-take-up evaluation uses, a limited cognitive approach**

### ***Evaluation process and results valorization: a legitimization instrument***

Firstly, in the political discourse, the RSA evaluation process is widely valorized as a necessary and courageous process. The government takes advantages of it and tries to show that it rationally questions its action and gives outputs legitimization, outside of political cleavages or ideologies. The minister’s discourse illustrate it quite clearly: *“there is a real need, from all the reform stakeholders advocated by the President of the Republic, to measure the scheme effects and implications in the most objective posture possible in a domain which easily gives birth to ideological posture. [...] This evaluation national conference has to give us a serene judgment about this topic which overcomes the political divisions. [...] We need to have the courage, if appropriate, to recognize imperfections and draw the consequences. We especially have to value what works.”* (Bachelot discourse, 15/12/13). In this respect, the evaluation is used to legitimate the governmental policymaking process in a rationalization and de-politicization perspective.

Secondly, the report concludes that in spite of the considerable non-take-up, which it is necessary to reduce to reach the poverty reduction objectives, the RSA effects over poverty are conformed to the schedule. By the way, it also notes that *“return to work effects appears low and*

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<sup>15</sup> « Pour les personnes, en effet, qui connaissent, de façon permanente ou plus ou moins temporaire, une situation de pauvreté, l’essentiel ne tient pas dans la logique économique ou les fonctionnalités des réformes, mais dans le regard que la société dans laquelle elles vivent, société forcément située nationalement, porte sur elles. »

not very significant”(p. 23). Its incentive effects, supposed to be verified by the experiment evaluation, are still into question. The political discourse focuses on the partial achievement of poverty reduction, demonstrated by the evaluation, to legitimate the reform validity and considers that non-take-up has to be reduced for better performance.

### ***The RSA non-take-up in the political discourse***

The RSA evaluation conclusions about the important non-take-up and its potential diffusion made the government face to its own responsibilities. It gives to the government accountability and policy feedbacks about the scheme that it cannot ignore and has to take into account. It has the merit to bring up this question as a public problem of reducing poverty in the administrative and political arena for one of the very first time in France. All the issues of this evaluation main political use are based on two important steps: the evaluation non-take-up approach and its reasons; and the government phenomenon understanding, discourse and action. As we saw, the evaluation non-take-up approach gives interesting explanations of the phenomenon according to the non-taking-uppers. Nevertheless, it does not go any further on the political analysis and does not even interrogate the regulation model and its relevance.

The political discourse almost stays in this same perspective, taking into account the low RSA knowledge, its stigmatization effects and refusal as a problem that government has to face: *“If some do not wish to benefit from the RSA, that is because they do not want to be stigmatized. I see the proof that French people do not want to live as “welfare recipient”. [...] I also see the sign that the scheme has to be improved to correct how it is perceived. It is an essential issue, because only a well-understood and well-accepted RSA can be an effective return to work scheme”* (Bachelot, 15/12/13 discourse). The evaluation results lead the government to questions the non-take-up reasons, in particular to improve the RSA for having a better perception and acceptance in order to be a more efficient return to work scheme. However, it is interesting to note that the NEC did not underline the return to work RSA efficacy but only its poverty reduction complying effects.

### **III. Are there evaluation practices and uses specificities when it is about social policies?**

It is quite complicated to be able to talk about a kind of specificity of social policy evaluation practices and uses, and two case studies are still few to be sure, but we are going to develop a little bit more on what we could learn about these MIS evaluation. It will contribute to describe and analyze some social policy evaluation particularity, and more broadly, will give us some perspectives of how the political actors can use the evaluation praxis in the social policy area.

As we note, social policies are very controversial. They deal with societal treatment to fight against poverty and are closely linked to employment and tax policies. As any policy, it is built on a specific regulation model linked to societal referential and its representations of reality. In France, poverty reduction policies are based on the European activation model of soft workfare, the successor of a previous welfare estate. It refers to an ideological posture of a financially rational actor which can be discussed. Poverty reduction policy is a long term qualitative and quantitative action to contribute to better living conditions, in a global approach (financial help, social work, professional formation, social housing, emergency relief, ...). In times of economic crisis and massive unemployment it has to response to increasing needs and is subject to important financial tensions because of budget reductions<sup>16</sup>. It is all the more summited to a consequent legitimation exigency of efficacy and efficiency for social cohesion. In the French

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<sup>16</sup> To give some indications, French social and health protection is the first public expenditure with 42% of public expenditure (388 Milliar €) which represent 24,4 point on the French PIB (2005, Insee). 46% of the social security budget is financed by households (2011 Social Security). There is now important and controversial debate about budget law to reduce social security deficits.

case, this policy is composed off a superimposition of social benefits and accompagniments, with specific eligibility criteria, led by diverse institutional actors (the state, CNAF end CAF, LGC, municipalities, charities or NGOs). The political system context is quite complex, with different territorial scales, specific targeted public repartition for each institution with some transversal ones. That is one of the main reasons why it is quite complicated to measure the policy impacts, efficiency and efficacy. Social policymaking and evaluation intend to deal with it, notably working in an inter-institutional perspective in an attempt to represent its political system context.

