

THE USE OF INDICATORS IN THE EVALUATION OF RETAIL PLANNING: EVIDENCES FROM ENGLAND

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Abstract. Retail planning gained importance with the introduction of innovation in that sector, which challenged the vitality and viability of town centres. With this evolution and the arise of Town Centre First in England, the retail planning key documents started to incorporate indicators to help and standardize the monitoring of the health of town centres. This article aims to analyse the process of evaluation and verify the evolution of indicators suggested in the several public documents that constitute retail planning in England since 1993. It was based on the review of the main documents established in England since 1993. The research developed in this paper helps to update some information and is valuable for urban planners, practitioners and academics. In this paper we conclude that indicators are been used but without been framed in an evaluation framework and the variability of suggested indicators may have limited the analysis of the temporal evolution of town centres. In terms of research implications this paper helps to, in part, path the way for future research in this field.

Keywords: evaluation, retail planning, England, indicators, Planning Policy Guidance, Planning Policy Statement.

Introduction

Retail is a private activity through which goods and services are sold and, although not restricted to urban areas, it's in these areas that it reaches its maximum expression. The public regulation of retail has gained importance over the last decades in several Western European countries (as example see: Netherlands (Spierings 2006; Evers 2002); France (Colla 2003); Germany (Barth, Hartmann 2003); Sweden (Kärholm 2012)). The changes in this sector caused a decrease in the vitality and viability of town centres (see Ravenscroft 2000; Schiller 1994; URBED 1994). Usually referred as retail planning, one may considered it as the regulation carried out on retail sector which reflect, directly or indirectly, the national development strategy of the sector (Guimarães 2016). In the English context, among many others, authors such as Guy (2007, 2002), Findlay and Sparks (2014) have worked on this subject. The regulation in this country has been characterized by the development of Planning Policy Guidance's and Statements. Associated with these documents is the provision of indicators to analyse the health of town

centres (Communities and Local Government 2009, 2012; Department of the Environment 1996). The role of private associations has also been relevant in this process, of which one may enhance the Association of Town & City Management (former Association of Town Centre Management) with the release of reports and Town Centre Health Check (Association of town centre management 2015). Recently, a study commissioned by this association and by Coca-Stefaniak (Coca-Stefaniak 2013) introduced a new set of indicators to measure town centre performance.

Material and methods

This article aims to analyse the process of evaluation and verify the evolution of indicators suggested in the several documents that constitute retail planning in England since 1993. This study was based on the analysis of the key documents that set the framework of retail planning of that country. In the following section we will discuss the process of evaluation. Subsequently, we will focus on English retail planning and indicators suggested on public documents. Finally,

some concluding remarks will be made. Although there is some research on this topic (Hogg *et al.* 2001, 2004; Pal, Sanders 1997; Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis 2000, Ravenscroft 2000) there is a need to update it. Even though there is some background of private commissioned reports (see for example Coca-Stefaniak 2013; BIS 2010, 2011) at some points this analysis has a descriptive nature because there is still a lack of recent scientific discussion on the use of indicators in retail planning, gap that this article tries to overcome and constitutes, at same time, part of the novelty of this article and the reason why this research may be of interest for researchers, urban planners and practitioners.

The process of evaluation

Evaluation is a very inclusive process used in a wide array of contexts and at different stages: ex-ante, ongoing or ex-post. The ex-ante evaluation means that it will be analysed the projected impacts of the subject of evaluation before it is implemented. The ongoing is done during the implementation of the programme and usually it's used to still make some amendments. Finally, according to Alexander (2006:7), the ex-post evaluation "involves measuring or assessing the impacts and effects of the subject undertaking – policy, plan, program or project."

