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**COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT**

**EVALUATION**

**Ex Post Evaluation of the 2014-2020 European Social Fund (ESF) and Youth  
Employment Initiative (YEI)**

{SWD(2026) 61 final}

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## Glossary

<i>Term or acronym</i>	<i>Meaning or definition</i>
AIR	Annual Implementation Report
AMIF	Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund
AROPE	At-risk of poverty or social exclusion
CARE	Cohesion's Action for Refugees in Europe
CBA	Cost-Benefit Analysis
CF	Cohesion Fund
CIE	Counterfactual Impact Evaluation
CLLD	Community-Led Local Development
CPR	Common Provisions Regulation
CRII/CRII+	Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative/ Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative Plus
CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
CSRs	Country specific recommendations
DG EMPL	Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion
EAFRD	European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development
EaSI	Employment and Social Innovation
ESI	European Structural and Investment
EESC	European Economic & Social Committee
EGF	European Globalisation Adjustment Fund
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
EMFF	European Maritime and Fisheries Fund
EPSR	European Pillar of Social Rights
ESIF	European Structural and Investment Funds
ESF	European Social Fund
ESF+	European Social Fund Plus
ESL	Early school leaving

ET 2020	Strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training 2020
EU	European Union
EUR	Euros
EURES	EUROpean Employment Services
FEAD	Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ILs	Intervention Logics
IP	Investment Priority
JRC	Joint Research Centre
JTF	Just Transition Fund
MA	Managing Authority
MS	Member State
NEET	Not in Education, Employment and Training
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NUTS	Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics
OP	Operational Programme
PA	Partnership Agreement
PES	Public Employment Service
REACT-EU	Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe
RRF	Recovery and Resilience Facility
SCOs	Simplified Cost Options
SFC	System for Fund Management in the European Union
SILC	Statistics on income and living conditions
SURE	Support to mitigate Unemployment Risk in an Emergency
SWD	Staff Working Document
TA	Technical Assistance
TO	Thematic Objective

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UK

United Kingdom

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YEI

Youth Employment Initiative

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE EVALUATION

The European Social Fund (ESF) is the main funding instrument through which the European Union translates its labour market, education, and social inclusion policies into actions. The 2014-2020 ESF programme had the objective of promoting employment, helping people to access better and fairer job opportunities, supporting upskilling and reskilling, fostering social inclusion, and reinforcing the institutional capacities of public administrations, public services and stakeholders. Following Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union<sup>1</sup> (TFEU), the ESF contributes to the economic, social, and territorial cohesion of the European Union (EU).

During 2014-2020, the ESF responded to four out of the eleven Thematic Objectives (TO) that were identified across the European Structural and Investment (ESI) Funds: TO 8 which aimed at promoting sustainable and quality employment and supporting labour mobility; TO 9, promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination; TO 10, investing in education and training for skills and lifelong learning; and TO 11, enhancing the capability of public authorities and efficient public administration. Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe (REACT-EU<sup>2</sup>) was established as a new thematic objective (TO13). At the same time, the ESF's support for these TO's was guided by specific Investment Priorities (IPs), which outlined the key areas for investments. Additionally, the ESF supported the implementation of the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI)<sup>3</sup> through IP 8.ii, targeting regions in which youth unemployment was over 25%.

The purpose of this evaluation is to assess the achievements of European Social Fund and Youth Employment Initiative during the programming period 2014-2020. It also provides lessons learned, which can be relevant for the implementation of the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and contribute to the design of future policies and programmes beyond 2027.

This staff working document (SWD) presents the main findings of the evaluation in accordance with Article 57 of the Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013<sup>4</sup>. It complies with the provisions of the European Commission's Better Regulation Guidelines<sup>5</sup>, which envisage the assessment of five

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<sup>1</sup> Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:12016ME/TXT>

<sup>2</sup> Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe (REACT-EU) was a crisis response programme launched in December 2020, see more information in footnote 13.

