



SCHOOL of  
PUBLIC POLICY

## **Policy, Program, and Budgetary Reviews by Specialized Analytic Units of the US and EU**

### **Similarities, Differences, and Cross-Atlantic Lessons**

*Thematic Report*

*February 2023*

A series of workshops and other events were held by the University of Maryland in conjunction with the annual meetings of the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management (APPAM) from 14-18 November, 2022 (see Appendix 1.) They were based on the understanding that “(G)overnments everywhere must make increasingly complex decisions on an ever-widening array of issues. To assist decision makers, both the United States and the European Union have established quasi-independent, specialized analytic units that assess (1) proposed legislation, regulations, programs, and spending; and (2) the implementation, effectiveness, and efficiency of operating policies and programs.”

With support from the Erasmus + Jean Monnet program of the European Commission, this effort brought together senior US officials from the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), the Congressional Research Service (CRS), and the Government Accountability Office (GAO) with their European counterparts at the European Court of Auditors (ECA), the European Investment Bank (EIB), and the European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS).

This report summarizes the major themes that emerged during the discussions. Importantly, consensus was not sought on all topics discussed. Indeed, it is unlikely that every participant would fully agree in detail with all of the following.

One point where there was a clear consensus was on the great value of the week’s discussions, the sharing of experiences, and the need to continue the conversations going forward. (Already, plans are being made for follow-up discussions at the ECA and the EIB.)

The obvious differences in the European and American governmental systems lead in turn to important distinctions in the roles, mandates, capabilities, client relations, and reporting responsibilities of the analytic units, both between Europe and the United States as well as within

Europe and the US. Nonetheless, common policy problems, needs of decisionmakers for sound information and perspective, and methodological challenges and opportunities all underscored the importance of continuing to deepen the sharing of lessons among the analytic units. There was agreement that a next step for the initiative could be to examine in detail how all of this plays out in a specific policy or program arena.

What follows are six themes that were consistently raised across the presentations and discussions.

### **(1) Interconnected and complex problems require coordinated assessments**

It is a truism to say we live in an interconnected and globalized world. For example, the challenges associated with climate resilience and adaptation, deadly pandemics, the soundness of financial systems, social protection, economic development, and cybersecurity do not respect boundaries related to jurisdiction, organization, or professional discipline.

Interconnected and complex problems cannot be addressed by one program, in one agency, at one level of government operating in isolation from others. Rather, success (or failures) will largely be a function of how effectively a network operates and the collaboration and cooperation among the members of that network. As one participant observed, “major crises such as climate change, recessions, COVID-19, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, require major policy responses.” Decision makers need insight into how individual programs are operating as well as if the overall effort is achieving a common outcome. In short, boundary-spanning responses require boundary-spanning analysis and assessment.

This is not to suggest that every analytic product needs to be a complete assessment of an entire policy area including the individual contributions of all the programs that seek to contribute to that policy area. In fact, very few analytic products will attempt such a level of ambition. Rather, it is to suggest that the collective contribution of analytic units will be most helpful to decision makers to the extent they speak overall to how individual programs operate and their contributions to a common outcome. Boundary-spanning and interconnected issues highlight opportunities for analytic units globally to collaborate and perhaps even more so, the need for the units within Europe and the US to coordinate their respective efforts.

Indeed, one of the more interesting lessons was how the analytic units within Europe and the US seek to coordinate their work—as appropriate and consistent with their differing mandates and roles---to make a collective contribution. The very different work and resulting coordination efforts of the CBO, CRS, and GAO were illustrative in this regard.

### **(2) Information throughout the policy and implementation cycle**

Scholars and practitioners have long recognized that policymaking and implementation are not discrete steps but, on the contrary, are part of a continuous process. This recognition has important implications for the roles and potential contributions of analytic units.

The core responsibilities of several of the units center on analysis of the efficient and effective implementation of programs. They recognize that many of the major failures of government are

the result of incomplete or poor implementation. The attention of policy makers, especially elected policy makers, often moves on to other issues once a legislative initiative is enacted and they lose sight of the importance of effective implementation, which can be politically unglamorous and technically complex.

Several of the analytic units provide “real-time” assessments (such as performance audits while a program is being implemented rather than waiting until after the fact) of the progress and challenges programs face in implementation and make recommendations for improvements. The discussion acknowledged that this could require a cultural change for some units which traditionally had been more comfortable with post-audits when more information was available and the issues more settled.

On the other hand, and consistent with the recognition that policymaking and implementation are part of a continuous process, several participants discussed how their units seek to provide decision makers with insight at each of the stages of the policy cycle. (The ECA showed a particularly interesting graphic in this regard.)