Among many other contexts, it can be applied in an entrepreneurial environment, aiming the evaluation of customer satisfaction or for the evaluation of tourist's satisfaction regarding a particular touristic destination. It also can be used in the context of development programs, regeneration projects or public policies. In this case, the importance of evaluation arises from the need to inform stakeholders such as agencies or funding institutions, local authorities, planning officers, retailers and taxpayers if the program for which contributed, managed to achieve the desired impact (Greene 2009: 216). More than information about the amount spent is crucial to know the achieved impacts. As a complement, the evaluation process can be useful to support policy decisions to improve the performance of ongoing and future programs (Wholey 2010: 652). While focusing on public sector productivity, Hatry (1978: 28) used a sports analogy that also suits this research: "Unless you are keeping score, it is difficult to know whether you are winning or losing". The evaluation exercise should be an important source of learning and social innovation, especially for those responsible for the instrument under assessment, for institutions and actors with whom they come into interaction in this context, and to the general public (Ferrão, Mourato 2010: 21). Focusing on urban planning, Oliveira and Pinho (2009: 36) con-

sider that evaluation improves its practice, legitimate these processes to citizens, help policy planners and decision-making and allows the construction of a practical planning based on continuous learning process. Despite the acknowledged importance, it's usual the existence of gaps in these processes. Dhaliwal and Tulloch (2011: 18) focusing on social policies explains them clearly:

"Billions of dollars are spent every year on development policies and programs, but there is relatively little rigorous evidence on the true impact these programs have on the lives of the poor. [...] This scarcity of rigorous evidence on program impact, and the technical language in which the little evidence that does exist is presented, makes it inaccessible to policymakers, many of whom then rely on intuition and anecdotal evidence in deciding which programs to fund and implement"

Evaluation: frameworks and methods

The evaluation of policies and/or programmes is usually framed in a conceptual framework and subsequently is realized through different methods. In the European context, the work of the European Commission stands out. In order to evaluate the application of the Structural Funds two studies of higher importance were developed: MEANS (*Means for evaluating actions of a structural nature*) and the guide EVALSED (*The resource for the evaluation of Socio-Economic Development*). The first consists of six volumes and was prepared by the European Commission in 1999, aiming to present a coherent set of methods to respond to the problems encountered during the evaluation of interventions supported by the Structural Funds (European Commission 1999: 5). Following improvements in the field of evaluation, new experiences in European policies, the increasing number of EU members and the need for a more strategic approach in the evaluation of Structural Funds, it became necessary to update this publication. In this context, in 2008, the study EVALSED was released, comprising a support guide and three books: Evaluation approaches for particular themes and policy areas; Evaluation methods and techniques; Resource material on evaluation capacity building. This is a general study and assumed the difficulty of bringing together the ideal conditions to carry out an evaluation, either for the lack of data, the limitation of time, the availability of tools or the ability to perform it (European Commission 2008: 5).

The framework developed in this guide is described in the Figure 1. It considered necessary to analyse the objectives, inputs, outputs and results in order to obtain the specific impacts of a certain programme. Depending on the depth of analysis, this guide also

