

# Common Assessment Framework: The state of affairs

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## **The origins**

The use of quality management tools and systems, for a long time confined to the private sector, has since the early 1990s started to pervade the public sector in Europe as part of its strive for modernisation, better public management, increased performance and a stronger “customer” focus.<sup>1</sup> In the course of the last decade, various quality management tools and systems started to be used in the public sector across the EU – albeit to a very different extent from one Member State to another – and in many EU countries public sector organisations started to participate in Quality Awards both for the private and the public sector, or Quality or Innovation Awards specifically destined for the public sector were developed.<sup>2</sup> Although many of these quality management systems and Awards were – and are – fully based on the *Excellence Model* owned, developed and promoted by the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM), it was not possible to speak of a common understanding and language of quality within the public sector in the EU. In the German-speaking part of the EU, for instance, quality management in the public sector follows a different approach, based on the bi-annual Quality Award organised by the Speyer Academy.

During the Austrian EU Presidency in the second half of 1998, the possibility of developing a European Quality Award for the public sector was discussed in the framework of the informal meetings of the Directors-General of the Public Administration of the EU Member States. The idea as such was dismissed in view of the fact that the diversity of cultures and visions of “quality” in the public sector in EU countries would not allow for direct competition, but an alternative idea came up and was finally accepted: the establishment of a common European quality framework that could be used across the public sector as a tool for organisational self-assessment. The discussions revealed that what was lacking in the realm of quality management was an easy-to-use and free entry tool for self-assessment in the public sector that could help public administrations across the EU understand and employ modern management techniques and could be of particular relevance for those public sector organisations that are interested in trying out the use of a quality management system, are just embarking on their “journey to excellence” or that wish to compare themselves with similar organisations in Europe.

As a consequence of this, it was decided that a Common Assessment Framework (CAF) – as it was later called – should be jointly developed under the aegis of the Innovative Public Services Group (IPSG), an informal working group of national experts set up by the Directors General in order to promote exchanges and cooperation where it concerned innovative ways of modernising government and public service delivery in EU Member States. The basic design of the CAF was then developed in 1998 and 1999 on the basis of joint analysis undertaken by the EFQM, the Speyer Academy (which organises the Speyer Quality Award for the public sector in the German-speaking European countries) and EIPA.

First pilot tests were conducted in a number of public sector organisations and the “final” version of the CAF was presented during the First Quality Conference for Public Administration in the EU in Lisbon in May 2000.

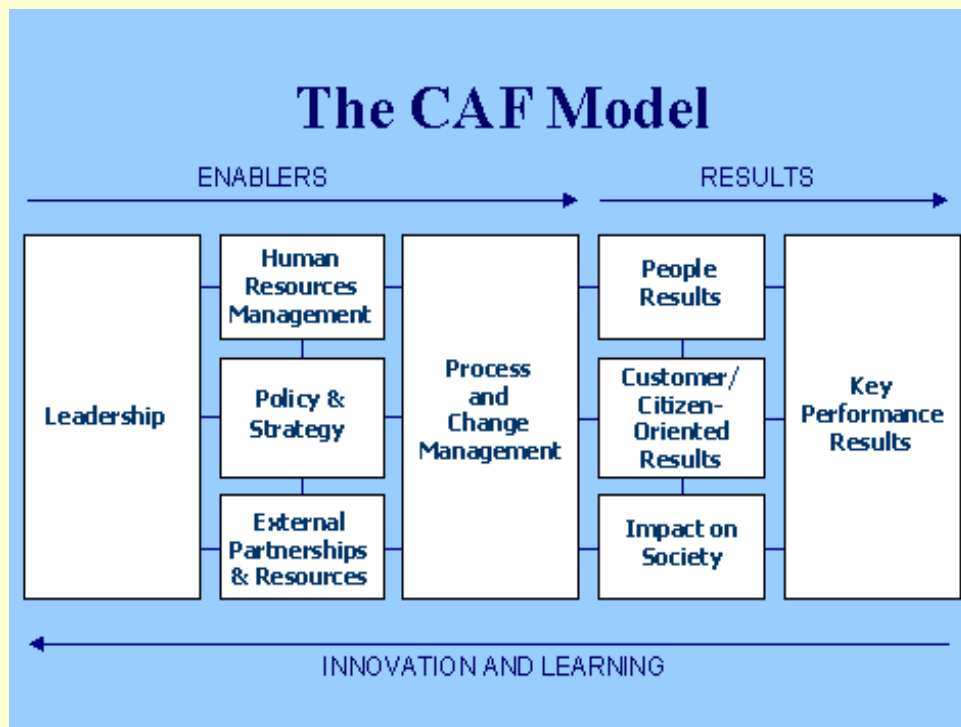
## **Purpose, structure and use of the CAF**

The main purpose of the CAF is to provide a fairly simple, free and easy-to-use framework which is suitable for self-assessment of public sector organisations across Europe and which would also allow for the sharing of good practices and benchmarking activities. The first pilot tests conducted early in 2000 indeed concluded that this goal had been achieved to a satisfactory extent (although it was clear that a wider use of the CAF was necessary in order to elaborate and refine the instrument).