<sup>3</sup> The Youth Employment Initiative was launched by the European Union in 2013 as part of broader efforts to combat youth unemployment across member states. It specifically targeted regions with youth unemployment rates above 25%, aiming to address the challenges faced by young people, particularly those who are not in employment, education, or training (NEETs). The YEI complemented the ESF activities by providing additional funding to support these regions. This funding was used for a variety of interventions, including apprenticeships, traineeships, job placements, and continued education and training opportunities.

<sup>4</sup> During the 2014-2020 period, the ESF was governed by the European Parliament and Council Regulation 1303/2013 (Common Provisions Regulation (CPR hereafter)) and by the Regulation 1304/2013 on the European Social Fund (ESF). Additional information on legal requirements available in Annex V.

<sup>5</sup> Better Regulation Guidelines; [https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/law-making-process/planning-and-proposing-law/better-regulation-why-and-how/better-regulation-guidelines-and-toolbox/better-regulation-toolbox-0\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/law-making-process/planning-and-proposing-law/better-regulation-why-and-how/better-regulation-guidelines-and-toolbox/better-regulation-toolbox-0_en)

evaluation criteria: (i) to which extent the objectives have been achieved — i.e. effectiveness; (ii) whether operations were cost-effective — i.e. efficiency; (iii) to what extent were the objectives and operations funded relevant to the needs of target groups — i.e. relevance; (iv) whether the EU support was internally coherent, as well as coherent with other EU funds and policies — i.e. coherence; and (v) whether it has produced results beyond what would have been achieved by Member States acting alone — i.e. EU added value. All these criteria are assessed in depth through specific evaluation questions<sup>6</sup>. The evaluation also analyses sustainability, visibility and simplification<sup>7</sup> assessing the fund’s performance in relation to the objectives set out in the ESF Regulation<sup>8</sup>.

This evaluation covers the implementation years 2014 to 2022. It considers the European Union 27 Member States as well as the United Kingdom (UK). It covers all ESF TOs and ESF IPs, including YEI, the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative<sup>9</sup> and Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative Plus<sup>10</sup> (CRII/CRII+), Cohesion’s Action for Refugees in Europe (CARE<sup>11</sup>) and REACT-EU<sup>12</sup> support<sup>13</sup>.

The findings and lessons learned are mainly based on the supporting study “*Study supporting the ex-post evaluation of the 2014-2020 European Social Fund and Youth Employment Initiative*” (hereafter also called the “supporting study” or the “study”) that was commissioned to an external contractor<sup>14</sup>, which triangulates a broad range of sources of evidence. Furthermore, important conclusions on the impact of the ESF and YEI were drawn from the Meta-analysis of the European Social Fund counterfactual impact evaluations performed by the

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<sup>6</sup> See Annex II.C for a detailed presentation of the evaluation questions followed.

<sup>7</sup> Visibility is analysed in section 4.3 as a separate sub-section. The analysis of sustainability is part of the effectiveness criterion and simplification as part of the efficiency criterion.

<sup>8</sup> Regulation (EU) No 1304/2013

<sup>9</sup> CRII-Regulation (EU) 2020/460 - <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2020/460/oj>

<sup>10</sup> CRII+ Regulation (EU) 2020/558 - <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32020R0558>

<sup>11</sup> CARE- Regulation (EU) 2022/562 - [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.L\\_.2022.109.01.0001.01.ENG](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.L_.2022.109.01.0001.01.ENG). The Council adopted the Cohesion's Action for Refugees in Europe (CARE) in April 2022, amending funding frameworks to address both the pandemic's impact as well as refugee inflows, providing flexibility for resource transfers between programmes financed by the ESF and ERDF

<sup>12</sup> REACT-EU-Regulation (EU) 2021/177 - <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32021R0177>. Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the evaluation of REACT-EU. Published 10 October 2025. Available at: [COM\\_2025\\_634\\_F1\\_REPORT\\_FROM\\_COMMISSION\\_EN\\_V4\\_P1\\_4084848.pdf](COM_2025_634_F1_REPORT_FROM_COMMISSION_EN_V4_P1_4084848.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative/ Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative Plus (CRII/CRII+), Cohesion’s Action for Refugees in Europe (CARE) and Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe (REACT EU) were crisis response programmes. CRII/CRII+ was launched in March and April 2020 to address the COVID-19 pandemic, it was later supplemented by REACT EU, launched in December 2020 intended to support longer term recovery and in later allocations was intended to support other crises. CARE, launched in April 2022, supported Member States and regions in providing emergency assistance to displaced persons fleeing from Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine.