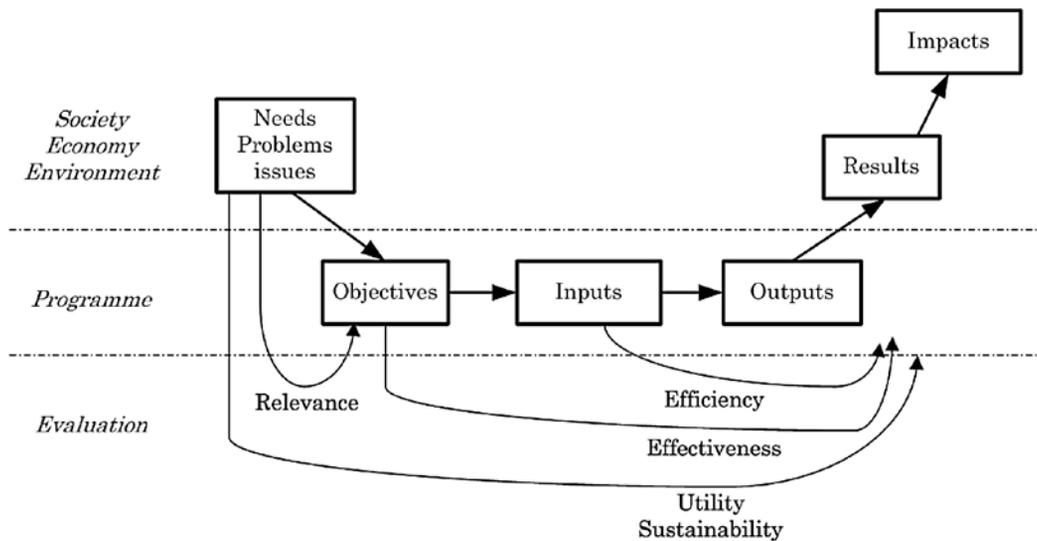


Fig. 1. Selecting priority evaluation questions
Source: European Commission (2008).

identifies four evaluation categories that relates to the relevance of the program, with its efficiency, effectiveness and utility (European Commission 2008: 41).

This guide (European Commission 2008: 42) explains what is meant by each of the categories. So, relevance “refers to the appropriateness of the explicit objectives of the programme in relation to the socio-economic problems it is supposed to address”; effectiveness “concerns whether the objectives formulated in the programme are being achieved, what the successes and difficulties have been, and how appropriate the solutions chosen have been and what is the influence of external factors”; “efficiency is assessed by comparing the results obtained or, preferably, the impacts produced, and the resources mobilized” and utility “judges the impacts obtained by the programme in relation to broader societal and economic needs”. This study also refers to sustainability, evaluation process that examine the duration of impacts. In this respect it must be examined what realistic expectations one may consider.

Other frameworks have been developed, like the one presented by Moore and Spires (2000: 219, based on the work of PACEC 1999), which presented a conceptual framework focused on the ex-post evaluation of urban regeneration programmes. Although there are some similarities with the Evalsed guide framework, especially regarding the outlined concepts, these are displayed in a more integrated way, which makes it easier to understand. In this framework it’s enhanced the strategic objectives of the programmes, inputs, activity measures, synergy, outputs and outcomes measures, gross impacts and the Net impacts on urban areas. Coca-Stefaniak (2013) performance

framework is another example and is anchored on four themes: people and footfall; diversity and vitality of place; consumer and business perceptions; economic characteristics. Although specifically developed for town centres this is a framework based on an ongoing evaluation process and, therefore, with limitations as to the depth of the performed analysis.

Underlying the different evaluation frameworks is the use of diverse kind of methods, like Importance-performance analysis (see Riviezzo *et al.* 2009; Musa *et al.* 2010), Analytical Hierarchy Process (Pineda-Henson *et al.* 2002; Saaty, Vargas 2013), Cost-benefit analysis (Nyborg 2014), Multi-criteria analysis (Macharis, Bernardini 2015), among many others.

The use of indicators in English retail planning

Retail planning in England was, until the mid-1990s, characterized by the reduced restriction to the appearance of new commercial formats and their deployment outside the established traditional centres of commerce. After that period there was an inversion with the rise of Town Centre First policy, whose first approach was in 1993, through Planning Policy Guidance 6 (PPG6). In this period, we also watch the use of retail as a crucial element of several urban regeneration projects, mainly through the deployment of shopping centers in central areas (see Lowe 2005, 2007; Jayne 2006) and the emergence and dissemination of town centre management schemes. Against this background, the English government started to incorporate a set of indicators in the main key documents of retail planning. These indicators, entitled Key Performance Indicators (KPI) (Hogg *et al.* 2004) have been suggested in several

pieces of legislation of that country (Planning Policy Guidance (PPG) and Planning Policy Statement (PPS)). The main objective is to measure the health of town centres. It is accepted as relevant the use of indicators to this purpose because it allows the periodic monitoring of the town centre and to correct some aspect in which the centre is not working properly. The use of the term “health” in this context has been widely spread in the literature that uses English case studies and the set of indicators used to measure it is called Town Centre Health Check. Alongside, it also allows the justification of the investment made by developers in two stages. In the first, informs investors about the relevance of the performed intervention. In the second stage, serves to attract new developers, by demonstrating the return of the investment made by the already established investors.