The organisations that had piloted the use of the CAF basically agreed that they found it fairly easy to handle and well suited for the needs of the public sector and that it could well serve as an introductory tool for quality management.<sup>3</sup> And there can be no doubt that it is an instrument that can be used free of charge, as it is in the common ownership of EU Member States and no charge is required for using it.

The structure and the logic of the CAF (see table on next page) have been taken over from the EFQM Excellence Model, well established and accepted in the private sector across Europe and in use in the public sector in several European countries.<sup>4</sup> The use of the Excellence Model as a starting point also has the advantage that it does not necessarily demand the establishment of a set of completely new management practices, but builds a logical structure around organisational activities and management practices that should normally be in place in any given organisation.

The logic according to which “Excellent results



with respect to Performance, Customers, People and Society are achieved through Leadership driving Policy and Strategy, People, Partnerships and Resources, and Processes” of an organisation was deemed also to apply to the public sector – and had already proven its worth in the public sector – and therefore remained in place. The CAF also keeps the distinction between five “Enablers” criteria (covering what an organisation *does* in order to achieve excellent results) and four “Results” criteria (covering what an organisation actually *achieves* in terms of results).

However, certain adaptations to the Excellence Model have been introduced in order to make the model more suitable for the public sector. To name but some of the most important of these adaptations, the CAF puts a much stronger emphasis on the notion of managing change and establishing a suitable reform process in public sector organisations (in the “Process” criterion), it tries to work out the “customer/citizen”-dichotomy found specifically in the public sector, it puts a stronger emphasis on issues such as fairness and equal opportunities, it more clearly works out the importance of an organisation’s contribution to the society (“Impact on Society” criterion)<sup>5</sup>, and it more clearly distinguishes – under the criterion “Key Performance Results” – between financial and non-financial outcomes in order to emphasise that in the public sector in particular other than purely financial outcomes deserve (at least) as much attention. Further, the CAF tries to explain the key implications of each of the criteria for the public sector in order to help organisations understand their relevance, and it provides examples of indicators – or evidence – that organisations may look for in order to support their self-assessment.

Meanwhile, more than 100 public sector organisations in several European countries in a broad range

of sectors of activity have used the CAF<sup>6</sup>, and we have been able to develop a better understanding of how it works and of some of the challenges that organisations face when using the CAF. One of the obvious difficulties lies with the fact that the concepts employed by the CAF and the language it often still uses are unfamiliar to the public sector, in particular to organisations that are not yet trained in using quality management tools. Help can be provided through a glossary that will soon be developed, but this may not in all cases solve the core difficulty of understanding the concepts and their meaning, e.g. when it comes to identifying your “Customers” or correctly understanding the concept of “Leadership” and to not limit it to the top management of a public sector organisation. Indeed several of the organisations that have used CAF have reported that in order to be better able to conduct their self-assessment they would have needed to have some kind of preliminary training or advice by external experts.

Although I believe that organisations that have a basic knowledge of modern management practices are able to use the CAF with the help of the guidelines that have been developed and the glossary that will soon be ready, this comes as no surprise given that the CAF is basically derived from a model originally developed for the private sector. The conclusion that needs to be drawn is, therefore, that the CAF needs some improvement – clearly in the sense of simplification and clarification of the concepts and the terminology used – in view of its function as an introductory self-assessment tool, the use of which should normally not require too many resources (like for instance the hiring of external experts or consultants).

Other difficulties that have been reported by organisations are linked to issues of a more methodological nature. First, the scoring system of the CAF –

organisations have to assess their own performance over the 9 criteria on a scale from 1 (no actions/no results measured) to 5 (a permanent quality improvement cycle is in place/results are consistently achieved at the highest level of performance) – seems to need some refinement and clarification. Some organisations reported having had difficulties in linking their actions or their performance to the descriptions of the different scoring levels provided for in the CAF. They also said it had been difficult to find the indicators or evidences that are needed in view of assessing their performance. Thus there also seems to be a certain need to work on the examples of indicators that the CAF proposes. One option is to work out a standard set of indicators that would facilitate the search for evidence and may also be useful when it comes to sharing of experiences between public sector organisations. Finally, there are some indications that the guidelines for the use of the CAF that were developed under the French Presidency in the second half of 2000 to give practical advice on how to conduct a self-assessment would also require some improvement, as in parts they seem to be too rigid and too detailed (e.g. in terms of the “usual” size of a self-assessment team or the distinction between an “organiser” – responsible for facilitating the work of a self-assessment team – and the self-assessment team itself).

