

**Flash report on the 2022 Meeting of the Community of Practice
on Counterfactual Impact Evaluation of ESF interventions
(CoP-CIE-ESF)**

18 May 2022

Introduction

The main focus of the 2022 annual meeting was to respond to the request from the Community of Practice members to plan the evaluations of the recently started ESF +. The CoP started with a keynote speech by Professor Jochen Kluve, which illustrated recent development on CIEs in Europe. This was followed by small group discussions on three issues of common interest of the previous programming period. The second part of the day focused on a comparison between the current and the previous programming periods, to learn how evaluations can be improved.

The meeting took place in a hybrid mode on 18 May 2022, with 8 participants joining in Brussels, and around 20 online. It was organized by the European Commission Joint Research Centre (JRC) Centre for Research on Impact Evaluation (CRIE) together with DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL). Representatives from 14 ESF Managing Authorities attended from AT, BE, BG, CZ, EL, ES, HR, HU, IE, IT, MT, PT, RO, and SE.

Highlights

- **Keynote speech on « Recent development in CIE in Europe – with a focus on ESF and ALMP» by Professor Jochen Kluve.**

The key note speaker highlighted the importance of Active labor market policies, which have been used in many EU member states since the 1980s. However, until few years ago, there were not many quantitative evaluations related to ESF funded interventions, but their number has grown impressively in the past 5 years. For the current meta-analysis around ***100 CIE evaluations estimating the effect of ESF funded interventions in the field of labor market*** could be used.

Some key messages are:

- Most studies make use of administrative data
 - One of the most common method applied is matching
 - Trainings seem to be the most effective policies, and internship the least effective.
 - Not (yet) enough evaluations in the field of education
 - Overall, the work done by the Commission (DG EMPL and JRC) and the managing authorities to promote the use of CIE can be considered as an enormous achievement
- The **first group discussion** was dedicated to the final part of the previous programming period focusing on the following three topics: how to assess ***quality*** of the evaluations, how to ***communicate*** their results, and how to prepare for the ***summary report***, which is due by the end of 2022. The tables below summarize the main challenges reported in the discussion, but also the possible solutions identified and implemented, together with some best practices.
- The **second group discussion** was dedicated to the comparison between the previous and the current programming periods. The tables below summarize the main ***changes and issues*** identified between the two periods, and some ***actions*** already being taken and/or that the MAs would like to take. The discussion highlighted a very ***heterogeneous picture across the different Member States***: what is still an issue in some countries, have been solved in others and what some countries wish to do, has

been already done in others. Therefore, some concepts can both be a change already observed in some Member States, but also a wish and possible actions in others.

Final remarks

- Meeting in presence – with some of the participants- after the 2 years of the pandemic was a good experience, and this should be the preferred option for the future annual meetings.
- In addition to the annual meeting, JRC will organize short ad hoc meetings (online) to discuss specific topics, which will be proposed by JRC and by the Mas. The purpose of these ad hoc meeting is to have more frequent interactions among the member of the CoP and to be able to share experiences and learn from each other on a regular basis, focusing on topics on interests for the MAs

Quality of evaluation reports	
Challenges	Possible solutions identified & implemented and best practices
<p>Despite the fact that MAs are involved in all the steps of the evaluation, some evaluation reports are not of proper quality.</p> <p>The reasons behind are multiple:</p> <p>Contractors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Not enough contractors in the country ➤ A limited number of companies comply with the public procurement requirements. ➤ Translation & language issues when working with experts from abroad <p>Evaluation process:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Not enough feedback is provided by the evaluation steering groups, who are rarely experts in evaluations. <p>Choice of what to evaluate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ In some cases the low quality is due to lack of evaluability of the chosen interventions, e.g. evaluation of small projects is simply not meaningful 	<p>Contractors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Contracting authority can announce the use of a quality assessment checklist when preparing the Tender specifications. This will make easier checking afterwards if the reports meet the quality criteria ➤ Joint external expert and national experts: the former can provide better methodological support, and the latter can provide knowledge of the context and country where interventions take place, and can help overcome language barriers. <p>Evaluation process:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Consult the Steering Committee in all the steps. ➤ Include in the Steering Committee both policy and research profiles. ➤ Organize an independent expert group that can give feedback to the evaluator to ensure a good quality report. <p>Choice of what to evaluate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Evaluation of “portfolios”: several projects with the same objectives are evaluated together, this makes evaluation more meaningful. ➤ More focus ex ante on evaluability. Let’s evaluate what can be evaluated!
<p>JRC CRIE can help in some steps:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Preparation of Tender specifications. ➤ Assessment of the preliminary/interim and final report, in strict collaboration with the contractors. ➤ Ex-ante assessment of the feasibility of CIE evaluation. 	

