



Council of the
European Union

Brussels, 31 January 2023
(OR. en)

5871/23
ADD 2

COH 8
SOC 58
AGRISTR 5
PECHE 30
CADREFIN 9
POLGEN 7

COVER NOTE

From:	Secretary-General of the European Commission, signed by Ms Martine DEPREZ, Director
date of receipt:	30 January 2023
To:	Ms Thérèse BLANCHET, Secretary-General of the Council of the European Union
No. Cion doc.:	SWD(2023) 22 final
Subject:	COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT Accompanying the document REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS European Structural and Investment Funds 2022 Summary report of the programme annual implementation reports covering implementation in 2014-2020

Delegations will find attached document SWD(2023) 22 final.

Encl.: SWD(2023) 22 final



EUROPEAN
COMMISSION

Brussels, 30.1.2023
SWD(2023) 22 final

COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT

Accompanying the document

**REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE
COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE
COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

**European Structural and Investment Funds
2022 Summary report of the programme annual implementation reports
covering implementation in 2014-2020**

{COM(2023) 39 final}

STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT
ON THE
SYNTHESIS OF THE FINDINGS OF THE EVALUATIONS OF
EUROPEAN STRUCTURAL AND INVESTMENT FUNDS
PROGRAMMES 2014-2020

accompanying the 2022 Annual Summary Report

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1 INTRODUCTION

Under the rules of shared management¹, Member States are responsible for managing and implementing the programmes supported by the European Structural and Investment (ESI) Funds. These programmes pursue the objectives of the EU strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.

The Common Provisions Regulation for 2014-2020² (CPR) requires that evaluations are carried out to **improve the quality of the design and implementation of programmes**, and to **assess their effectiveness, efficiency and impact**. During the programming period, Member States are required to carry out evaluations for each programme and ensure that each evaluation is duly followed up. At least once during the programming period, an evaluation should assess how the support from the ESI Funds has helped achieve the objectives of each priority of the programme.

So far, around 3 000 evaluations have been carried out by Member States on all ESI Funds for the 2014-2020 programming period. While the evaluation work at the beginning of this period focused a lot on process, as implementation of the programmes picked up pace, Member States have increasingly focused their **evaluations on impact**. The Commission has also started its *ex post* evaluation of the 2014-2020 programmes, which will produce a number of deliverables until the work is completed in the synthesis report due in 2025.

In line with Article 53 of the CPR, this staff working document **summarises the findings** of the latest available evaluations of the programmes supported by the ESI Funds³. While this report is published annually, it consolidates all of the findings of Member States' evaluations. It **accompanies the 2022 summary report** of the programme annual implementation reports, which cover implementation in 2014-2020, and until the end of 2021.

The implementation of cohesion policy has been affected by the **COVID-19 pandemic** and the latest refugee and energy crises. The Commission responded quickly to the effects of the pandemic with the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative (CRII and CRII+). Then NextGenerationEU made additional resources from the EU budget available for cohesion policy, through the new instrument Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe (REACT-EU). Further action followed in response to the **Ukrainian refugee crisis** via Cohesion's Action for Refugees in Europe (CARE) and flexible assistance to territories (FAST-CARE). More recently, in reaction to the **energy crisis**, the REPowerEU plan addressed the need to accelerate the transition to clean energy, diversify energy sources and increase energy savings. The plan could also mobilise cohesion policy resources. Finally, the latest proposal of exceptional measures to address the current **energy price increases** will provide support to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and vulnerable families particularly affected by this.

So far, only a **few evaluations have addressed the response to COVID-19** and how the pandemic has affected some sectors and programming choices. The number of evaluations looking at these issues and the other measures introduced to respond to the latest refugee and energy crises is expected to increase in the future. Likewise, the Commission plans to address these issues in the *ex post* evaluation.

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/policy/what/glossary/sustainable-development_en

² Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32013R1303>

³ <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/>

In publishing the report it is important to underline the limitations of this exercise. Evaluations carried out by Member States are mostly designed to deal with the results of projects in a **local context**, so it is sometimes difficult to aggregate the findings.

Section 2 covers cohesion policy programmes, supported by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the Cohesion Fund (CF) and the European Social Fund (ESF) including the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI). Section 3 is devoted to rural development policy, supported by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). Section 4 focuses on the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) and, finally, Section 5 contains some concluding remarks.

2 COHESION POLICY PROGRAMMES

Cohesion policy is one of the most evaluated of the EU's policies. This section presents the main findings of the evaluations of the three cohesion policy funds carried out by the Member States and the Commission.

2.1 Evaluations in the Member States

2.1.1 General overview

Since January 2015, the Member States have published **around 1 800 evaluations** of 2014-2020 operational programmes. The growing number of evaluations shows that the Member States have endorsed a more **evidence-based** approach to policy making and a focus on results.

An increasing **number of evaluations aim to assess the impact** of EU support, and the mechanisms that influence the effectiveness of this support. The evidence from these evaluations played an important role in the negotiations between the Commission and the Member States for the 2021-2027 programmes.

Summary of common evaluation findings

Some common findings that are important to highlight:

- *Smart growth: research and innovation, information and communication technology (ICT) and competitiveness of small and medium enterprises*

Funding for **research and innovation** has strengthened cooperation between research centres and businesses. This helps overcome a fundamental obstacle to innovation, namely to translate research results into innovative products or services. Making these products or services marketable is often an even more difficult challenge. In addition, in most cases where support has led to positive results, EU funding has brought real benefits to the projects. Without it, the projects would have been smaller or would not have happened at all.

Support for investment in **ICT infrastructure** has helped meet the needs of less developed regions at risk from the digital divide. However, it takes time for results to materialise. On the other hand, support for the **digitalisation of services** tends to produce results more quickly and its positive effects on businesses and public authorities are already visible.

Support to **SMEs** has boosted innovation in businesses, strengthening their competitiveness and enabling them to enter new markets and expand their exports.

- *Sustainable growth: low-carbon economy, climate change, environment, transport and energy networks*

On the **shift to a low-carbon economy**, there are positive results in reducing energy consumption in public and private buildings and businesses, but evidence on renewable energy production is still limited because many projects have yet to be completed.

Evaluations have shown that collaboration between managing authorities in neighbouring Member States via cross-border cooperation programmes is key to making support for **climate change adaptation and risk prevention** truly effective for the regions concerned.

Installing and improving infrastructure for **wastewater treatment and municipal waste management** often responds to the need to comply with EU environmental directives. This has helped increase the number of users connected to sewage treatment systems and selective waste collection.

Investments in the **transport sector** led to increased capacity in railway networks, even though their impact can only be assessed in the longer term.

- *Inclusive growth: employment, social inclusion and education*

Employment-related measures and training have proved to be more successful when tailored to both the needs of those receiving support and the skills needed in the labour market. Apprenticeships and traineeships have proved to be very effective. Evaluation has also found that in some instances there was a shortage of skills for technical training and that it is therefore important to continue improving the skills of teachers and trainers.

Initiatives that aimed to foster social inclusion have **helped vulnerable and disadvantaged people find work**. Further cooperation is required to identify the most suitable education and training paths as well as the social support that may be needed. This is equally important for reducing school drop-out rates.

Evaluations have also found that projects have helped **increase access to and the quality of healthcare**.

- *Strengthening institutional capacity and making public administrations more efficient*

The effectiveness of action to increase **institutional capacity** depends as much on the motivation and cooperation of the staff involved as on the specific design of the measures themselves. Structural reforms require willingness at the political level.

Some of the evaluations point to difficulties in achieving the targets on energy saving, for example in the areas of energy efficiency actions in the housing sector, and in urban regeneration programmes. The evaluations identified the **increase in the prices** of raw materials and commodities in the construction sector as one of the main reasons for this.

Evaluations sometimes find contrasting evidence in different regions. This suggests that analytical work must increase its focus on the contextual factors that affect implementation and, consequently, the results of the actions supported. Such an analysis will be part of the *ex post* evaluation of cohesion policy in the 2014-2020 period, which the Commission has already started (see Section 2.2).

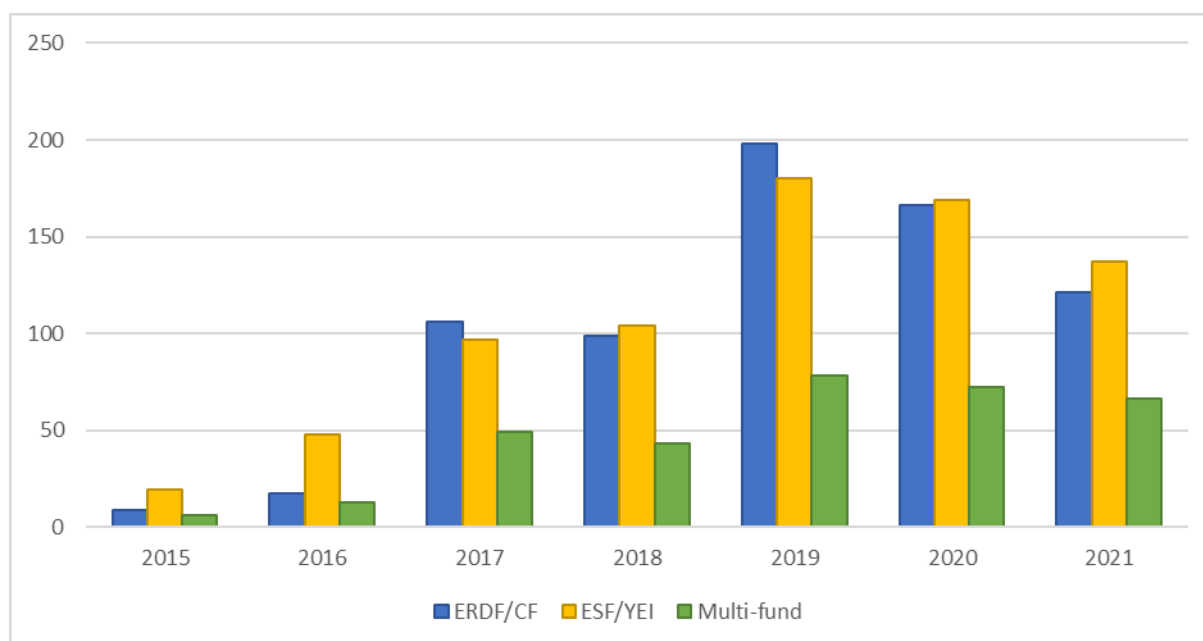
Completed evaluations

The number of evaluations of 2014-2020 cohesion policy operational programmes completed and published since January 2015 has reached 1 797⁴.

In 2021, 324 evaluations were carried out by the Member States, of which 134 aimed to assess impact. While the number of impact evaluations has slightly increased (+7% compared to 2020), the overall number of evaluations is 20% less than in 2020. The fall in the number of evaluations published in 2021 is directly linked to a natural **shift in the main purpose of evaluations**. During the final years of the programming period, there is a decrease in process evaluations, i.e. those aimed at assessing how the actions supported were carried out, while the number of impact evaluations is expected to grow.

The distribution of evaluations across the funds has not changed much in the past year, with around 40% of evaluations specific to ERDF/CF, 40% specific to ESF/YEI and almost 20% of evaluations covering both ERDF/CF and ESF/YEI (multi-fund).

Figure 1: Evaluations of cohesion policy programmes published since January 2015 – breakdown by year and fund



Source: Commission evaluation helpdesk for cohesion policy.