In England, although the collection of indicators is not mandatory but only recommended, it should be done systematically, allowing to trace the regular evolution of the area. The indicators presented in Table 1 began to be

suggested in the revision of the document that guided the development of retail, the revised Planning Policy Guidance 6 (PPG6) of 1993. In this document only seven indicators were suggested. In the following year, with URBED report “Vital and Viable Towns Centres: Meeting the Challenge” (URBED 1994), this number remained unchanged although retailer representation was replaced by the State of town centre environmental quality. This report also pointed out the importance of vitality and viability in the analysis of the health of town centre. Other indicators were indicated, but have been regarded as of marginal importance.

After 1994 three other documents were produced, all of them incorporating indicators considered relevant to measure the vitality and viability of town centres. With the suggestion of indicators, through documents with national coverage, it is intended that their collection become standardized, allowing the comparison between different areas.

The 1996 revision of PPG6 extended the number of indicators to eleven. The introduction of new docu-

Table 1. Indicators used in the documents relating to retail planning in England

Indicators	PPG6 (1993)	URBED report (1994)	PPG6 (1996)	PPS6 (2005)	PPS4 (2009)	NPPF (2012)
Diversity of uses	X	X	X	X	X	
Retailer representation	X		X	X	X	
Retailer demand (plans to change)	X	X	X	X	X	
Shopping rents			X	X	X	
Proportion of vacant street level property	X	X	X	X	X	
Commercial yields on non-domestic property	X	X	X	X	X	
Pedestrian flows	X	X	X	X	X	
Accessibility			X	X	X	
Customer views and behaviour			X	X	X	
Perception of safety & occurrence of crime			X	X	X	
State of town centre environmental quality		X	X	X	X	
Physical structure of the centre	X	X				
The amount of retail, leisure and office floor space in edge-of-centre and out-of-centre locations;				X	X	
Potential capacity for growth or change of centres in the network				X	X	
Land values and the length of time key sites have remained undeveloped						X
Other indicators			Demand from retail multiples; ranking of multiples presence; space in use; profile of retailers; vacancy rates; quality of the centre.			

Source: Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis (2000); URBED (1994); Department of the environment (1996); Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2005); Communities and local government (2009, 2012).

ments in 2005 and 2009 further broadened this number to thirteen and fourteen, respectively.

The last retail planning document – National Planning Policy Framework (Department for Communities and Local Government 2012) – edited in 2012 is the first, since PPG6 of 1993, to not incorporate any indicators. Only five indicators remained during the 16 years and five key documents: diversity of uses, retailer demand, proportion of vacant street level property, commercial yields on non-domestic property and pedestrian flows. The remaining indicators were only suggested in fewer cases, breaking the continuity that should characterize evaluation.

As new regulations were released, new indicators were incorporated, such as accessibility, customer views and behaviour, perceptions of safety and occurrence of crime, among others. Assuming the difficulty to collect them, it was probably expected that increasing the number of suggested indicators would positively influence the number of those which was going to be effectively collected.

The use of these and/or other indicators is optional. In urban areas, the gathering of indicators has generally been done through Town Centre Health Check, an analogy made to the measurement of the health of town centres. It is available online a wide range of such studies. For example, in the county of Fife, Scotland, several Town Centre Health Check were undertaken, focusing on different aspects: (1) analysis of consumer perceptions of four centres – Glenrothes, Kirkcaldy; St Andrews and Dunfermline. These studies were considered crucial to identify the necessary interventions for maintaining the viability and vitality of those areas (Fife Council 2009, 2011); (2) in 2012 another study was prepared on the perception of the quality of existing core areas, for which visitors and potential investors were interviewed, with the purpose of proceeding to the creation of a marketing strategy oriented to an external audience (Thinkingplace 2012); (3) characterization of the retail sector in this area, serving as support for the various municipal development plans (Roderick MacLean Associates Ltd 2012). In other case, in the health check drawn to the centre of Sutton (London Borough of Sutton 2010), it was decided to collect the indicators suggested in PPS4.