#### **Progress in the use and spreading of the CAF**

Despite some shortcomings, the use of the CAF has made considerable progress since it was first publicly presented in Lisbon in May 2000. There are several encouraging developments that give us reason to believe that the CAF is starting to serve the purpose it was designed for.

The first bit of encouragement comes from the fact that the majority of EU Member States have started to actively promote the use of the CAF across or in parts of the public sector. Though not all countries are joining this common effort, this can easily be explained by the fact that several countries are promoting and encouraging the use of the Excellence Model in the public sector and thus are not as strongly interested in the CAF as others.

This, however, should not be seen as a major dilemma, as the CAF itself was mainly derived from this model and as cooperation with the EFQM remains one of its pillars. This is underlined by the fact not only that there is regular exchange of information between the EFQM and EIPA, but more by the fact that the EFQM promotes the use of CAF as one of the possible approaches in view of embarking on the “journey to excellence” and accepts the use of the CAF as a tool for self-assessment for the “*Committed to Excellence*” stage of “*Levels of Excellence*”.<sup>7</sup> In practice, the CAF seems to be of particular relevance for local authorities as a starting tool.

Secondly, it is encouraging to see that the use of the CAF has been integrated into several Quality or Innovation Awards at the national level or – exceptionally – is a pre-condition for participating in a national quality conference. Belgium's 1<sup>st</sup> Quality Conference in October 2001 was based on the use of the CAF<sup>8</sup>, Italy and

Portugal have integrated the CAF into their specific public sector innovation Awards (*Cento Progetti; Atribuição do Prémio de Qualidade dos Serviços Públicos*), and organisations wanting to participate in the next Speyer Quality Award (*Speyerer Qualitätswettbewerb*) in December 2002 are also encouraged to use the CAF for this purpose.<sup>9</sup> Other Member States may follow along these lines.

Denmark will be hosting the Second Quality Conference for the Public Administration in the EU<sup>10</sup> from 2 to 4 October 2002 in Copenhagen. The focus of the Conference will be on the presentation of best practices in the fields of “*Innovation*”, “*Change*” and “*Partnerships*”, following the high importance that the CAF attached both to planning and managing change and innovation in the public sector and to establishing partnerships. Member States are completely free in the procedures they use to select their best practice organisations to be presented in Copenhagen. The fact however that the three fields have explicitly been taken over from the CAF and that it is referred to as one of the tools for selecting the case study organisations again gives an additional European credibility to the CAF.

Interest in the CAF is also increasing in the candidate countries in Central, Eastern and Southern Europe as they prepare for accession to the EU and seek to modernise and strengthen the capacity of their public administrations. Although not an instrument that is suitable for actually *measuring* the quality of an administrative organisation (there are serious doubts about whether this can be done at all), the CAF as common European system for self-assessment in the public sector is starting to be seen as a reference or even as an “official” European instrument, endorsed by EU Member States, in the candidate countries.

Finally, the CAF Resource Centre established at EIPA has started to build up a CAF website and thus has made progress in establishing a common information pool and help desk that can be used by public sector organisations across the EU.<sup>11</sup> The basic CAF assessment form is now operational on-line in eight languages (Dutch, English, Finnish, French, German, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish) and is available as read-only versions in Norwegian and Swedish. The aim is to have on-line CAF translations in at least 10 languages by the end of the Spanish EU Presidency. Equally, the CAF guidelines have been translated by several Member States and can be found on the website in most of these languages. The CAF website at EIPA also includes a database of organisations that have used the CAF that can serve as a starting point when it comes to the identification of partner organisations for the purpose of sharing experiences or benchmarking activities, as well as other pieces of relevant information (including the composition of the European CAF working group, conferences, links etc.). Although some work is still required in order to offer the full range of services that the CAF is called upon to provide, the website now provides a basic infrastructure on the Common Assessment Framework.

We can thus summarise by stating that progress with regard to the CAF is currently under way on several different fronts.

### The future

There is agreement on all sides that the CAF should stay what it is and that its essential character should even be reinforced: an easy-to-use and introductory tool for organisational self-assessment in the public sector. This includes the agreement that there is no aim to develop the CAF into a more sophisticated tool that would be in competition with others, in particular the Excellence Model. Close cooperation with the EFQM, with the Speyer Academy and with other organisations and institutions will remain a characteristic element of the CAF.

Nonetheless, the CAF clearly needs some improvement. The European working group responsible for steering, developing and promoting the CAF agreed under the Belgian EU Presidency to launch a review process that should lead to a revised version of the CAF.

Based on the results of a questionnaire sent to the organisations that have used the CAF and on professional advice, the review should lead to a “new” CAF that would be even easier to use and would focus on specific needs of the public sector to an even greater extent.<sup>12</sup> The aim is to have this new version ready for presentation at the Copenhagen Conference early in October 2002.