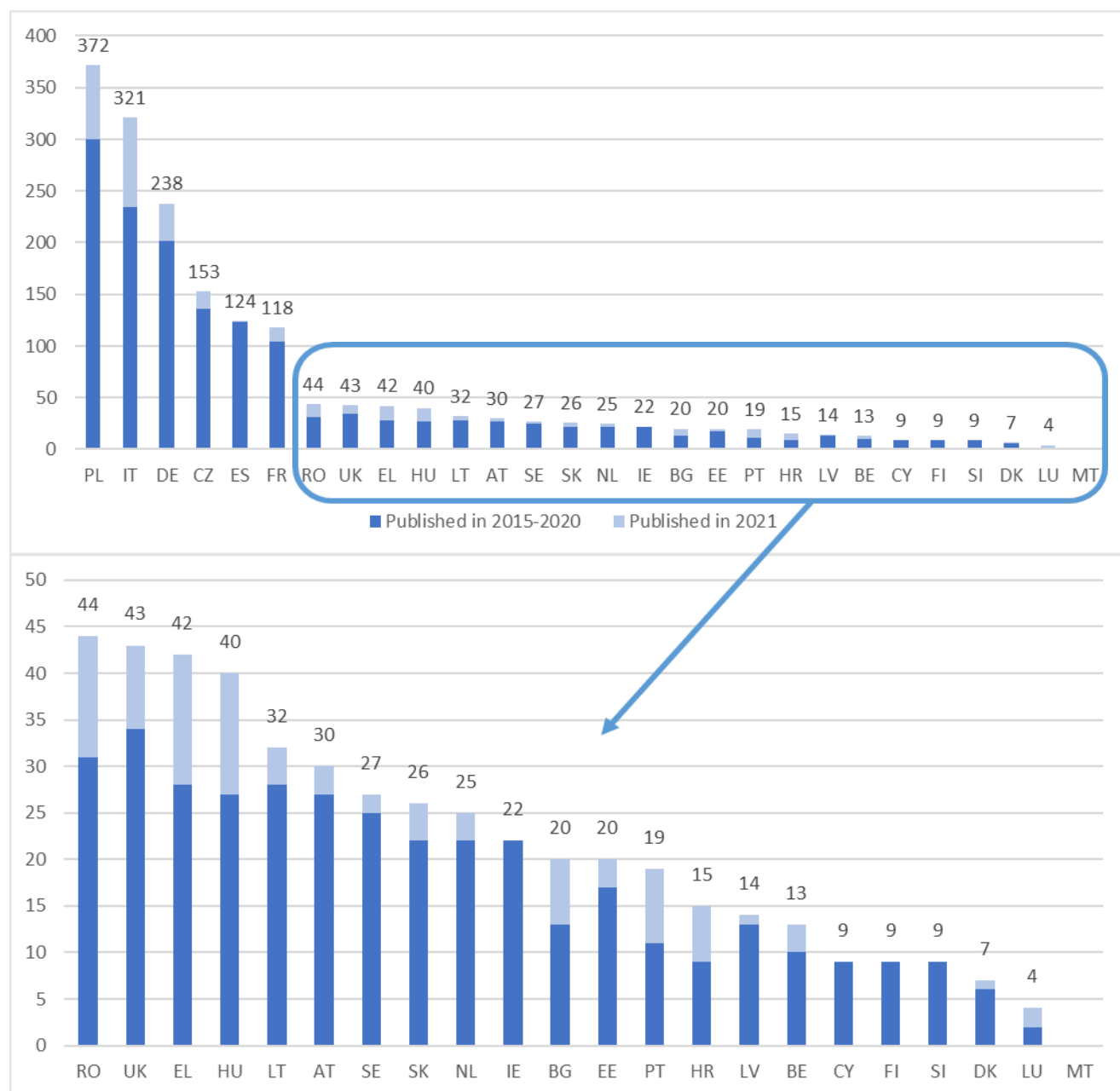
Almost 50% of the evaluations published in 2021 are related to programmes in Italy and Poland, who were the main beneficiaries of cohesion funds in 2014-2020. Overall, six countries accounted for over 75% of the evaluations of cohesion policy that have been published so far. Poland, which has produced the largest number of evaluations, and Italy are followed by Germany, Czechia, Spain and France.

The reason for the large differences between countries, which are clearly shown in Figure 2, is the **marked variation in the scope of the evaluations undertaken**. For example, in Poland, 26 evaluations have been carried out solely on the Smart Growth operational programme. Many of them are very narrowly focused on support for particular sectors, project selection criteria or the reasons for the low participation of large firms. This contrasts with the situation in other countries, where in many cases evaluations cover all the support provided under one

⁴ This number includes a few evaluations related to both the 2014-2020 and the 2007-2013 period.

thematic objective. The number of evaluations carried out, therefore, does not necessarily reflect the evaluation effort being made, since evaluations vary substantially not only in terms of scope but also in terms of size and the degree of detail they go into.

Figure 2: Evaluations of 2014-2020 cohesion policy operational programmes published since January 2015 – breakdown by Member State



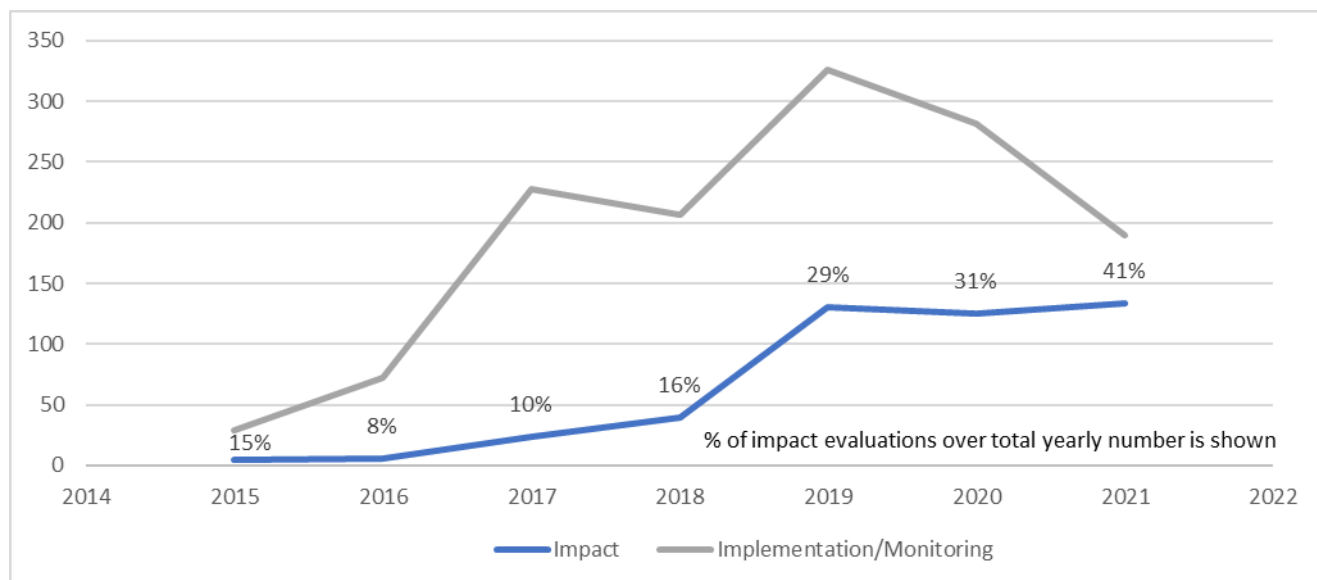
Source: Commission evaluation helpdesk for cohesion policy.

Types of evaluations

The number of evaluations focusing on **implementation** and **progress**, which look mostly into procedural aspects or progress in achieving policy targets, has decreased over the past two years. As expected, the number of impact-oriented evaluations, which are normally carried out later in the programme cycle, has been stable, with around 130 evaluations published each year since 2019. As a result, the share of impact evaluations grew to 41% in 2021, up from around 30% in the previous two years. In Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Portugal and Sweden, more than 80% of evaluations published in 2021 are impact-oriented.

The number of impact evaluations is expected to grow further in the coming years, when more projects will have been completed and will have produced results.

Figure 3: Evaluations of 2014-2020 cohesion policy operational programmes published since January 2015 – by type and year



Source: Commission evaluation helpdesk for cohesion policy.

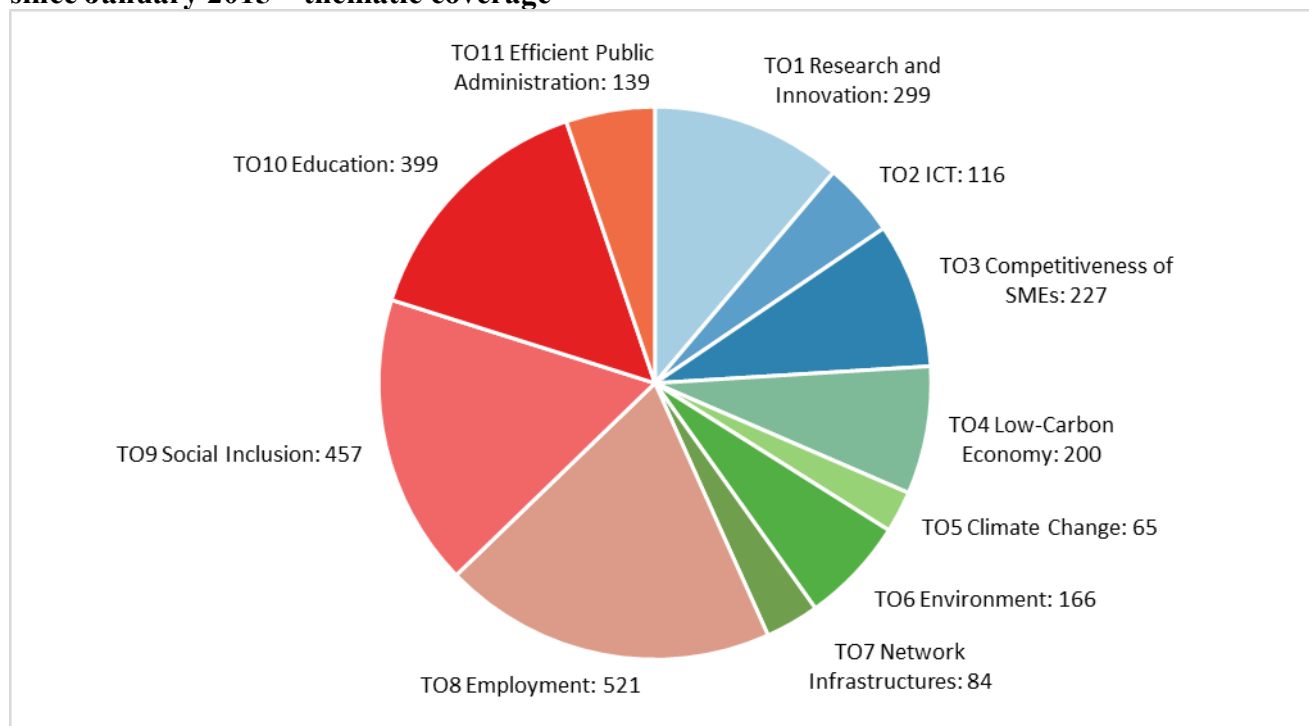
Most evaluations combine relatively simple qualitative methods with quantitative ones. **More advanced research methods**, such as counterfactual evaluation techniques (mostly in ESF/YEI evaluations), theory-based techniques (mostly in ERDF/CF evaluations) and cost-benefit analysis (used to a lesser extent, primarily in ERDF/CF evaluations) are used in more than **half of all impact evaluations**.

Thematic distribution

The distribution of evaluations **across thematic objectives (TOs) is uneven** and more than half of the evaluations cover multiple TOs.

Figure 4 shows the thematic coverage of evaluations for the 2014-2020 programming period. Evaluations covering multiple TOs are reported under all of the TOs in question. However, the chart does not include evaluations that broadly address all TOs. **A few evaluations have addressed the COVID-19 response** and how the pandemic has affected some sectors and programming choices. However, no specific evaluation has been published yet under the new TO on ‘Fostering crisis repair in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its social consequences and preparing a green, digital and resilient recovery of the economy’. The resources of the new instrument ‘Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe’ (REACT-EU) have been allocated to this TO.

Figure 4: Evaluations of 2014-2020 cohesion policy operational programmes published since January 2015 – thematic coverage



Source: Commission evaluation helpdesk for cohesion policy.

Most evaluations cover the TOs related to inclusive growth, i.e. employment (TO8), social inclusion (TO9) and education (TO10). Typically, actions under these TOs, receiving ESF and YEI support, are carried out more quickly and generate results in a relatively short time.

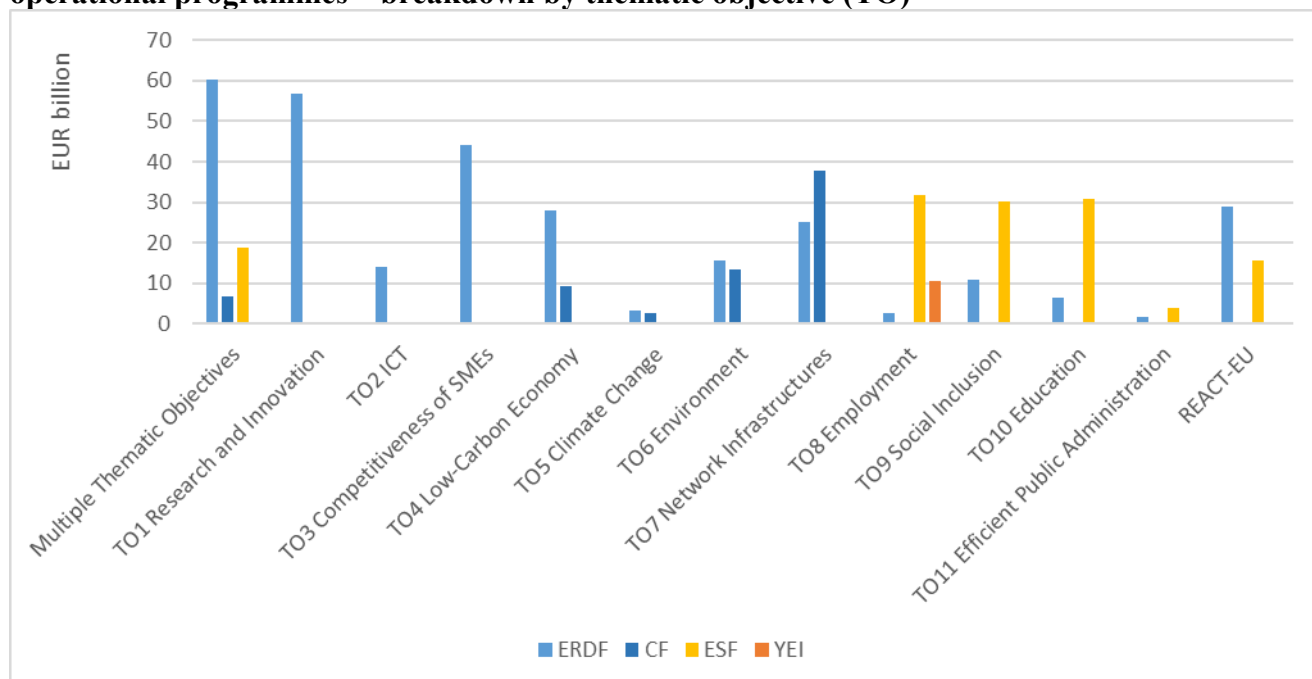
2.1.2 Main findings of evaluations

Based on the information on the data used and the methods applied, the findings of the Member States evaluations appear to be reasonably robust.