The use of indicators, whether by formal health check lists or other more informal ways can be done by both public and private sector. In the first case, the city council acquires a prominent position. In the second case, the town centre management schemes and, more recently, business improvement districts are increasingly assuming a leading role.

Some constraints in the evaluation process

Some problems arise from the evaluation approach used in English retail planning. With a focus in urban town centres, one should take in consideration that these areas are very likely to change, making it difficult to correct allocate the responsibility to a certain measure or policy. Another everyday aspects introduces difficulties to the evaluation and data collection mechanisms: (i) sometimes those responsible for the implementation of programmes, policies or projects are more concerned with managing the daily work; (ii) some necessary data for evaluation may not be easy to get. For example, data relating to the viability of the area, such as revenue and the number of unoccupied stores and data relating to vitality, as the pedestrian flow are not available and are very expensive to obtain. The allocation of human resources to the collection of data is, most of the times, hard to achieve, regardless whether it will be collected by public local authorities or private schemes or associations. In addition to these difficulties, in order to understand the evolution of the areas, it is necessary that both the vitality-related data and those relating to the viability would be collected periodically, which usually discourage their gathering and makes it an unfeasible process. Sometimes, as Hogg *et al.* (2004: 313) attested even if a certain indicator is considered relevant by a project manager, it still may not be used, which will introduce limitations to the comparability of different areas. These problems are not restricted to the English, British or even the European context. Mullin and Kotval (2003: 11) identified these difficulties in the North American context. According to these authors, although most central areas revitalization projects intend to increase the vitality, viability and sustainability of targeted areas, actually end up not establishing any criteria for the evaluation of projects. The evaluation of projects eventually falls back on the intuition of local public authorities.

It has also been a problem in terms of scale and comparability of data. In the English national context, the range of intervened areas by regeneration projects has been very wide. Evaluations, especially those based exclusively on the collection of indicators, can hardly incorporate local specificities of disturbed areas. Apart from these features, the presence of some proactive stakeholders can be a decisive factor in the success of the project. As identified in the literature, the presence of these local leaders (Forsberg *et al.* 1999; Purdue *et al.* 2000; Hambleton 2003; Hambleton *et al.* 2001) can decisively influence the success or failure of a project.

Conclusions

While it is visible an effort to carry out evaluation processes in English retail planning, through the suggestion of indicators to allow the analysis of the health of town centres, there is no integrated information enabling an assessment of impacts, at least one that would be approximated to a framework like the ones developed by the European Commission and PACEC. What we found in the key documents is a set of indicators, whose variability between documents doesn't facilitate the comparison or the analysis of the temporal evolution. Although there are some private reports (Coca-Stefaniak 2013; BIS 2011, 2010) they reflect the funding association point of view, which may be different than the one the national government may have.

One may conclude that indicators used in English retail planning documents are unframed and should be in a framework that would justify its use by the different stakeholders, which therefore, could recognize its importance. We conclude that a smaller set of well-established indicators that may persist over time would be the better solution. Therefore, it would allow the temporal comparison of the same area and the territorial comparison between different town centres or intervened areas. Thus, we recommend to look back to previous and current public documents (Table 1) and give priority to the indicators that were suggested in all or the majority of the documents. Hence, regardless of the limitations, that set of indicators would still give an overview of the evolution of a certain town centre, instead of the photographic view that indicators collected only once (temporal dimension) give. Even though it was not the aim pursued in this article, with this research we have somehow path the way and demonstrate the necessity of a research that would establish such a set of indicators. In practical terms, the constraints found in the English context are important to urban planners, practitioners and academics because it may provide some assistance in the definition of future evaluation indicators and conceptual frameworks, not only in England but also in other countries.

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