There also is agreement that the basic logic and structure of the CAF will remain unchanged. Within this, however, there still is considerable room for improvement. Personally, the author feels that the review of the CAF could follow a number of possible tracks.

Firstly, it may be desirable to reduce not the number of criteria of the CAF, but the large number of sub-criteria or areas to be addressed (currently 43<sup>13</sup>). I see

little difficulty in considerably cutting back the number of sub-criteria without losing any of the substance of the CAF. Secondly, it would seem possible to simplify and clarify the language used by the CAF, again without losing any substance. Thirdly, the author believes that the CAF should include some – not many – new elements.

One of the current shortcomings in my view is that the CAF still too strongly focuses on intra-organisational and management issues and does not sufficiently take account of the specific working environment of public sector organisations. It falls short on issues that are today commonly discussed under the label “*public governance*”, in particular issues concerning the management of the citizens’ and the civil society’s involvement and the discussion of transparency and ethical behaviour in the public sector; and we may also add the management of relations with the “*political sphere*” (including Parliaments) to this list. There is in my view little difficulty in adding such “public governance” elements to the CAF – not because they are fashionable but because they are highly relevant for the future of the public sector and its “quality”.

To conclude, a “new” or revised version CAF could even better serve the purpose of introducing quality management in the public sector and serve as a simple diagnostic tool that enables public sector organisations to better understand where they are and where they should be going. After all, the main purpose of the CAF is learning and improving – learning to understand your own organisation, the way it is run and how it performs, and getting started with a change and improvement process with ambitious, but realistic goals and clearly understood and agreed priorities. Self-assessment, using the knowledge of the people in an organisation and involving them in the reform process, is a suitable technique for this purpose.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Quality issues in the Public Service, special issue of Public Policy and Administration, Vol. 14 (1999), No. 3; Antonio Trinidad Requena (ed.), Evaluación y calidad en las organizaciones públicas, Madrid: Instituto Nacional de Administración Pública, 2000; Loes Broeckmate, Katharina Dahrendorf and Klaus Dunker, Qualitätsmanagement in der öffentlichen Verwaltung, jehle: München und Berlin, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> For an overview see Elke Löffler, The Modernization of the Public Sector in an International Comparative Perspective: Concepts and Methods of Awarding and Assessing Quality in the Public Sector in OECD Countries, Speyer: Forschungsinstitut für Öffentliche Verwaltung, 1996 (Speyerer Forschungsberichte No. 151), and more recently Elke Löffler, Quality Awards as a Public Sector Benchmarking Concept in OECD Member Countries: Some Guidelines for Quality Award Organizers, in: Public Administration and Development 21 (2001), pp. 27-40.

<sup>3</sup> See António Silva Mendes, EU Common Assessment

Framework goes into effect. Public Administrations across Europe discover self-assessment, in: European Foundation for Quality Management (ed.), Excellence Network, Vol. I (2000/2001), No. 2, pp. 14-15.

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, since 1996 the EFQM has launched a public and voluntary sector version of the Excellence Model, and public sector organisations now are member of the EFQM (although the vast majority of members still come from the private sector). Currently, the EFQM is starting to develop specific public sector guidelines on the use of the Model.

<sup>5</sup> It should however be added that the experiences with the CAF have shown that this criterion needs further elaboration in particular in as far as its relation with the “core business” (“Key Performance Results” criterion) of public sector organisations is concerned.

<sup>6</sup> EIPA keeps a database of these organisations that provides for general information on the individual organisations, whereas the scores that they have achieved in their self-assessment

remains anonymous.

<sup>7</sup> European Foundation for Quality Management, Excellence Network Vol. I (2000/2001), No. 2, p. 15. It is also interesting to note, for instance, that *Excelsior*–PricewaterhouseCooper’s main performance improvement service which e.g. also offers a quick on-line assessment using the Excellence Model –has now included the CAF in its list of complementary tools. See the website [www.excelsior/pwcglobal.com](http://www.excelsior/pwcglobal.com).

<sup>8</sup> For details consult the website [www.publicquality.be](http://www.publicquality.be).

<sup>9</sup> For details consult the website [www.dhv-speyer.de/Qualitaetswettbewerb](http://www.dhv-speyer.de/Qualitaetswettbewerb).

<sup>10</sup> For more information consult the website [www.2qconference.org](http://www.2qconference.org).

<sup>11</sup> Consult [www.eipa-nl/CAF/CAFmenu.htm](http://www.eipa-nl/CAF/CAFmenu.htm).

<sup>12</sup> Based on an analysis of the questionnaire, Belgium will suggest a review track to the IPSP at its next meeting in April 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Whereas the EFQM Excellence Model currently operates with just 32 sub-criteria. □