In addition to showing the emerging findings per policy area and TO, this section also includes findings on integrated territorial investment, financial instruments and European territorial cooperation, and a review of the cross-cutting findings of evaluations that assessed procedural aspects. In line with the 2022 annual summary report, a brief overview of the achievements and financial evolution by the end of 2021 accompanies each headline policy investment discussed below.

Figure 5 shows the overall planned contribution of cohesion policy funds to the TOs by the end of 2021.

Figure 5: Total amount planned (EU and national) under 2014-2020 cohesion policy operational programmes – breakdown by thematic objective (TO)



Source: European Commission.

- **Smart growth: research and innovation, information and communication technology and competitiveness of small and medium enterprises**

The ERDF invested EUR 114.9 billion⁵ in smart growth between 2014 and 2020. Projects had spent EUR 82.4 billion (72%) of this total by the end of 2021, up from 52% at the end of 2020. The total eligible costs of the selected projects contributing to this headline priority is even higher than the ERDF allocations, i.e. EUR 141.6 billion. Programme authorities use this selection strategy to ensure that by the end of the programming period, resources are fully spent.

➤ *TO 1: Research and innovation*

By the end of 2021, the cohesion policy programmes had planned EUR 56.6 billion of investment in the area of research and innovation, of which they had already spent EUR 37.1 billion (66%). Thanks to the ERDF investment in research and innovation, more than 61 000 companies cooperated with research institutions (93% of the target) and around 30 000 enterprises introduced new products to the market (94% of the target).

Evaluations give an insight into the performance of the projects that contributed to meeting these targets. Evaluations in various Member States show successful examples of **cooperation between SMEs, universities and research centres**. In Czechia, some EU-funded projects have exceeded their targets for cooperation between businesses and research centres. Moreover, most of the companies involved (70%) have continued to cooperate after ERDF support finished. Fruitful cooperation has also helped develop cross-border technology transfers between Germany and the Netherlands, and improve the innovation environment in Austria.

⁵ All the amounts of thematic allocations mentioned in Section 2.1.2 include the contribution from the EU budget and the national co-financing. Multi-thematic allocations are not included.

Several evaluations have also found that the **ability of businesses to develop new products and processes** had increased. Thanks to EU support, companies in Germany have introduced new products and services, and improved their existing ones. SMEs in Poland have introduced innovative processes and increased their profitability, but this is largely based on the search for innovations and there is room to increase their added value.

In several cases, support for research and innovation has also been conducive to **smart specialisation strategies**. For example, in one region in Poland, the support has helped eliminate barriers to innovation. In some regions of Portugal, Spain and Italy, supported companies have been able to increase their exports and participation in international markets.

Recent evaluations have also shown that measures to promote innovation in Belgium (Wallonia) have had positive effects in terms of **new competences** and interactions between SMEs, but less positive effects in terms of spin-offs or innovative products. In Lithuania, measures to develop research and innovation infrastructure have helped strengthen the **capacity to commercialise research and development (R&D) results** and increase the competitiveness of businesses. Under the Sweden, Denmark and Norway Interreg operational programme (in Öresund-Kattegat-Skagerrak), support for innovation resulted in an increased number of researchers, new and **strengthened research networks** and more exchanges between local players.

➤ *TO2: Information and communication technology*

Supporting the digital transition in the EU is one of the Commission's headline priorities. The planned ERDF allocation for this objective in 2014-2020 was EUR 14.2 billion. Programmes spent EUR 8.9 billion of this total by the end of 2021. As a result, 6.3 million households had improved broadband access, representing more than 52% of the target. 11.5 million households are expected to benefit from improved broadband access by the end of 2023.

Evaluations show that cohesion policy support has helped **increase broadband access** in some EU regions. In France, for example, ERDF support has made it possible to provide high-speed broadband services. In many other EU regions, including in Sweden, Spain and Italy, cohesion policy has helped deliver major infrastructural projects. In Poland, ERDF funding has significantly **improved ICT infrastructure**, particularly in rural areas. However, a recent evaluation in Romania found that **interventions were delayed** because they were hampered by the reorganisation of strategic public beneficiaries and the heterogeneity of local regulations and procedures.

Evaluations have also found that support for digitalisation has created opportunities to develop **ICT products and services and e-government**. In Poland, for example, the wide use of e-services funded by the EU has increased the transparency of public sector activities and reduced digital exclusion among older people. In Italy, digital platforms set up to improve communication between local administrations and businesses have reduced administrative costs.

Investments in digitalisation have also helped **improve the digital skills** of workers in Czechia and of young people and households in difficult socio-economic situations in Poland. In other cases, evaluations have highlighted that a lack of appropriate skills prevented beneficiaries from making the most of funding, such as in the education sector in Poland and Sweden.

➤ TO3: Competitiveness of SMEs

Increasing the growth, productivity and competitiveness of businesses is one of the best performing areas of ERDF support. This support proved to be vital, especially in response to the global health crisis. By the end of 2021, cohesion policy programmes had planned EUR 44.1 billion of investment in this area, of which they had already spent EUR 36.3 billion (82%). More than 2 million businesses (an increase of 600 000 compared to the situation at the end of 2020) had received ERDF support in the form of grants, financial instruments⁶ or non-financial support. The businesses that were supported had created 310 000 new jobs, while an additional 200 000 jobs are expected to be created by the end of 2023.

Evaluations of TO3 have found that support in this sector has often achieved its objectives, such as **increasing companies' competitiveness and the number of people they employ**. This was the case in several regions of Poland and Germany, where companies now also have better **access to international markets** thanks to the availability of additional capital through grants and financial instruments.

Recent counterfactual analysis in Poland (in Warmińsko-Mazurskie), found that companies that benefitted from innovation and competitiveness support had slightly higher revenues or profits in the period 2016-2019 and the **increase in employment** was 4 percentage points higher than for non-beneficiaries. Among the beneficiaries of support, a bigger share of companies (11 percentage points more) invested in R&D activities than in the control group. An increase in employment was also confirmed by a recent evaluation in Germany (Hessen).

Support has also **boosted companies' productivity** in some Polish regions, and has improved the ability of German firms to undertake larger projects. Furthermore, supported businesses have often grown, or at least maintained their level of activity, and have been able to consolidate their market position, for example in Romania.

In Portugal, Italy and Spain, cohesion policy funding has strengthened companies' competitiveness by **improving their ability to innovate**. In the Italian case, supported businesses have also improved their ability to attract private investment.

Sustainability is an important aspect of improving SME competitiveness. Initial evidence suggests that the sustainability of the positive results depends in particular on the relationships developed between businesses and research centres and the ability to attract other co-investors. Sustainability can be improved by having selection criteria for funding that favour companies with an explicit, and seemingly viable, expansion strategy.

In general, measures for **start-ups** should be fine-tuned according to the specific phase of business development that is the object of support (seed, early, growth, etc.). This includes choosing a suitable combination of repayable and non-repayable support. Enabling factors include the development university and company networks and the availability of suitable infrastructure. On the other hand, excessive administrative requirements and uncertainty about the timing of funding and payments are major obstacles to the use of the funds.

In Italy (Friuli-Venezia Giulia), measures for **business creation** have resulted in the creation of new companies mainly in retailing and tourism, with a significant presence of women and young people reported. While most of the companies that were supported have grown, those engaged in cultural and creative activities have reduced in size as a result of the pandemic.

⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/policy/what/glossary/financial-instruments_en

- **Sustainable growth: low-carbon economy, climate change, environment, transport and energy networks**

The European Green Deal is at the forefront of EU investment and support policies. Cohesion policy funds play their part by supporting investments in a climate-neutral, clean and circular economy and in the areas of environment and climate change adaptation. The ERDF and the CF have supported this headline priority with more than EUR 136.2 billion in funding during the 2014-2020 programming period, of which the Commission had already paid EUR 85.6 billion (63%) to the Member States by the end of 2021.

➤ *TO4: Low-carbon economy*

The low-carbon economy thematic objective is primarily focused on investment in energy efficiency and the production of renewable energy. By the end of 2020, cohesion policy programmes had planned EUR 37.8 billion of investment in this field, of which EUR 22.3 billion (59%) had already been spent. By the end of 2021, the ERDF had helped almost 460 000 households to improve their energy consumption classification (up by 100 000 compared to the achievements reported last year). It has also helped increase the EU's renewable energy production capacity by 3 660 MW; the target for the end of 2023 is 8 800 MW.

The Commission has recently published a Communication on the **REPowerEU joint European action** for more affordable, secure and sustainable energy⁷ and the **REPowerEU plan**⁸ to accelerate the transition to clean energy, diversify energy sources and increase energy savings. Cohesion policy will be mobilised to help achieve these objectives and we expect that Member States will carry out further evaluations in this area in the future.

Evaluations have found that **measures to improve energy efficiency** have been effective across the EU. Some positive results have been obtained by projects to reduce energy consumption **in companies and in public and private buildings**. The range of measures carried out is extremely wide, encompassing improvements in the energy efficiency of public buildings, businesses and houses, electrification of public transport and the construction of tramways and metro lines to take cars off city roads, and investment in the production of renewable energy.

A study in Italy has found that the support has helped reduce energy use in public buildings. Most recent evaluations have shown the positive results of investments to **improve energy efficiency in public buildings and/or housing** in a number of regions and Member States, such as in Germany (Saxony-Anhalt), Lithuania and France (Ile-de-France and Seine).

Some results can be observed in projects to **improve companies' energy efficiency and reduce CO₂ emissions**. This includes the use of new technologies in Germany (Saxony-Anhalt), where the complementarity between the one-stop shop approach and federal measures, together with attractive funding conditions, helped companies reduce their energy consumption. Also in Germany (Hessen), energy savings were achieved along with innovative organisational changes, thus improving the overall competitiveness of the SMEs supported.

In Poland, thanks to the replacement of small, local heating plants powered by low-quality solid fuels with high-efficiency cogeneration units, **environmental benefits** have resulted

⁷ COM(2022) 108 final, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52022DC0108>

⁸ COM(2022) 230 final, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52022DC0230>

from reducing primary energy consumption on average by 37%, CO₂ emissions by 65%, NO_x by 69%, and particle emissions entirely or almost entirely.

In Estonia, measures supported by the ERDF addressing the production of **renewable energy** are leading to the generation of more than 400 GWh of electricity a year. Positive results have also been achieved in France (Auvergne and Rhône-Alpes). In Poland, the use of financial instruments to support the production of renewable energy and to increase the energy efficiency of businesses has been found to be an appropriate form of support.

Cohesion policy support under this TO also aimed to **improve urban transport systems** and make them more environmentally friendly, for example by reducing the use of private cars and improving the connections between different modes of transport.

➤ *TO5: Climate change adaptation and risk prevention*

Cohesion policy funds also support investment in climate change adaptation and risk prevention. By the end of 2021, Member States had already spent EUR 3.4 billion (57%) of the total amount planned of EUR 6.0 billion. Thanks to these investments, 21.7 million people (more than 63% of the target) are now less exposed to flood risks.

Support under TO5 has tended to focus on **tackling specific risks** in particular areas, such as flooding or fires, and on developing or **improving systems to monitor natural disasters** and to manage the outcomes. In Romania, projects to monitor such events have limited floods, reduced the damage and provided appropriate emergency equipment. Further evaluations have also shown the successful results of flood-protection measures in Germany (Bavaria and Saxony-Anhalt). In Poland, funding has helped to develop a disaster recovery system and improve the volunteer fire brigade (in Świętokrzyskie), and to increase resilience to climate change threats (in Podkarpackie).