## **1. From inter-institutional evaluation committee to inter-institutional legitimization**

During the RSA evaluations and participant observation of other local policies evaluation led by local social security (CAF), we could observe that inter-institutional evaluations imply specific practices and situations. Evaluating social policy to reduce poverty implies to involve its different stakeholders depending on their political system context in a kind of advocacy coalition (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993). As we pointed out for the RSA evaluations, different institutional actors have been represented: Social affairs ministry study department (DREES), Employment ministry studies department (DARES), LGC presidents, social security direction and studies department (CNAF and CCMSA), National employment public service directory (Pôle Emploi), Treasury directory, fight-against-poverty organizations, qualified personalities for evaluation policy (mainly researchers in economics and sociology), some RSA recipients. That is to say administrative and political actors, evaluation professionals, researchers and beneficiaries with quite different interests and opinions (both personal and institutional) about the RSA and its evaluation process (Avenel, 2009).

On the one hand, it gives an opportunity to question the policy with its different institutional stakeholders with more financial and data resources, the diverse institutional and personal point of view to feed the reflection: *"We do not make it alone, it is made on demand or a working group, etc. Indeed, we never made an evaluation which consist in explaining to another institution that it is doing its job poorly"* (CNAF, 16/03/12). It brings the collective legitimacy to its members to evaluate the scheme which mostly impact their missions. But it also legitimates the evaluation results not only for outsiders but also for the comity members' own institution, that is to say for the main stakeholders of the policy. It directly facilitates its consideration. On the other hand, this configuration of numerous institutional actors can lead to a kind of connivance, in particular because of some stakeholders' presence with divergent evaluation representations, which can make it complicated to tackle more specific issues, for example about RSA relevance or political analysis of the non-take-up. One interviewed member notes that : *"there were many lectors to prepare the report, one of the annex report has never been published, I have been censured but I'm far from being the only one"*.

On both RSA evaluation, political actors used to talk about the "independent committee", its "scientific" evidence and "objectivity". There is definitely a legitimacy issue around the evaluation committee, its institutional stakeholders, and its professional composition. Inter-institutional evaluation context influences the evaluation practices and also its potential uses.

## **2. Social impact quantification complexity**

The social policy evaluation institutionalization process is characterized by quantitative efficacy measurement tendency. This perspective is not at all part of the field actors' administrative culture, in particular for social workers. They mainly deals with a *"qualitative, individualized*

*global approach*” of their professional missions with aims to traduce personal complex situations into institutional helps with justice, justly, and justification perspectives for its both interlocutors (Soulet, 2008, 2013). They have to justify to potential beneficiaries and payer institution the accompaniment and help interest which is not always easy from a qualitative approach and even more from a qualitative one, which can generate reluctance for social workers and their managers. With this mind, it can also intend to the data evaluation sources.

Out of cultural checks, there are structural difficulties to quantify the policy impact of some social scheme or actions which try to ameliorate the living conditions (social work, familial mediation, centres for social welfare). Indeed, we could observe important debates about this kind of social intervention evaluation on the CNAF. First, there is methodological controversy to evaluate the action impacts in a complex system. There are difficulties to quantify living conditions amelioration by indicators, when its depending on many other factors that the treatment itself in complex social situation. Second, there is a political necessity to legitimate these actions by an efficacy evaluation to ensure that the dedicated budget permanency: *“we can’t really evaluate social work efficacy but we have to find something to avoid budget cut”* (CNAF, 27/11/12). That leads to develop new management and performance indicators which can be mobilized in an evaluation process.

On the RSA evaluations we could saw the quantitative indicators importance: on the first one to try to quantify the return to work impact with an experimental evaluation method, and on the second one, to elaborate a non-take-up rate in order to evidence the phenomenon. There where political issues about these indicators on the political arena. It can be used on the debate and political discourse to legitimate their implemented policy. It is a part of a rationalization and de-politicization strategy operated by evaluation instrument and its indicators. Nevertheless, evaluation indicators and their elaboration can really be questioned as any statistical instrument (Desrosières, 2005), in particular in the social sector due to its particularities, legitimization exigencies and budget cuts. The RSA experimentation evaluation shows that there were important issues about the efficacy indicator for political decision which mainly focus on it, without even questioning the indicator pertinence to measure impact on complex social reality. To a certain extent this prohibits the NEC from questioning the real relevance of the RSA. Social policy evaluation is submitted to quantitative approach, notably mobilizing experimentation, to the expense of a qualitative approach as we pointed out on both RSA evaluations.