Communication of results	
Challenges	Possible solutions identified & implemented and best practices
<p>How to communicate?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Difficulty in spreading the results of evaluations, even internally ➤ Difficulties in organizing the various evaluations in a simple way. The information is published on website, but it is not well organized, so it is hard to use the information provided. ➤ Executive summaries of evaluation reports could be a great instrument to communicate to a non-technical audience evaluation results. However, quite often these are still too technical and do not contain all essential information, and so are not of great use. <p>Use of the results</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Even if reports are published online, the question is who will use them? All the steps were undertaken: EC was informed, but policy makers do not always use the results of previous evaluation in the planning. ➤ Misinterpretation of results from evaluations led sometimes to continuation of policies that were not useful. ➤ Misinterpretation of the results can happen when not considering the “overall” labor market but only considering ESF measures. ➤ Difficulties in comparing national interventions with similar scope as the ones financed by the ESF. 	<p>How to communicate?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Knowledge is shared regularly between policy making and research units. ➤ For each evaluation concluded, a video summarizing the main features & results of the evaluation is prepared, discussing also what will be the next steps to be taken by policy, based on the results of the evaluation. ➤ Organizing a workshop where the evaluation findings are presented and discussed with stakeholders ➤ A press release is always issued, after an evaluation is concluded, to inform also the general public. ➤ A website is being created where all reports from department will be published. A national searchable database of evaluations findings is a good practice. ➤ An annual report containing the most interesting research is prepared every year. ➤ More attention is needed in explaining main implications of the results and in communicating results in more understandable way (e.g. preferring graphs to tables, etc.). ➤ After the drafting of the evaluation report, a more informative report could be prepared, containing only the main messages explained in a non-technical language. <p>Use of the results</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Narrative review - a comprehensive, critical and objective analysis of the current knowledge on the topic - of all evaluations carried out by MAs, and how is being used to shape current interventions. ➤ Remove artificial divide between EU and nationally funded interventions

Evaluation Summary report	
Challenges	Possible solutions identified & implemented and best practices
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Seminars organized (by national evaluation unit) to help regional MAs draft this report. A country reported that there was one huge contract that was subcontracting all the different evaluations, so it was straightforward to do the summary. The whole evaluation was done by externals, to make sure to have an independent evaluation. ➤ Prepare summary report also in English could foster the sharing of information across MS.
JRC CRIE can help in the preparation of the summary report	

Choice of what to evaluate	
Changes & issues	Actions & wishes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Theory of changes are being used in the preparation of evaluation plans. ➤ More interest from beneficiaries and intermediate bodies in CIE. 	<p>Action already taken:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ More effort in evaluating projects that can be evaluated! (Assess feasibility of evaluation ex ante). ➤ Narrow the focus of evaluations. Focus on specific measures: evaluate “projects” rather than “programs”. ➤ Identify knowledge gaps after taking stock of past evaluations. <p>Wishes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Extend to outcomes beyond employment, for which there is not so much interest anymore; stakeholders are more interested in e.g. employment quality (-> also related to data). ➤ Extend CIE to non-ALMPs! E.g. education, financial instruments, firms’ survival, state aid schemes...

Evaluation process and design of interventions	
Changes & issues	Actions & wishes
<p>Changes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The conceptual framework of some interventions was designed using the evidence provided by the existing academic literature. ➤ Some recommendations were implemented and results were used in deciding which interventions to keep and which ones to quit. ➤ Effort in evaluation units to actively communicate results to programming units. ➤ Evaluation units were involved in the design stage of an intervention. ➤ Effort to connect the processes of monitoring and evaluation. ➤ Evaluation culture is becoming more common at management level in some countries. ➤ Rules for conducting evaluation are more flexible than in the past (specific strategic areas vs priority axes). 	<p>Actions already taken:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Introduce some features that do not alter the design of the intervention, but improve the possibility of evaluation (e.g. better clarifying eligibility criteria or randomizing encouragement letters). ➤ Pilot projects will be introduced on a small scale, and, if effective, will be expanded nationally later on. ➤ As it is difficult to get involved in the design of the operations that will be under ESF+, the MA got involved in the design of the calls for interventions (involvement in the design of the template for the calls for the beneficiary institutions that will implement the various interventions). <p>Wishes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Programming is still a process itself: more integration is needed: programming unit and evaluation unit can work together more closely. ➤ Evaluation culture, especially for CIE should be raised among all stakeholders in the entire process.

Data	
Changes & issues	Actions & wishes
<p>Changes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Agreements with employment services are already ongoing. ➤ Improved data planning <p>Issues:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Data availability for specific groups, such as vulnerable people, and Roma. ➤ Differences across funds for the regulations relating to data collection (participants). 	<p>Wishes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Create a better link with the monitoring framework. Evaluators should get involved in the indicators setting and collection, so that data could be shared between the two parts (monitoring & evaluation). ➤ Checking and predicting data availability should be done earlier, before deciding on the evaluation. ➤ Start building relationships with the owners of the data and anticipate data needs and requirements ➤ Get data on outcomes beyond mere employment, and even for non-ALMPs. ➤ More clarity is needed to understand if the EU level Regulations provide sufficient legal basis for data collection. ➤ Clarify GDPR rules (interpretations vary not only between but also within countries). This was highlighted by many countries as a fundamental bottleneck, calling for European Commission to take action as soon as possible to clarify the issue (involving other Commission DGs as needed)

Contractors	
Changes & issues	Actions & wishes
<p>Issues:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Policy makers need clear information from evaluators and contractors, possibly with one line of direction to summarize the recommendations. ➤ Some sections of evaluation reports had to be rewritten. 	<p>Wishes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Recommendations should be more closely linked to MS actions and programs; ➤ More training is needed. ➤ Public procurement procedures are often an obstacle. Work towards finding a solution for this. ➤ Find the right incentives to engage universities/ research centers, beyond the usual contractors that answer to tenders. ➤ European market of impact evaluators: make a list of good quality contractors (with CRIE).