Such projects are a feature of many Interreg programmes in neighbouring regions in different countries, recognising that natural disasters do not respect national borders and that disaster prevention or response often needs to have a **cross-border dimension** to be effective.

Cross-border cooperation between institutions on risk prevention and civil protection has been strengthened. Italy and France have taken **joint measures to manage the risks of climate change**, authorities in Czechia and Poland have cooperated to improve their ability to tackle emergency situations, and Italy and Austria have exchanged good practices and improvements in monitoring and evaluation systems.

➤ *TO6: Environment protection and resource efficiency*

The ERDF and CF have allocated EUR 29.5 billion to projects on environment protection and resource efficiency. Implementation is progressing steadily: by the end of 2021, projects had already spent EUR 15.4 billion (52% of the total). Thanks to these investments, 5.1 million people already benefit from an improved water supply, with a target of 15.4 million people by the end of the 2023.

The actions in support of environmental protection and resource efficiency often have an integrated approach and address various dimensions altogether, such as wastewater management and nature preservation or natural and cultural heritage. Evaluations have found that they were effective in **improving wastewater management and preserving natural habitats**. In France and Latvia, measures to improve wastewater management and preserve water basins have strengthened the conservation of habitats. Biodiversity territorial cooperation programmes have also helped to protect ecosystems, such as the one between

Italy and France, which aims to protect ecosystems by developing green infrastructure. In Romania, support helped expand the sewer network, increase the extent of recycling and close non-compliant landfills. However, the connection of households to mains drainage is still limited.

EU support has also helped to **improve waste management systems** in Czechia, Poland and Portugal and has boosted the **circular economy** in France and Belgium.

Support under this heading has also helped **preserve natural and cultural heritage** by:

- contributing to the development of an integrated network of tourism sites in Poland;
- safeguarding the Pompeii archaeological site in Italy and improving its accessibility; and
- fostering cooperation between Germany and Czechia.

Evaluations have found evidence that cohesion policy investments have also helped **rehabilitate urban areas** in Austria, Czechia, Poland and Portugal. A recent evaluation showed that in Germany (Hessen) ERDF support has helped to reconvert old military and industrial buildings, to clean up contaminated sites for commercial use, and contributed directly to the relocation of businesses to urban areas, to the removal of potential environmental hazards from the land, and to improving the attractiveness of cities.

➤ *TO7: Transport and energy network infrastructure*

Energy and transport network infrastructure received EUR 62.9 billion of support from the ERDF and CF in the 2014-2020 programming period. By the end of 2021, projects had spent EUR 44.5 billion, thus spending 71% of the total budget. Investments in clean urban transport supported by the ERDF and CF had delivered 172 km of new or improved tram and metro lines by the end of 2021 (34% of the target). An additional 330 km of track is expected to be put into use in the coming years.

Support under this heading mainly aimed to develop road and rail networks. In Poland and Czechia, such investments have **improved road safety** and reduced the number of accidents. It has also **reduced travel times, noise and air pollution in cities**. Furthermore, rail investments have helped increase the capacity of railway networks, reducing journey times and improving connections between cities. This has **increased railway use**.

Transport projects often take a **long time to deliver** and it is rarely possible to assess their impact within the same programming period. It is long-term data that gives the relevant information on the impact of this type of investment. Moreover, to attract more passengers and reduce car use, investment in public transport infrastructure, in particular rail, needs to be matched with high-quality transport services and commitment to prioritise public transport. For example, investment in tram lines in Italy has helped make the **regions concerned more attractive** for people and businesses, and reduce car use in favour of public transport. In Estonia and Spain, investment in rail infrastructure has made train travel more attractive and competitive, leading to an increase in passenger numbers.

In Poland, an evaluation examined **natural gas projects** financed under the Infrastructure and Environment national OP. Among them, the expansion of the liquefied natural gas terminal and transmission projects will increase the security and diversification of energy supplies.

Further evaluations are expected to follow on energy network infrastructure, given the importance of this policy area. They will be done at a later stage, depending on the timetable, since large infrastructures are still under construction or have been recently completed, such as the recently inaugurated gas interconnector between Greece and Bulgaria. This area will also be thoroughly covered in the Commission's *ex post* evaluation.

- **Inclusive growth: employment, social inclusion and education**

The European Pillar of Social Rights, which is the basis of the EU's social agenda, is one of the main driving forces of cohesion policy investment in sustainable and quality employment (EUR 45.3 billion), social inclusion (EUR 40.7 billion) and educational and vocational training (EUR 37.3 billion). By the end of 2021, the average spending rate for the three topics was 70% of the total budget (EUR 86.2 billion of declared expenditure), a significant increase compared to 2020 (54%). The ESF has been the main fund used to support social and educational services, keep people in employment and support vulnerable groups, e.g. by supporting short-time work arrangements, supplementing the wages of healthcare personnel and providing services for vulnerable groups.

➤ *TO8: Sustainable and quality employment*

By the end of 2021, cohesion policy programmes had planned EUR 45.4 billion of investment in this area, of which they had already spent EUR 32.0 billion (70%). The ESF and YEI had supported 55.2 million participants, including nearly 19.9 million unemployed and 20.9 million inactive people. A total of 6.4 million people had found a job thanks to ESF and YEI support.

The actions dedicated to helping people, especially young people, to find jobs are often combined in **tailored support packages**, which take the form of training programmes, internships, and work experience. Several counterfactual evaluations⁹ show that participation in the programmes significantly **increases the chances of finding a job**. In Italy, for example, traineeships and voucher schemes have increased participants' chances of finding a job compared to non-participants. In Germany, more participants were employed 15 months after the end of the projects compared to non-participants. In Poland, such projects have also proved successful for the long-term unemployed, young people and low-skilled individuals. Most recently, the evaluation of the JobPlus programme in Ireland estimated that long-term unemployed people who participated in the programme were 18 percentage points less likely than non-participants to be unemployed two years after entering the programme.

The ESF can also help participants to improve their entrepreneurial skills and provides support for **business start-ups**. In Poland and Italy, such projects have helped create new businesses and helped businesses to survive after the ESF support ended. In Germany, a factor in the success of ESF-supported actions for business creation is the complementarity between mentors who provide technical assistance and coaches who support businesses on management issues.

Beyond support to unemployed people, the ESF also helps employees and businesses to adapt to change. In Germany, a positive effect on people who had attended training was that they were able to better **adapt to changes in market conditions** and to move to activities that required more qualifications and had greater responsibilities.

⁹ https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/scientific-activities-z/counterfactual-impact-evaluation_en

➤ *TO9: Social inclusion*

By the end of 2021, cohesion policy programmes had planned EUR 40.8 billion of investment in this area, of which they had already spent EUR 28.0 billion (69%). Cohesion policy investments have improved skills for the job market and employment opportunities for 3.6 million participants with disabilities, 8 million participants who were migrants, or had a non-EU or ethnic minority background, and 10.3 million other disadvantaged people. In addition, 59 million people have benefitted from improved healthcare services across the EU.

Measures have been introduced that amend cohesion policy rules to support Member States in **managing the arrival of Ukrainian refugees**, by the CARE and the Flexible assistance to territories (FAST-CARE) proposals, which allow a swift reallocation of available funding to such emergency support. We expect that Member States will carry out evaluations in this area in the future.

In many less developed regions, significant ESF investment went into support for health services and this was complemented, in a number of cases, by ERDF investment in related buildings and equipment. Several evaluations have found that these projects have increased access to and improved the **quality of healthcare**. In Lithuania, such projects have helped reduce the risk of death from cardiovascular disease and reduce the suicide rate. Recent evaluation in Poland has shown that the support provided under the Investment and Employment OP to improve healthcare has had a significant positive impact on medical services. It has helped to adapt facilities to the needs resulting from demographic change and to create additional units in the state medical rescue service.

In addition, there has been a strong focus **on increasing the chances of vulnerable people to find employment**. In Spain, projects have succeeded in doing this while also reducing the participants' risk of suffering from mental illnesses. In Italy (Tuscany), 20% of the participants in a project supporting the employability of people with disabilities or other disadvantages had a job one year after the project ended. A recent counterfactual evaluation in Italy (Marche), showed that the percentage of disadvantaged people who were employed 6 months after participating in ESF-financed traineeships was 6 to 8 points higher than that of equally disadvantaged participants in non-ESF traineeships.

➤ *TO10: Education and vocational training*

By the end of 2021, total funding of projects in educational and vocational training amounted to EUR 37.3 billion, of which EUR 26.3 billion (71%) were already spent. Thanks to ESF and YEI support, 25.9 million low-skilled people had participated in specific activities, 8.8 million had gained a qualification and 2.6 million had participated in education and training. In addition, 23.3 million people have had access to expanded childcare and education infrastructure.

Evaluations have found that education and vocational training **has reduced early school leaving** and improved attitudes to schools, in particular in Germany, where this training also improved the integration of migrants. In Germany, training was also open to teachers, who have gained communication and conflict resolution skills. In Portugal, using different teaching methods has helped to reduce school dropouts, and the 'Integrated and innovative plans to combat school failure' have created new educational activities. One recent counterfactual evaluation in Spain found that a scheme to reduce early school leaving has made it easier for those targeted to access upper secondary education.

Evaluations show positive results from the support for high quality education, which is most successful when **tailored to the needs** of the beneficiaries.

Projects have also **improved the links between education and the labour market**. In Poland, increased cooperation between vocational training schools and employers has improved teachers' skills and helped students choose suitable courses. In Germany (Brandenburg), the most effective factors in helping students to make career choices are high-quality input from teachers, discussions with parents and practical training in companies. Also in Germany (Mecklenburg-Vorpommern), cooperation with local entrepreneurs has enabled students to make informed career decisions, and in Italy, technical courses have improved the participants' chances of finding a job. In Czechia, however, the counterfactual analysis does not show that projects have had any consistent effect on exam results in maths and the Czech language, as the supported schools performed much the same as schools that were not supported.

Under TO10, the ERDF focuses on investing in infrastructure to make education more accessible and relevant equipment. Investing in education infrastructure in Lithuania has helped to improve the quality of pre-school and general education, although the falling number of secondary level students remains a challenge. On the other hand, support for higher education **has made universities more international**, increasing the share of foreign students and the number of Lithuanian students spending part of their studies abroad.

- **Strengthening institutional capacity and making public administrations more efficient**

- *TO11: Efficient public administration*

By the end of 2021, cohesion policy programmes had planned EUR 5.6 billion of funding for actions to improve institutional capacity. The amount spent had reached 41% of the total, with the Member States having received EUR 3.1 billion in payments. Thanks to the investments under this TO, more than 840 000 people had participated in targeted activities in more than 3 000 supported projects.

Evaluations of institutional capacity have found that in many EU regions, investment under this TO has **strengthened collaboration and networks between those involved in cohesion policy**. In Poland, an improved understanding of good governance practices has led public authorities to increase people's involvement in urban planning procedures. In Slovenia, projects have helped strengthen networks of non-governmental organisations and put them in contact with public authorities. In Czechia, such investment has enabled better collaboration between social partners.

In many instances, this investment has also **made public administrations more transparent**, for example by improving the exchange of information on government decisions in Estonia. However, public administrations also suffer from a lack of resources, making it difficult to put communication strategies and evaluations into practice.

Improved governance thanks to projects in this field has also improved the skills of staff in the managing authorities. In Czechia, staff have improved their know-how and capabilities, which has helped make the **organisation more efficient**. In Latvia, supported projects have given public authorities a better understanding of how to promote entrepreneurship. In Lithuania, projects have increased **the efficiency of investments** by creating a stronger link with reforms. In Romania, the measures supported have helped staff to improve hard and soft personal skills, to improve the coordination of national programmes, strengthen decision-

making and institutional procedures (such as simplifying legislation, reducing the administrative burden and improving inter-organisational relations), and improve the quality of judicial services and access to the justice system

- **Helping the EU recover from the COVID-19 crisis and become more resilient**

In order to fight the effects and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU put in place NextGenerationEU, its largest ever recovery package, to emerge more resilient from the crisis and to support Europe's digital and green transformation. For this purpose and within the framework of the 2014-2020 structural funds, new resources of EUR 50.6 billion were planned via the instrument Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe (REACT-EU), with funding of EUR 39.6 billion already programmed in 2021.

The funds were planned to support medical institutions, researchers, business owners, workers and vulnerable people. So far, EUR 6.8 billion has been allocated to green investments (of which EUR 5.8 billion to climate action) and EUR 3 billion to the digital economy; EUR 8 billion have been allocated to supporting businesses; EUR 7 billion to the health sector and EUR 15.6 billion for measures dealing with the labour market, social inclusion and education and training.