### **3. Social policy evaluation uses**

Both RSA evaluations that we analyze illustrate different possible uses. As for any evaluation policy, this process input qualitative and quantitative information about the policy operation, its institutional implementation and about the targeted public situation and behavior. In this way it is a real revelator of policy feedbacks (Mettler & Welch, 2004; Pierson, 1993). As far as social policy is concerned, there is a real issue about a scheme reception as we saw with the RSA evaluation. The main problem here is the efficacy of the poverty reduction policy. The detection and the non-take-up analysis seem to be particular issues of social policy feedbacks and can be used as an indicator of the policy efficacy and relevance. It leads to question the style and the content of the policy in a supply and demand perspective.

As we pointed out, social policy as redistributing policy have an important need of legitimization and rationalization. Quantitative and de-politicization arguments seem to be all the more necessary to face to reform and consensus difficulties. Evaluation processes and reports have to provide accountability and contribute to the inter-institutional acceptance. Firstly, the experimental process with evaluation requirement seems to be more and more mobilized in



social policy sector. After the RSA experimentation, lots of other experimentations have been made by the same High Commission with an important budgetary investment<sup>17</sup>. Instrumentation of experimentation and experimental evaluation methods shows that there is a significant change of the social policy making process and its legitimation modalities. It moves out from classical theories centralized on the sovereignty and leaders legitimacy to shift on government technology embodying rationality (efficacy indicators, discrete instruments, norms,...). This mutation is in the line with policy technicization and de-politicization, implying a form of leaders' disengagement. We can wonder if these instrument utilization characteristics would not be a modality to avoid eminent political questions of social poverty treatment. According to Lascoumes et P. Le Gales *«for governmental elite, the instrument debate may be a smokescreen to dissimulate less acceptable objectives, for depoliticize fundamental political questions, to create a minim reform consensus by an apparent neutrality of instruments, presented as modern, and which proper effects are felt over time»* (2010, p. 333). Evaluation is used as a public action instrument by political actor to legitimate the policy, but also the leading-policy institutions and policy making process.

## Conclusion

Both RSA evaluation analyses illustrate how evaluation is a policy instrument that can occupy particular positions in policy making, implementation and social policy questioning. On the one hand, the RSA experimentation evaluation, conceived as a step toward generalization, gave "scientific" evidence (with evaluation committee and indicators) of its efficacy and its acceptability as a regulation model. It provided rational and de-politicized elements to the public power, elements which have been instrumentalized in the political discourse to output legitimation and facilitate the decision-making. On the other hand, generalized RSA evaluation highlights an important non-take-up, in particular for the RSA activity, and provides explanations of the phenomenon. It demonstrates an unexpected RSA effect: non-application. Nevertheless, while 68% of the RSA activity targeted public does not receive it, the NEC does not question the relevance of the RSA (style and content), especially as it pertains to the limits of its operational modalities and its social image.

Evaluation provides policy feedbacks and accountability. Social policy, maybe more than other policies, has an important need of legitimation, not only because it deals with poverty reduction, wealth redistribution and is subject to important political and ideological debates, but also because it has to deal with increasing needs in a context of reduced budgetary allocations. In praxis, social policy evaluation can be used by political actors as a policy instrument which provides a rationalization, technicization and de-politicization approach of the policymaking process and decision-making, denying political questions in order to facilitate consensus and reforms. In this way, evaluation does not even question the policy relevance. Policymakers instrumentalize the evaluation process, evaluation committee and results in their political discourse, in order to show the government apparent rationality. In fact, the evaluation methodology and focus can also be influenced by political constraints. Social policy evaluation institutionalization is characterized by an important quantitative efficacy measurement tendency, although it is not embodying the administrative social work culture. It is also newly characterized by evaluation experimental methods which policymakers mobilized in scheme experimentation to better legitimate a program implementation. But as we saw, evaluation method and quantitative indicators can really be questioned.

Moreover, we can point out that social policy evaluation needs inter-institutional approach and legitimation and deals with non-take-up which is a central issue of reduction-poverty-policy. Evaluation facilitates readability of social policy, giving a specific instrumental orientation of the

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<sup>17</sup> (Fond d'Expérimentation Jeunesse)

supposed efficacy. In a certain extend it contributes to legitimate the policy, also legitimating the policy making and the public power. More broadly, it questions the role that the polity attributes to the evaluation praxis and uses, and therefore, the orientation that it gives to the institutionalization of the social policies evaluation.

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