The information provided at the various stages often differs by methodology and reporting format. The point, it was stressed, is two-fold (and is further elaborated on below):

- (1) The analysis is real-time. That is, it is provided to decision-makers when they need it. The most elegant piece of analysis that is provided after it was needed may have historical value but will have missed the opportunity to inform current efforts.
- (2) The most appropriate methodology is driven by the types of information needed, which can differ by the stage in the policy process.

While their roles as independent analytic units often preclude the units from commenting directly on policy matters or the wisdom of legislative initiatives, the units can and do provide valuable insight into the administrability of the proposed solutions. For example, irrespective of the desired policy objective, will the programmatic response as designed meet the intended objective? Has the proposal fully considered the capabilities of the implementing organization and whether it will be able to administer and oversee the new initiative? Has the proposal considered whether the new initiative overlaps or duplicates existing efforts?

Finally, analytic units are finding that they are increasingly being asked for advice as policies are being formulated. Some of this is coming directly through formal mechanisms, some is less formal and indirect but, in all cases, the analytic units stressed that they seek to meet decision makers’ needs while maintaining their common core values of policy neutrality, objectivity, and political independence.

Policy advice that protects the independence of the analytic units can be done by providing information on prior broadly related efforts and what they suggest for the current policy debates. For example, lessons learned from the COVID-19 response will doubtless be used by the analytic units to inform policymaking on strengthening public health systems and biosecurity planning.

The European analytic units, particularly the EPRS, described in detail their roles in ex ante assessment of regulatory policy. As EPRS noted, a core part of its efforts center on the belief of “better regulations for better results.”

### **(3) Fit-for-purpose methodologies**

As noted above, the analytic units recognize that the most appropriate methodology to answer a given question is determined by the information needed. The units seek to keep informed of and pilot innovations in analytic approaches (such as mixed method evaluation approaches) and those that push the traditional boundaries of audit to be more real-time and outcome-centered.

Strategic foresight was one emerging competency raised among the participants. Both EPRS and GAO have dedicated efforts in this regard. Strategic foresight helps the organizations advise their clients on the “over the horizon” issues that deserve attention now before they potentially become full-blown crises. Foresight efforts likewise help the units prepare for the types of issues they should examine (and related competencies they will need) to meet decision makers’ needs in the future.

The analytic and data mining opportunities provided by large administrative data sets was mentioned but in the interests of time during workshop not fully explored. Likewise, using artificial intelligence was mentioned in passing but not in any detail. Both topics may be appropriate items for exploration at a future session.

### **(4) A client-centered approach to reporting**

All the units discussed how they adjust their product mix to the needs of their clients. As one participant put it, “we need to meet the client where they are, rather than where they were, or they we want them to be.” We no longer (if we ever did!) live in a world where every question can only be answered with a 20+ page printed or PDF report. Certainly, some questions and issues require a deep and detailed assessment and a resulting lengthy report. However, other questions can be answered in a much shorter report and accordingly will be more useful to decision makers.

Directly related, the units described how they are employing a diverse set of formats for providing their information. In addition to traditional reports, these include short memos (confidentially or publicly), fact sheets, technical assistance and informal comments, multi-purposing information across products, “born-digital” products that allow for advanced data visualization, etc. The overall point is that the units are constantly on the alert to how can most helpfully present their information to maximize its value and they recognize a traditional one-size fits-all approach is no longer appropriate.

### **(5) A “trusted voice” in an era of disinformation**

While not an explicit part of their missions, all the analytic units recognized the especially important role they play safeguarding democratic values by being a trusted voice in an era of disinformation. Decision makers and the broader public are seeking reliable information in a political and social media environment that offers multiple sources of truth.

Objective, politically neutral, high-quality analysis and information that is forthcoming about its strengths and limitations, is an essential part of the effort to fight against democratic backsliding in Europe and the United States (and elsewhere of course). This awareness on the part of the analytic units leads to reinforced commitments to ensure the rigor, quality, and usefulness of their work supporting decision makers.

Providing decision makers and the public with honest and timely information on what works in government and what does not along with practical and specific recommendations for improvements can be a key element in showing that public funds are being well spent and when improvements can be made, they are made. Where authorized and appropriate, the units are expanding their public presence by pushing their work over social media platforms so that the public has wider access to their information and analysis. Overall, the analytic units deeply appreciate that assuring the public that their taxes are being used effectively and efficiently is key to rebuilding trust in public institutions and the essential role those institutions have in the well-being, safety, and security of the population.