While there are no evaluations yet that broadly address the impact of the resources allocated under CRII, CRII+ and REACT-EU, a few evaluations have targeted specific **actions carried out in response to the COVID-19 crisis**. These evaluations cover different areas, such as **business support** in Hungary, where the use of the ERDF seems to have had a positive effect on the turnover of the companies that were supported. In Italy (Piedmont), activities that provided **remote counselling for young people** were well managed and organised despite being planned at short notice. Also in Italy (Campania), **R&D activities** were carried out in the health sector. This strengthened cooperation between national and international research institutes, but projects suffered delays because of the late supply of the materials needed. An evaluation in Czechia took stock of the use of cohesion funds, including REACT-EU, that were deployed in response to the pandemic. CRII support was concentrated on financing working capital and job retention measures, mostly via financial instruments, while REACT-EU resources were targeted more on healthcare infrastructure, integrated rescue systems and the provision of social services.

Further evaluations are expected not only on CRII/CRII+ and REACT-EU, but also on the support offered by cohesion policy via CARE and FAST-CARE in response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis, and in support of REPowerEU's objectives in the context of the energy crisis, including the latest proposal of exceptional measures to address energy price increases.

- **Cross-cutting instruments**

- *Territorial instruments: integrated territorial investment, community-led local development and sustainable urban development*

Cohesion policy has strengthened its support for integrated territorial development and sustainable urban development in the 2014-2020 programming period. Several tools have been put in place to help achieve the goal of coherent development of the various dimensions of urban life, such as integrated territorial investment (ITI) and community-led local development (CLLD). It was planned to spend approximately EUR 32 billion of cohesion policy funds on integrated territorial development and sustainable urban development. By the end of 2021, EUR 31.5 billion had been allocated to projects, representing 99% of the total

planned allocation. Projects also speeded up their spending, with 52% (EUR 17 billion) of the planned allocation spent by the end of 2021, up from 39% at the end of 2020. These investments are expected to produce 58 million square meters of renovated or newly developed urban open space, which will be accessible to the public, 3.5 million square meters of renovated or newly built public buildings, and over 24 000 renovated housing units.

Most evaluations of territorial approaches to local development still look into implementation processes, considering the nature of the investments concerned and the long time-scale over which their results are likely to become visible. In a number of cases, they have been effective in **stimulating cooperation at local level** to carry out local strategies and in **improving the attractiveness of the areas concerned**.

In the two Polish regions that used CLLD, many people have become involved in developing **local development strategies**, and new beneficiaries who had not received EU funding before have been reached. In Czechia, the CLLD approach has helped to further consolidate the interconnections between different actors in the country and has enabled a large number of actors to cooperate.

Again in Poland, ITIs have supported the development of natural and cultural assets, which **has made the areas concerned more attractive**, increased their tourism potential, and protected biodiversity.

Important factors in the efficient and effective management and coordination of activities include clearly defined and appropriate **procedures for creating local partnerships**, political commitment and clear leadership by the participating institutions. In the Netherlands, for example, integrated territorial instruments have enabled policymakers to better integrate the social and economic aspects of local policies. They have also increased cooperation between public and private stakeholders. In France, they have improved the collaboration between public authorities and local community organisations.

Effective cooperation between local stakeholders and local people involved in planning and carrying out projects took place in Germany (Thuringia), where ERDF projects have been integrated into a broader urban development strategy. However, a recent evaluation of integrated territorial investments in Italy (Sardinia) found that there was significant **room for improvement in the governance** of the strategies.

➤ *Financial instruments*

More than EUR 30 billion were spent by the end of 2021 through financial instruments in different policy areas. By the end of 2021, more than 514 000 businesses had received support via financial instruments, with 24 000 more expected to benefit from this type of support by the end of 2023. This in turn has already generated more than EUR 11.4 billion in matching private investment with an additional EUR 3 billion expected by the end of the programming period.

Financial instruments, including loans, guarantees, equity and other risk-bearing mechanisms have been key in supporting **different policy areas**, such as SME competitiveness, research and innovation or energy efficiency. Many evaluations have found the use of financial instruments to be successful, mostly in the area of business support.

The use of financial instruments has supported the **growth of companies**, and business start-ups, which often have difficulty in obtaining finance, and helped to increase funding for business investment. In Germany and Northern Ireland, financial instruments have increased

business competitiveness, profits and turnover. A recent evaluation shows that in Poland financial instruments have had a positive impact on promoting self-employment, with 84% of the entrepreneurs supported still active after two years.

Financial instruments have been used to fund **research and innovation in SMEs** and have been an important factor in fostering innovation and competitiveness. Positive results are reported in Italy (Lombardy) where a loan guarantee measure has helped SMEs to improve the organisation of their work, invest in innovative products and increase revenue.

In some cases, evaluations have reported difficulties stemming from the **complexity of the instruments**. In Czechia, the number of available instruments at EU, national and regional level creates fragmentation and overlaps. Polish authorities face difficulties arising from the complex national regulatory framework, the complicated implementation model and a lack of coordination and harmonisation of the offer.

➤ *European territorial cooperation*

One of the goals of the ERDF directly targets the territorial cooperation dimension at EU level. Funding of EUR 13 billion was planned in the 2014-2020 programming period for measures in support of this goal. By the end of 2021, EUR 8 billion (64% of the total planned amount) had been spent. In terms of the outputs generated by this funding, more than 33 500 businesses have participated in cross-border, transnational or interregional research projects, and 165 000 people have benefitted from cross-border mobility initiatives.

Most of the cooperation projects would not have taken place without ERDF funding. Research, development and innovation, and the environment are the policy areas that received the largest share of financial resources. Several projects focused on cooperation in R&D between research centres and companies on both sides of a border, such as under the Italy-Austria OP and the Germany-Denmark OP. The projects also helped **increase cooperation between institutions and local communities** across borders.

Projects have also helped to involve more locals in decision-making processes, leading to **more inclusive and effective policies**. For example, more networking and institutional cooperation took place between Germany and Czechia, and Polish and Czech local authorities have embarked on long-term cooperation.

Member States have also benefitted from **successful cooperation on thematic issues**, including:

- creating cross-border networks for technology transfer and to promote energy efficiency between Germany and the Netherlands;
- producing joint measures to protect biodiversity and manage the risks of climate change between France and Italy;
- promoting cultural heritage in Estonia and Latvia.

The findings of a recent evaluation show that, as a result of the Romania-Serbia Interreg programme, cross-border **cooperation intensified** in all relevant areas. Under the Sweden, Denmark and Norway Interreg OP (in Öresund-Kattegat-Skagerrak), in addition to the positive achievements already reported under TO1, the vast majority of **projects on the green economy have achieved good results**.

In some instances, however, differences in regulatory frameworks and the limited involvement of policymakers restricted the extent of cooperation, highlighting that there is

still some room to improve cooperation between the bodies that manage cooperation programmes.

- **General findings on implementation**

While projects were still running and before their effectiveness, efficiency and impact could be assessed, managing authorities have invested in evaluating how the funding has been managed and spent, to improve the design of projects and the quality of outputs. Systemic **success factors and weaknesses** have thus started to emerge, along with mixed findings on some general aspects, providing important information for the managing authorities of the 2014-2020 period, which was also useful for planning of 2021-2027 programmes.

Evaluations have highlighted the importance, during the **planning process**, of keeping the design of the interventions flexible and of involving stakeholders to ensure that the programme delivers its objectives and that it is consistent and complementary with other national or regional development policies.

Some crucial elements can also improve the **selection process**. The use of standardised models for calls for proposals, pre-selection or two-step selection procedures, increased transparency and electronic platforms to submit projects all help to reduce administrative burdens and improve the quality of project applications.

Arrangements to ensure smooth communication between stakeholders while the projects are running are essential to solving problems and taking quick action. Efficient communication and monitoring systems are key tools to guide how programmes can be run effectively.

Governance issues have recently been reported in **Italy** (Sicily), where the running of some environmental and cultural projects faced problems because of insufficient coordination between the departments involved. Similarly, in **Croatia**, there has been limited cooperation and communication between the management and control bodies and the beneficiaries and stakeholders.

In some cases, the selection process has been too long and the **application procedures were considered to be excessively complicated**. The long duration of the selection process, together with administrative complexity, delayed measures to support SMEs in Slovakia, while in Italy (Marche) the complexity of procurement procedures and the lack of adequate resources created delays. In other instances, **the selection criteria were not suitable** for selecting the best projects. In Italy (Friuli-Venezia Giulia) a lack of selectivity in choosing actions to support advanced manufacturing systems, advanced materials and nanoelectronics led to the financing of many projects that probably would have happened anyway in the absence of ERDF support (known as ‘deadweight’).

Shortage of skills and available personnel is a recurring issue, most recently reported in Hungary in the area of planning and management in the Environmental and Energy Efficiency and the Competitive Central-Hungary OPs.

Difficulties emerged in respect of understanding and applying **simplified cost options** in some Member States, most recently in Poland. However, in other cases these were applied successfully, and some evaluations in Italy (Marche and Veneto) propose to make more use of simplified cost options in 2021-2027 programmes.

The **administrative burden** was considered too high according to recent evaluations in Poland (Kujawsko-Pomorskie) of measures supporting business activities, and in Italy (Veneto), where beneficiaries considered application procedures burdensome. Together with

uncertainty about the time frame for funding, this limited the participation of start-ups. Burdensome reporting, especially drafting intermediate and final reports on project participants, was also reported as an issue for ESF actions aimed at promoting active inclusion in the Netherlands.

2.1.3 Support to the Member States

The Commission supports the Member States to enable them to carry out high-quality evaluations. This support includes methodological guidance, expert reviews, tailored assistance and discussion fora to exchange experience. The Commission runs the **evaluation network** (managed by the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy) and the **European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) evaluation partnership** (managed by the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion), which are the main platforms for exchanging experiences in monitoring and evaluating cohesion policy. These platforms bring together evaluation experts from the national authorities of the Member States. They meet two to four times per year to share experience and good practice and to strengthen evaluation capacity throughout the EU.

The Commission has continued to run its cohesion policy **evaluation helpdesk** to strengthen Member States' evaluation capacity. The experts of the helpdesk collect, categorise, summarise and analyse the evaluations carried out by the Member States. The main findings on impacts are summarised by country and by thematic objective. All evaluations, together with their summaries in English, are uploaded to the evaluation library¹⁰. The helpdesk also provides customised support to the Member States on specific evaluation issues, including feedback and advice on evaluation questions, the scope of evaluation and choice of methodology. The Member States have also received expert feedback on drafting terms of reference, evaluation reports and evaluation plans.

In addition, the Commission organises **evaluation summer schools** for managing authorities and other public bodies involved in the evaluation of ERDF/CF programmes. The schools provide practical training in the areas most requested by the Member States. After the 2021 edition in hybrid format, at the latest summer school in Prague, Czechia in June 2022 all participants were physically present, which meant they could take full advantage of group work and face-to-face interaction. The summer school focused on the general theme of evaluation design and included a masterclass on the evaluation of territorial effects.

In cooperation with the Joint Research Centre (JRC), the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion promotes the use of **counterfactual impact evaluations** (CIEs). Special efforts are made to increase managing authorities' capacity to conduct CIEs because these types of evaluations can provide robust evidence on the effectiveness of the ESF. The managing authorities can receive tailor-made support in different phases of the evaluation. In 2022, JRC experts provided support to six countries to carry out CIEs. The managing authorities can exchange experience in the regular CIE community of practice meetings organised by the JRC. One larger and three smaller scale meetings took place in 2022. The participants discussed a wide range of topics, including the latest developments in CIEs in the EU, communicating the evaluation results, the quality of evaluation reports and data needs.

In 2022, the Commission published the translations in 23 EU languages of the updated guide '**Design and commissioning of counterfactual impact evaluations**'¹¹. The guide is the 2021

¹⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/evaluations/member-states/

¹¹ <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/dd4a4fc7-42a3-11ec-89db-01aa75ed71a1>

update of material published in 2013, and it is intended for managing authorities and other stakeholders involved in the evaluation of programmes funded by ESF+. The guide introduces the concepts of the CIEs and helps with the planning, design and commissioning of CIEs.

With a view to sharing good practice and mutual learning in ESF monitoring, the **ESF Data Support Centre** held data network meetings with national ESF authorities, including on target setting, informed estimates and soft indicators. Methodological advice has been published in the ESF+ common indicators toolbox and in the FAQs section in the SFC electronic data exchange system¹².

2.2 Evaluation work by the Commission

Several evaluations were completed in 2022, including: (i) the *ex post* evaluation of research and technological development infrastructures and activities financed by the ERDF in the 2007-2013 period; (ii) the evaluation of the e-Cohesion system; (iii) the preliminary evaluation of support from the ESF and the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) under CRII and CRII+; (iv) the meta-analysis of the ESF and YEI counterfactual impact evaluations.

