

**Flash report on the 2020 Meeting of the Community of Practice
on Counterfactual Impact Evaluation of ESF interventions
(CoP-CIE-ESF)**

10&12 November 2020

This year the Community of Practice was devoted to discussing all phases of the policy cycle, focusing on the real experiences made by the Managing Authorities (MAs) in the past 7 years to carry out CIE of ESF funded interventions. The choice of the topic represented a constructive way of ending the current programming period and preparing for the new one.

In particular, the meeting consisted of an online open discussion between the MAs, first in small groups, and then in a plenary section, based on their work in the field on evaluation and on the points that they identified as best and worse experiences of the past seven years for carrying out CIE. The discussions in the small groups was very fruitful, and touched upon several topics which can be summarized in five broader areas: (i) selection of interventions and methods; (ii) data; (iii) evaluation process; (iv) contractors; and (v) communication of results and engagement of policy makers.

Highlights:

▪ **Selection of interventions and methods**

- MAs often have the need to evaluate sets of actions, i.e. entire thematic objectives or operational programmes, rather than single operations, and the choice of the intervention to evaluate using CIE is not always clear cut.

Conclusion: evaluations using CIE cannot be thought as a one-size-fits-all solutions, but rather as a way to “zoom-in” and better quantify casual impacts of specific lines of intervention. CRIE can help with the choice of the interventions to evaluate using CIE.

- CIE methods do not allow to assess why an intervention does not work.

Conclusion: CIE could be complemented with other evaluation methodologies, which could help answering this question.

▪ **Data**

- Exchanging (micro)data between institutional partners can be difficult. Different interpretations of GDPR rules further exacerbate the problem preventing MAs to gain access to data needed to perform CIEs

Conclusion: MAs proposed several solutions, such as ad-hoc memorandum of understanding between different parties, informal agreements, regulatory solutions via state act, and the involvement of National Statistical Institute. In addition, from the next programming period, CPR will introduce stronger legal basis, which should help MS to access administrative data.

- Exchanging data with external contractors add a further layer of complexity. Institutional partners are indeed reluctant to share data with third parties, especially in the light of GDPR rules.

Conclusion: Internal ethical protocols on how data should be treated and analyzed (on top of GDPR rules) can be agreed with institutional partners. This could also serve the purpose of sharing anonymized data with external contractors.

▪ **Evaluation process**

- The evaluation units are often not involved in the design phase of intervention. This is likely to have consequences on the quality of evaluations.

Conclusion: Even if the evaluation units can't participate to the design phase, something could be done to ensure that evaluation is still feasible. A dialogue between policy makers and evaluators in all the phases of the evaluation process, as well as engaging stakeholders with internal capacity on evaluation, can help. Motivation of institutions is key since institutions have to negotiate their needs with the needs of evaluators.

▪ **Contractors**

- Some contractors have poor knowledge of CIE and public procurement rules imply some limitations in the choice of external evaluators. In addition, after the contractors are selected, it can be difficult to follow the entire process and assess whether they are carrying out a good quality CIE evaluation.

Conclusion: common markets for contractors could offer a possibility to engage external evaluators from other countries. Also, CRIE collaboration with contractors can help to ensure that the CIEs are correctly implemented during the evaluation process.

- Engaging researchers from the academia can be useful to improve the quality of the evaluations. However, it is difficult to ensure that have academics participate to the bid for evaluation, and that they deliver evaluations with the same high-quality academic standards of academic studies. How can one increase buy-in from academia?

Conclusion: researchers from academia could be involved as experts both in the steering group, at the beginning of the evaluation, and in the final phase, reviewing the final reports. Involve them in data exchange could serve as an incentive for researchers to engage in the evaluations.

▪ **Communication of results and engagement of policy makers**

- Knowledge of CIE methods among policymakers is scarce. This makes it difficult to make the policymakers aware of the importance of CIE evaluations.

Conclusion: Policymakers often have expectations on the interventions' results. Their involvement and trust in the evaluation process (possibly not only in the communication phase) could increase their understanding of the evaluation design, its potential drawbacks, and the findings of the evaluation. There is the need to build up a culture of evidence-based policy.

The meeting took place online, on 10 and 12 November 2020. 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). 29 representatives from ESF Managing Authorities and Research Institutes attended from AT, BE, BG, CZ, EL, FR, HR, HU, IE, IT, LV, MT, PL, PT, SE and SI.