#### **(6) Analytic unit capacity**

All of the units recognize that the organizational competencies and personnel skills that made them successful in the past are not adequate for the needs of today. The themes described above show many of the ways that the units are evolving to meet the demands of a rapidly changing environment. The types of reporting, array of analytic tools and approaches, the range of topics assessed and the points of the policy process where they are looked to for guidance are shifting dramatically.

The analytic units recognize that they need to augment their existing talent base to include the skills needed for the new environment. For example, at least in the US context, this includes staff with stronger skills in program evaluation, strategic foresight, data analytics especially of large data sets, data visualization, and digital reporting.

#### **Feedback on events**

The participants without exception expressed appreciation to the UMD organizers and their colleagues in the other analytic units for the information sharing and lessons they provided and looked forward to further interactions. Here are some of the responses that the organizers received:

*Theresa Gullo*, Director of Budget Analysis, Congressional Budget Office:

Just a note to let you know how much I enjoyed spending time and learning from all of you last week. I learned so much and hope that some perspective on how CBO operates in the US budget system was helpful for you.

*Wolfgang Hiller*, Head, Directorate for Impact Assessment and European Added Value (EPRS) European Parliamentary Research Service:

The highlight of the programme was the APPAM Conference where exchanges took place both in the context of a pre-conference workshop and at the main Conference itself.

High-level ‘get-acquainted’ EU-US leaders meetings, hosted by the European Parliament Liaison Office preceded that the day before the Conference. In terms of content, all of these meetings were highly interesting and allowed establishing new contacts and renewing those that already did exist.

Kathryn Newcomer, Professor, George Washington University:

I also truly enjoyed meeting all of you and learning more about the EU governance, investment bank and analytical work.

*Emily Sinnott*, Head of Policy and Strategy Division, European Investment Bank:

I would like to thank you for organising the visit of the EU delegation to Washington D.C. to exchange approaches and experiences on programme/policy evaluation. It was an excellent and packed visit that allowed us to hold discussions and deepen relations with policy experts in the U.S. administration, academics and politicians on evaluation work and key policy initiatives. The range of experts that you arranged for the Delegation to meet and the quality of the discussions that you prepared and chaired in the various meetings and seminars were excellent. We were lucky to have the opportunity to interact with many high-level officials, top academics and policy experts.

*Martin Weber*, Director of Audit Chamber II, Investments for Cohesion, Growth and Inclusion, European Court of Auditors (ECA):

We highly appreciated the rich and informative programme put together by Professor Besharov, his role in facilitating the exchanges and the interesting and thought-provoking discussions with our US colleagues on issues of mutual interest. This study visit allowed us to establish new and reinforce existing contacts with our US counterparts and already provided valuable inputs to our work. We highly recommend continuing these exchanges in the coming years.



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# Appendix 1: Program Events

## Monday, November 14

*20:00—21:30*

Public event

University of Maryland School of Public Policy  
College Park, MD

## Tuesday, November 15

*12:30—14:30*

Private consultation

Pew Research Center  
1615 L Street NW, Suite 800,  
Washington, DC

*16:00—22:00*

Private consultation

Delegation of the European Union to the United States  
2175 K Street, NW  
Washington, DC

## Wednesday, November 16

*11:00—17:00*

Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management annual meeting

Pre-Conference Session: Policy, Program, and Budgetary Reviews by Specialized Analytic Units of the  
US and EU: Similarities, Differences, and Cross-Atlantic Lessons

Washington Hilton  
1919 Connecticut Ave., NW  
Washington, DC

*18:30—21:30*

Private consultation

Secretaries' Innovation Group  
Willard Hotel  
1401 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC

## Thursday, November 17

*10:15—11:45*

Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management annual meeting

Panel: European and US COVID-Relief Programs: Comparing Experiences and Lessons for the Future  
Washington Hilton  
1919 Connecticut Ave., NW  
Washington, District of Columbia

*13:00—14:15*  
Private consultation  
Congressional Research Service  
101 Independence Ave., SE  
Washington, DC

*15:00—16:30*  
Private consultation  
Congressional Budget Office  
Ford House Office Building  
441 D St SW  
Washington, DC

*18:45—22:00*  
Private consultation  
American Enterprise Institute  
1789 Massachusetts Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC

## **Friday, November 18**

*9:30—11:00*  
Private consultation  
US Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street NW  
Washington, DC

*12:15—14:00*  
Private consultation  
Bertelsmann Foundation North American  
1108 16th Street, NW, 1st Floor  
Washington, DC