The Commission is finalising its *ex post* evaluation of investment projects in **infrastructures, competence centres and activities for research and technological development (RTD)** financed by the ERDF in the period 2007-2013. Preliminary findings indicate that **ERDF support has helped regions to catch up in terms of their RTD capacities**, particularly in EU13 lagging regions. This good result was mainly delivered by targeting infrastructure investments on upgrading and modernising existing facilities and building new ones. In addition, support for RTD projects, both individual and collaborative, resulted in observable effects on scientific production and capacity. The main drawback was the lack of observable long-term impacts, as far as the use of research results for technological development and innovation are concerned. Synergies and complementarities with existing funding sources were also not always well exploited. A preliminary conclusion is that ERDF support alone may not be enough: **other supporting factors and more place-based approaches are probably necessary for a noticeable shift in technological capacity**. These shortcomings have been mostly addressed by new elements introduced into the ERDF in 2014-2020 and 2021-2027. The evaluation report will be published in the first quarter of 2023.

The evaluation of **e-cohesion**, the electronic data exchange system that simplifies the exchange of documents and data between the beneficiaries of ESI Funds and the relevant authorities, is under finalisation. Preliminary findings reveal that e-cohesion systems have been widely introduced, as 99% of the 302 ERDF/CF OPs analysed have an e-cohesion system. In addition, most users who responded to the surveys (80%) agree that e-cohesion represents an **improvement in information exchange** between beneficiaries and programme authorities and that its advantages outweigh its operating costs. Future improvements should eliminate the paper-based exchanges that are still in place in certain instances (audit verifications) and take advantage of the potential for interoperability between systems. The Commission will publish the evaluation report in the second quarter of 2023.

The study supporting the **preliminary evaluation of support from the ESF and FEAD** under the CRII and CRII+ is also under finalisation, with publication of the evaluation report scheduled for the second quarter of 2023. The evaluation focuses on the process of reacting to the COVID-19 crisis and the role that the ESF and FEAD played in the reactions of the EU Member States and UK.

¹² <https://ec.europa.eu/sfc/en/2021/support-ms/2021MNTESF#/>

In 2022, the Commission carried out the **meta-analysis of CIEs on the ESF and YEI**. During the 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 programming periods the Member States and the UK conducted more than one hundred CIEs on the ESF and YEI. The purpose of the meta-analysis was to synthesise the findings of these individual evaluations and to find systematic evidence of the effectiveness of the ESF and YEI. The results showed that overall the ESF/YEI interventions in the EU are effective: the size of the average estimated effect in the sample was a 7.3 percentage point increase in the probability of participants to find employment. The meta-analysis has identified employment subsidies and internships as the most successful types of ESF/YEI intervention, while public employment programmes were found to be relatively ineffective. A meta-analysis of the CIEs on education outcomes could not be carried out due to the low number and high degree of heterogeneity of education CIEs.

In line with Article 57 of the Common Provisions Regulation, and after extensive discussions at the ninth conference on the evaluation of EU cohesion policy in September 2021, the Commission started the ***ex post* evaluation of cohesion policy** in 2014-2020. For ERDF and CF investments, the evaluation work is structured according to five cross-cutting and eight thematic work packages, most of which are now under way¹³. The ‘Preparatory study on data collection’ (work package 2) has been finalised and has produced **rich datasets on operations, beneficiaries and indicators**¹⁴. These datasets go beyond the public lists of operations, national open data platforms and annual implementation reports (AIRs) and provide an important additional source for analysis in the thematic work packages. The *ex post* evaluation of ESF investment was also launched in 2022, and will cover all ESF investment priorities in order to obtain a complete overview of the ESF and YEI, building on the interim evaluations completed in 2020. The *ex post* evaluation will be finalised with the synthesis report due by the end of 2025, but a number of interim deliverables will be available sooner.

3 EUROPEAN AGRICULTURAL FUND FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT (EAFRD)

3.1 Evaluations in the Member States

3.1.1 General overview

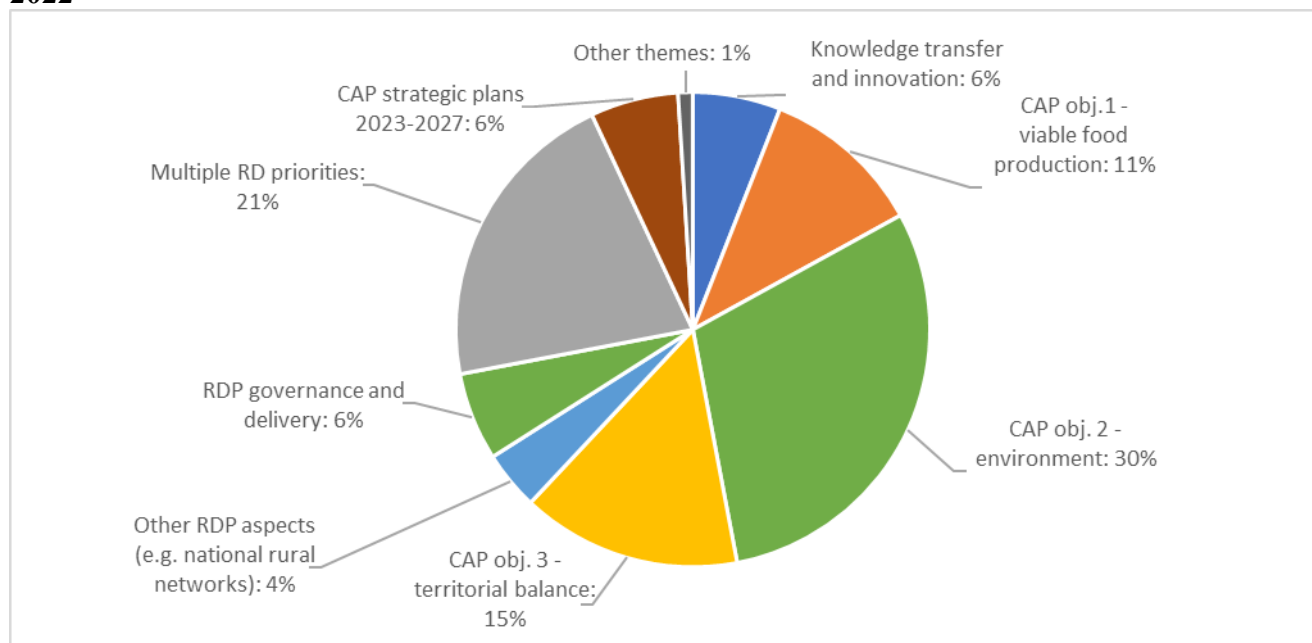
The number of completed evaluations (209), reported in 114 AIRs submitted and analysed in 2022, slightly decreased (-4%) compared to the previous year (217) and brings the total number of evaluations completed in the 2014-2020 period to 1 160.

The 209 evaluations were carried out by 22 Member States and the biggest share covered Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) objective 2 (Ensuring sustainable management of natural resources and climate action), followed by evaluations on multiple rural development programme (RDP) priorities and objectives.

¹³ https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/evaluations/ec/2014-2020/

¹⁴ For a full description of the data, see the related story on the Cohesion open data platform, at: <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/stories/s/h9bm-ur7f>

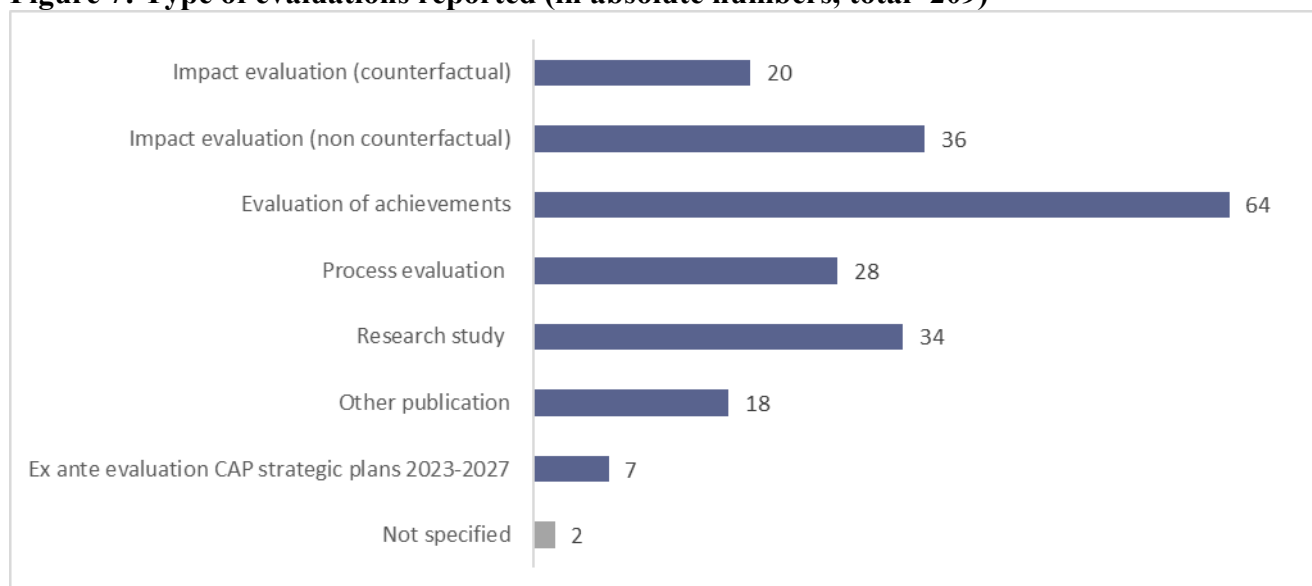
Figure 6: Completed evaluations (209 in total) across main topics reported in AIRs in 2022



Source: European Evaluation Helpdesk for the CAP (2022).

The main types of evaluations reported in 2022 were evaluations of **achievements (31%)** followed by **impact evaluations (27%)**. The share of impact evaluations with a clear counterfactual approach increased (10% of the total, compared to 3% in 2021). Furthermore, process evaluations of the implementation system (13%) and research studies other than evaluations, such as monitoring studies (16%), were also carried out. Various evaluations related to the *ex ante* evaluation of the CAP strategic plans 2023-2027, including *ex ante* evaluations of financial instruments and strategic environmental assessments, some of which at the drafting stage.

Figure 7: Type of evaluations reported (in absolute numbers, total=209)



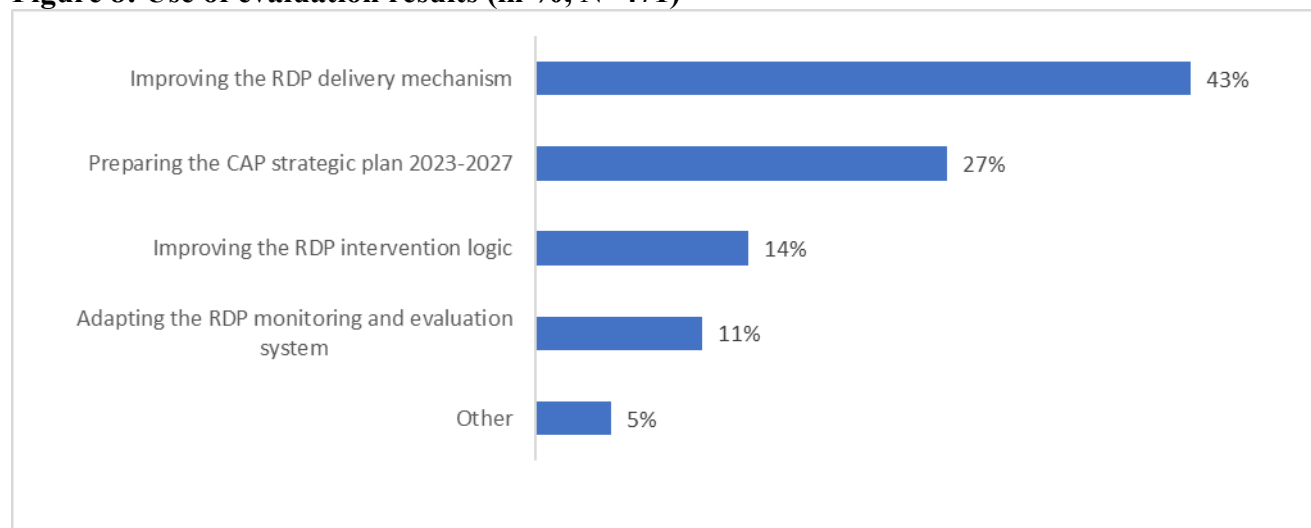
Source: European Evaluation Helpdesk for the CAP (2022).

A substantial number of communication activities (348) on evaluation findings was reported in 2022 and Member States estimate that altogether around 6 million people were reached, which is considerably higher than the number reported in 2021 (3.8 million). Most people were reached through websites (4.6 million or 76%), followed by internal meetings

with programme authorities (17%). A smaller share was reached through a combination of various communication channels, including newsletters, publicly available documents, meetings and outreach event, social media, etc.

Follow-ups to evaluation results (471) were reported to a greater extent than in 2021. Member States **used the evaluation results mainly to improve the RDP delivery mechanism (43%)** and to **prepare the CAP Strategic Plans (27%)** for the programming period 2023-2027. To a lesser degree, evaluation results were used to improve the intervention logic of the RDP (14%) and to adapt the monitoring and evaluation system (11%).

Figure 8: Use of evaluation results (in %, N=471)



Source: European Evaluation Helpdesk for the CAP (2022).

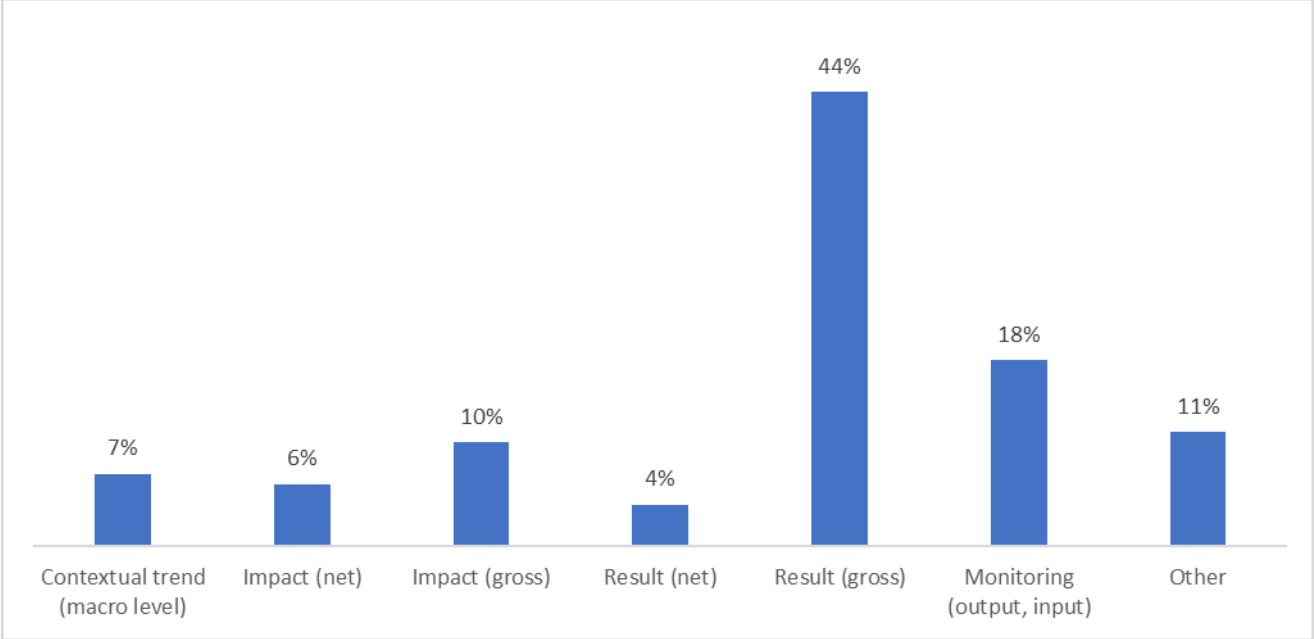
3.1.2 Main findings of evaluations

The overall number of evaluation findings reported is steadily increasing. In 2022, it has more than doubled (397 compared to 198 in 2021, and 156 in 2020).

Member States reported considerably more evaluation findings in relation to the three CAP objectives and the cross-cutting objective in 2022 compared to 2021. Evidently, in the more advanced phase of the implementation period, Member States were able to generate evaluation insights in areas that previously could not be assessed due to the level of uptake.

Evaluation findings are increasingly derived from the assessment of observed impacts and results, given that more data is available at this stage of the policy cycle. In 2022, **64% of findings were based on the assessment of impacts and results**, compared to 60% in 2021. A smaller share of findings (18% in 2022) is based mainly on the analysis of inputs and outputs, while some findings (7%) follow an analysis of contextual trends at the macro level (i.e. no effect of the RDP was assessed). Other forms of evidence (e.g. expert judgement, process analysis, etc.) were the source of 11% of the reported findings.

Figure 9: Evidence basis of evaluation findings reported in the AIRs in 2022 (N=397 findings)

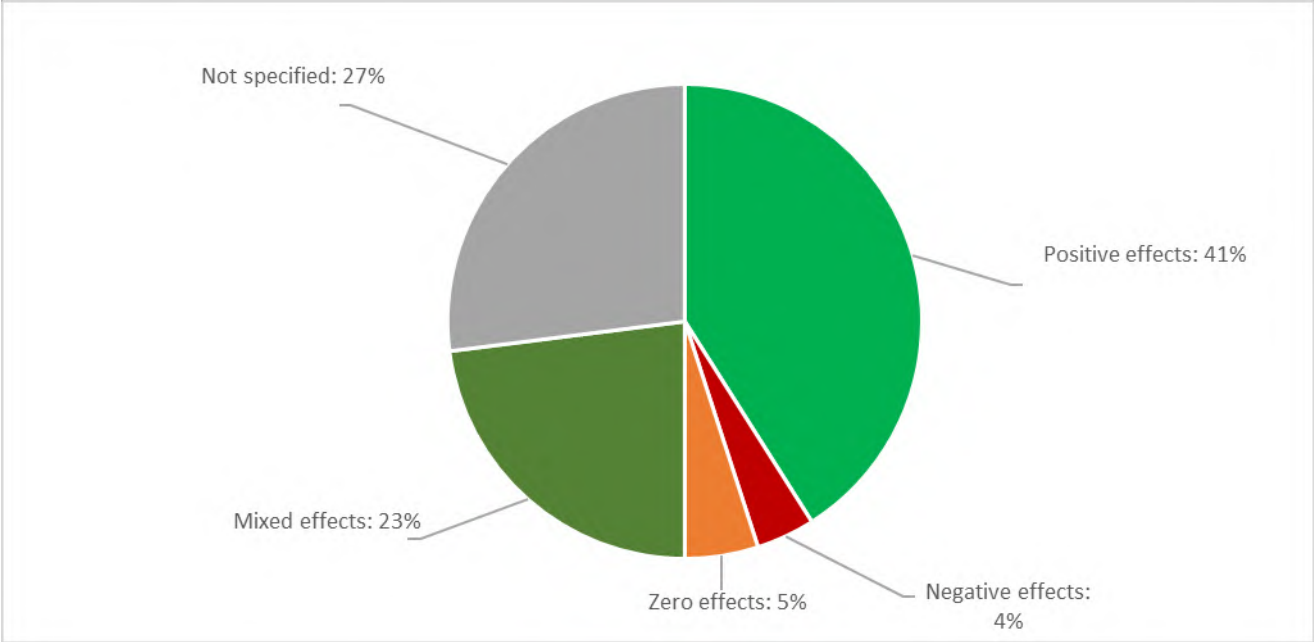


Source: European Evaluation Helpdesk for the CAP (2022).

Member States report that a large share of evaluation findings (41%) show clear positive effects of CAP expenditure, in particular within CAP objective 1 (viable food production) and multiple RDP priorities.

Mixed effects are reported in 23% of the findings, negative in 4%, and zero effects were reported in 5% of cases. The share of findings for which the direction of effects cannot be specified remains high (27%, i.e. the same share as in 2021). In such cases, the link between the policy and the development of impact or result indicators could not be demonstrated or is not applicable (e.g. for findings related to the CAP strategic plan 2023-2027).

Figure 10: Direction of effects of reported evaluation findings (N=397 findings)



Source: European Evaluation Helpdesk for the CAP (2022).

A further breakdown of the subset of reported evaluation findings linked to individual CAP objectives provides the following picture:

CAP Objective 1 - Fostering the competitiveness of agriculture

For this objective, 27 RDPs (11 Member States) reported 75 evaluation findings in 2022, which is nearly three times higher compared to the previous year. **55% of the findings are clearly positive, followed by mixed (12%), unspecified (28%) and negative effects (5%).**

The highest number of positive findings under this objective is related to RDP Priority 2: Farm viability and competitiveness. Member States mention the clear positive net effects of the support given on the competitiveness of farms (e.g. increases in gross value added, farm incomes, level of competitiveness index) compared to the control group of non-supported farms. An increase in the efficiency of production processes and labour productivity has been found as a result of the investments.

For RDP Priority 3: Food chain organisation, animal welfare and risk management, the positive effects were the increased efficiency and profitability of food production (processing) and increased income for producers. The measures carried out under the RDP have clearly improved the participation of producers in the food chain.

CAP Objective 2 - Ensuring the sustainable management of natural resources and climate actions

The environmental CAP objective shows, as in previous years, the highest number of evaluation findings (137) among all CAP objectives, which increased by more than 70% on the previous year. Altogether 42 RDPs (17 Member States) reported findings of which **41% are positive effects, followed by mixed (26%), unspecified (18%), zero effects (11%) and negative effects (4%).**

The highest number of positive effects were reported for RDP Priority 4: Ecosystems related to agriculture and forestry, which has also a high number of mixed effects. Under RDP Priority 4, Member States reported a considerable reduction in soil loss through RDP measures, as well as a substantial increase of soil organic matter. A positive effect on water quality was found in the agricultural areas supported and nitrogen loads and surplus have been significantly reduced since the adoption of RDP interventions.

A high number of positive effects were also reported under RDP Priority 5: Resource efficiency, low-carbon and climate resilient economy. Moderate reductions in nitrate, phosphorus, nitrous oxide and methane were reported under RDP Priority 5.

CAP Objective 3 - Achieving a balanced territorial development

The number of evaluation findings under the third CAP objective has tripled compared to the previous year. 31 RDPs (10 Member States) reported 59 findings in 2022. While the largest number of reported effects are **positive (44%), there are also mixed (20%), unspecified (31%), zero effects (3%) and negative effects (2%).**

Most of the findings relate to CLLD/LEADER/LAGs and less to other Priority 6 topics such as diversification, job creation and ICT in rural areas. Findings in relation to CLLD/LEADER/LAGs often also show mixed or unspecified effects. Evaluation activities by LAGs showed achievements such as helping people enter the labour market, mitigating depopulation, creating jobs, increasing equal opportunities in rural areas, or improving public services for disadvantaged people and those at risk of social exclusion.

Horizontal Priority 1: Fostering knowledge transfer and innovation in agriculture, forestry, and rural areas

Under this priority a small group of 19 RDPs (8 Member States) reported 30 evaluation findings in 2022, which is more than three times higher than in the previous year and overall the biggest increase among all CAP objectives. **37% of the reported findings show positive effects**, which relate in particular to EIP-Agri and innovation support but less to knowledge

transfer. These largely positive results might not be representative of the total number of RDPs due to the still relatively small number of reported findings. **27% of the findings show mixed effects, 3% zero effects and 3% negative effects. 30% of the findings are unspecified.**

The evaluation findings show that RDP support has made it possible to carry out projects that opened up new lines of work between actors in the agri-food value chain, thanks to the combination of cooperation and innovation. Cooperation activities have also made it possible to overcome certain problems in the mechanism of knowledge transfer and the generation of innovation processes within the agri-food value chain. The RDPs helped to establish links between research centres and universities and farmers, food companies and agricultural and livestock associations.

3.1.3 Support to the Member States

In December 2021, the new European Evaluation Helpdesk for the CAP started its support activities, replacing the European Network for Rural Development Evaluation Helpdesk. As part of the EU CAP Network, the Evaluation Helpdesk¹⁵ supports Member States by assisting managing authorities, national CAP networks, paying agencies and evaluators on a range of issues, from conducting *ex ante* and *ex post* evaluations of the CAP strategic plan to assessing specific objectives and types of interventions.

3.2 Evaluation work by the Commission

Since October 2021, the Commission has published the following evaluations or support studies on EAFRD funding:

- On 8 December 2021, the Commission published a **staff working document on evaluation of the information policy of the CAP**¹⁶, which showed that the information actions on the CAP increase understanding of the policy and improve perception among stakeholders and people in the EU, but also acknowledges scope to further improve and adapt them to the new CAP and to the needs of society. The activities were effective (as reflected in Eurobarometer surveys), which indicated that nearly three out of four people in Europe are aware of the CAP and consider that it benefits everyone, not just farmers.
- On 10 December 2021, the Commission published a **staff working document on the impact of the CAP on territorial development of rural areas: socio-economic aspects**¹⁷. It showed that the CAP is effective in improving the viability of farms and keep farms running in rural areas. The uneven distribution of support, however, limits its effectiveness in reducing economic disparities between farmers. CAP support has a significant spill-over effect into the wider rural economy, especially in less developed regions, and generates gross value added and employment in rural areas across the EU and contributes to generational renewal. The document concluded that poverty and land abandonment would be more pronounced in the absence of the CAP; however, administrative burdens limit the efficiency of CAP support in rural areas.
- On 16 December 2021, the Commission published a **report on the implementation of the common monitoring and evaluation framework including an assessment of**

¹⁵ https://eu-cap-network.ec.europa.eu/support/european-evaluation-helpdesk_en

¹⁶ SWD(2021) 980 final, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52021SC0980>

¹⁷ SWD(2021) 384 final, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52021SC0394>

the performance of the CAP in 2014-2020¹⁸. This report shows how the 2014-2020 measures under the CAP provided economic, environmental, social and political added value in the EU. In particular, this has included: (i) supporting a fair standard of living for farmers and addressing needs in rural areas, in particular in remote areas and areas with low population density, thus strengthening regional and social cohesion; (ii) ensuring a stable, safe and healthy food supply; (iii) providing clear food information to consumers in the EU; (iv) strengthening environmental protection and climate action by raising standards and encouraging change. However, the CAP must still do more to support the sustainability of EU agriculture, in line with the European Green Deal and its farm-to-fork strategy.

- On 17 December 2021, the Commission published a **staff working document on the impact of the CAP on biodiversity, soil and water (natural resources)**¹⁹. It concluded that the CAP provides EU added value by setting a higher level of ambition than might be possible under a purely national approach, requiring minimum levels of financial support, and supporting knowledge sharing between Member States. However, the potential of the CAP to address the sustainable management of natural resources was not fully exploited between 2014 and 2020. Member States did not allocate enough funding to the most relevant measures, and/or took a minimalistic approach to cross-compliance and greening conditions. The evaluation reaffirms the relevance of the CAP's objective to address the sustainable management of natural resources and the CAP's potential to fulfil sustainable management objectives by providing extensive protection through cross-compliance, greening obligations and more targeted voluntary commitments under rural development support. The evaluation also concluded that the CAP can prevent land abandonment and slow down specialisation in farming systems, and help maintain diversified land use, including farming and permanent grasslands.
- On 17 March 2022, the Commission published **an evaluation support study on the impact of LEADER on balanced territorial development**²⁰. It concluded that LEADER, by promoting integrated rural CLLD through a bottom-up and multi-sector approach, has demonstrated its relevance, effectiveness and added value for integrated and sustainable rural development at a local level across Europe. Despite its limited resources, LEADER has been able to develop complex and locally tailored solutions to many rural development challenges. However, certain areas for improvement were identified, particularly on knowledge exchange between different levels of the governance and delivery system. The study also recommended that procedures should be simplified, cooperation should be strengthened and new indicators and methods should be developed to better capture LEADER's added value.
- On 5 May 2022, the Commission published a **staff working document on the CAP's impact on knowledge exchange and advisory activities**²¹. The evaluation showed that the CAP was effective in addressing the objective of creating knowledge exchange and innovation, and fostering advisory activities. The CAP also helped to build knowledge, in particular on technology, cross-compliance and environmental sustainability. Advisory services contributed to farmers' lifelong learning, but Member

¹⁸ SWD(2021) 387 final, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52021SC0387>

¹⁹ SWD(2021) 424 final, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52021SC0424>

²⁰ <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/bd6e4f7c-a5a6-11ec-83e1-01aa75ed71a1>

²¹ SWD(2022) 137 final, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52022SC0137>

States' responses to the obligation to set up a farm advisory system (FAS) have varied. The evaluation confirmed that CAP instruments and measures contribute to Member State agricultural knowledge and innovation systems, however the coherence between the EU measures was lacking. Advisory services supported through the FAS and rural development were managed by different authorities with sometimes different jurisdictional powers and objectives. This produced a lack of consistency between the two policy instruments. Although the policy was deemed to have a significant role in helping farmers make the transition to a green and sustainable agricultural sector, the limited uptake was a considerable drawback, since it reached fewer than 10% of farm holdings in the EU.

- On 11 May 2022, the Commission published a **study on CAP measures and instruments promoting animal welfare and a reduction in the use of antimicrobials**²². The study concluded that CAP instruments and measures can contribute to animal welfare and help reduce the use of antimicrobials. As only a few Member States had introduced monitoring systems, which did not collect enough information to determine progress in this area, the study recommended that appropriate indicators should be drawn up.
- On 30 June 2022, the Commission published a **staff working document on the evaluation of the 2007-2013 rural development programmes**²³. Although it was difficult to establish the extent to which positive changes in the various programme areas were due to the measures introduced, the evaluation found that the 2007-2013 RDPs were generally successful in improving the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector (rural development objective 1). Investments aiming to improve productivity, efficiency and sustainability were key. Measures to attract young people to rural areas targeted the maintenance rather than the creation of farming jobs, particularly in marginal areas. On the environment and countryside (objective 2), Member States/regions reported benefits from the rural development policy, suggesting that although natural resources deteriorated over the programming period, the deterioration would have been worse and more land would have been abandoned without the CAP. The programmes improved quality of life in rural areas and encouraged diversification in the rural economy (objective 3) only marginally. On building local capacity for employment and diversification (objective 4), local action groups contributed to the objectives under local development strategies and rural development programmes only to a limited extent. The rural development programmes made a moderate contribution to building local capacities for employment and diversification of the rural economy through LEADER. Overall, the rural development programmes have helped address the needs identified in the programme area to a moderate extent. On the social and economic dimensions, there are considerable differences in the extent to which individual needs were addressed by the RDPs, while in the environmental dimension needs were addressed more homogeneously.

²² <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/1dfbca3d-d0d3-11ec-a95f-01aa75ed71a1>

²³ SWD(2022) 182 final, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52022SC0182>

4 EUROPEAN MARITIME AND FISHERIES FUND (EMFF)

4.1 Evaluations in the Member States

By the end of 2021, EUR 4.9 billion of EMFF funding had been committed to operations in the Member States. This corresponds to 87% of the total EMFF budget of EUR 5.6 billion available under shared management. Expenditures declared by beneficiaries have reached EUR 3.1 billion (55% of total EMFF funding) since the beginning of the programming period.

During this time, a total of 64 evaluation operations were reported²⁴ on the 16 Member State programmes, with EUR 6.5 million committed to support this work. Of this amount, half of the commitments were for Spain (EUR 3.2 million), followed by Sweden (EUR 0.8 million) and Italy (EUR 0.7 million). Spain, Sweden and Czechia reported the highest number of evaluations. The Commission provides practical support to managing authorities to boost Member States' capacity to evaluate the EMFF and to enrich the scope and quality of the evaluations conducted.

The information used for EMFF evaluations comes from the annual implementation reports (AIR). However, the information presented in the AIRs varies significantly between Member States in terms of the level of detail provided and this is likely correlated to the scope and depth of the evaluation process itself. Several Member States have rather small EMFF budgets, which is a factor in limiting the scope of the evaluations.

The type of evaluation varies considerably between the Member States. Process evaluations are the most frequently mentioned type of evaluation. Effectiveness and impact evaluations cover a wide range of issues, and address effectiveness and efficiency at the operational programme level and the level of the partnership agreement and at the levels of EU priorities, specific objectives and measures (for example, CLLD and permanent cessation) or strategies (for example, the aquaculture strategy). Several impact evaluations were also carried out, for example, impact assessment at the level of EU priorities and assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the fisheries sector.

Recommendations included in the evaluations also cover a wide range of issues and some recommendations were mentioned by multiple Member States. One such recommendation is that amendments to the national operational programmes and the reallocation of financial resources are crucial to the implementation of the EMFF. This is particularly important since EMFF expenditures are eligible only for two more years (until 2023).

Several Member States also recommended to further reduce administrative burdens and take action to increase the administrative capacity of managing authorities.

Recommendations to specific countries included suggestions to: (i) improve the efficiency of communication and publicity measures; (ii) increase knowledge dissemination; (iii) consider cross-cutting issues (e.g. reduce environmental impact, use of environmental indicators); (iv) encourage the creation of producer organisations; (v) consider subsidising the collection of marine litter; (vi) provide additional education to fisheries local action groups (FLAGs) on strategic planning, networking and creating partnerships, and on preparing and implementing projects, on broader topics related to blue growth; (vii) include principles to be generally applied in procurement procedures (e.g. green public procurement); (viii) outsource the evaluation of project proposals to speed up the selection process.

²⁴ Member States report in line with Article 97(1)(a) of Regulation (EU) No 508/2014.

Several evaluations provided recommendations on preparations for the 2021-2027 period. These included suggestions to: (i) use simplified cost options; (ii) simplify administrative procedures to ensure the timely and optimal implementation of CLLD measures and to strengthen national FLAGs networks; (iii) streamline the number of interventions in the interests of efficiency and clarity; (iv) ensure clear targeting to areas of need, minimising any potential for overlap; (v) improve the efficiency of programme management as regards the IT system and process more grants online. Some Member States also carried out strategic environmental impact assessments for 2021-2027 programmes under the scope of evaluations.

Overall, EMFF evaluations helped Member States to assess funding needs and facilitated preparations for the 2021-2027 period. The evaluations established the feasibility of the draft programme; the appropriateness of the intended goals, priorities and measures in the context of the sector's needs; and the appropriateness of the financial allocations.

The list of specific evaluations includes the following:

- An evaluation of support payments for organic aquaculture for the promotion of environmental services in aquaculture and the development of organic aquaculture;
- An assessment of mechanisms to improve the development and use of innovation in fisheries;
- Methodological issues in evaluation and data collection;
- Climate adaptation in EU programmes 2014-2020;
- A model for the evaluation of LEADER;
- Local indicators in locally led development;
- LEADER or not – that is the question;
- Selection criteria in locally led development;
- An evaluation of the environmental benefits delivered through the EMFF;
- The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the fisheries sector.

Detailed information summarising the evaluations of each Member State, based on information provided in AIRs, is available in Section 7 of the EMFF implementation report for 2019, published in December 2020²⁵ and the EMFF implementation report for 2020, published in September 2021²⁶.

4.2 Evaluation work by the Commission

The *ex post* evaluation of the EMFF (under Article 117 of the EMFF Regulation and in accordance with Article 57 of the CPR 2014-2020) has to be carried out by the end of 2024. External contractors will analyse all available data at EU level. They will also contact managing authorities through surveys, questionnaires and interviews, to deliver a detailed evaluation report assessing the contribution and achievements of the EMFF.

A synthesis report outlining the main conclusions of the *ex post* evaluation will be prepared by the end of 2025.

²⁵ <https://ec.europa.eu/oceans-and-fisheries/document/download/11811d61-8ebf-4fc5-bbbc-4842d64d208b>

²⁶ <https://ec.europa.eu/oceans-and-fisheries/document/download/68276db8-058c-4766-8368-34681e09993b>

5 FINAL REMARKS

Evaluation is a fundamental part of the policy cycle, as it produces evidence that can be used to **ensure a result-oriented policy** that is able to learn from past experience and adapt to new challenges. This is particularly true of cohesion policy, which combines its main long-term objective of reducing territorial disparities between regions in the EU with the need to respond to multiple emerging crises with a high degree of flexibility.

The evaluation effort of the Member States fits into framework. In 2021 this effort has continued with increasing resources dedicated to assessing the impact of actions supported by ESI Funds, and with a lower intensity on evaluations focused on the implementation of the funds. This confirms once again the **commitment of the Member States** to go beyond compliance with regulatory requirements and to invest valuable resources in evaluation as a tool that promotes accountability, transparency and better policies by learning from experience. The need to carry out evaluations while further readapting operational programmes after the pandemic and the allocation of REACT-EU resources, in parallel to the negotiation of the 2021-2027 programmes, makes their effort even more remarkable.

Evidence that emerges from evaluations carried out in the Member States typically refers to the specific local context of the supported actions. While the findings cannot be generalised as such, they provide the **valuable insight necessary to make adjustments to actions and projects**, which is needed in the final part of the 2014-2020 programming period and, even more importantly, to design the new actions in the 2021-2027 programmes. In addition, as a result of the increasing number of evaluations, some **common findings are starting to emerge**. They will also feed into the *ex post* evaluation of the Commission, whose work has already started and will produce several outputs, before its final completion with the synthesis report due in 2025.

In order to help Member States cope with new challenges and emergencies that have arisen since 2020 with the COVID-19 pandemic, cohesion policy has been promptly adapted with targeted regulatory amendments and strengthened with new financial resources. **A few evaluations have already addressed the COVID-19 pandemic** and how it has affected some sectors or forced changes to some of the actions previously planned in the programmes. The number of these evaluations is still very small but is expected to grow in the coming months and years.

Evaluations will not only analyse the effects of CRII/CRII+ and REACT-EU, but will also focus on the additional support offered by cohesion policy via CARE and the flexible assistance to territories (FAST-CARE) in the context of the Ukrainian refugee crisis. Evaluations will also consider the REPowerEU objectives in the context of the energy crisis, including the latest proposal of exceptional measures to address the energy price increases.

The Commission reaffirms its **commitment to collaborate with the Member States** and to help produce quality evaluations, by offering dedicated methodological support services and discussion fora on evaluation topics. In parallel, the Commission will continue to promote the importance of evaluation as an **essential tool for policymakers** to learn from past experience and to make the best decisions based on robust evidence, and to address the challenges of our fast-changing world.