<sup>14</sup> Available at: <Study supporting the ex-post evaluation of the 2014-2020 European social fund and youth employment initiative - Publications Office of the EU> and <Annexes>. Carried out by Ecorys Europe, Ismeri Europa, 3s Unternehmensberatung GmbH, and Wmp consult, coordinated by the Commission’s Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, with the support of an Inter Services Steering Group (ISSG) c.f. Annex I.

Joint Research Centre (JRC) of the European Commission<sup>15</sup>, as well as the working paper “*The ex-post macroeconomic evaluation of the 2014-2020 European Social Fund, Youth Employment Initiative and REACT-EU labour market interventions*”<sup>16</sup> issued by the JRC (hereafter also called ‘JRC’s working paper’ or ‘JRC’s report’). The latter provides a quantitative analysis of macroeconomic impacts of the ESF, the YEI and the labour market interventions of the REACT-EU programme, using the spatial dynamic general equilibrium model RHOMOLO to analyse how GDP, employment, wages and various measures of inequality respond to ESF investment.

## 1.2. EVALUATION METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

This evaluation uses as reference the Intervention Logics (ILs) of ESF and YEI as a whole, and those specific to each of the TOs (See Annex II.B). The ILs present the theory of change and guide the causal pathways between the programme’s rationale, objectives, inputs, measures taken, output, results and impacts of the funds. They are combined with the evaluation framework (See Annex II.C), which addresses the research questions set out for each evaluation criterion described in Section 1.1. It presents the judgement criteria, indicators and sources that were used and provides the elements of the methodology which were used to collect the required evidence. The monitoring system established for ESF encompasses key components of the Intervention Logics, and its effectiveness is evaluated in the report. The range of qualitative and quantitative evidence gathered was assessed and triangulated to evaluate how the process and outcome causal chains depicted in the intervention logics were supported.

The evidence and methodology used are designed to evaluate these cause-and-effect relationships. The range of evidence included 27 in-depth case studies<sup>17</sup>, which included 380 interviews with country level representatives involved in the implementation and monitoring of the funds; 28 individual country factsheets<sup>18</sup>; 150 interviews conducted with EU and national stakeholders<sup>19</sup> between February and June 2023; a survey to Managing Authorities conducted between March and June 2023<sup>20</sup>; a public consultation<sup>21</sup> published on Europa “Have your say” website, open for 12 weeks from 16 October 2023 to 23 January 2024; desk research to collect and analyse Operational Programmes (OPs) evaluations; monitoring data from the System for Fund Management in the EU (SFC) 2014; Annual Implementation Reports; a literature review; an assessment of the socio-economic context based on the evolution of relevant socioeconomic indicators during the evaluation period; JRC’s macro-economic analysis using the RHOMOLO

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<sup>15</sup> Haepf, T. and Serrano Alarcon, M., Meta-analysis of the European Social Fund counterfactual impact evaluations: Brief update with alternative measures, European Commission, Ispra, 2024, JRC137571, Available at: <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC137571>

<sup>16</sup> Casas, Pablo and Christou, Tryfonas and García Rodríguez, Abián and Lazarou, Nicholas Joseph and Salotti, Simone (2025): *The ex-post macroeconomic evaluation of the 2014-2020 European Social Fund, Youth Employment Initiative and REACT-EU labour market interventions*. Link to the publication: <https://mpr.ub.uni-muenchen.de/123410/>

<sup>17</sup> See Supporting study [Annexes](#). All case studies are available to download from: <https://url.de.m.mimecastprotect.com/s/qy8iCvQn4XFE2jAqHQfZsQRm4E?domain=webgate.ec.europa.eu>

<sup>18</sup> See Supporting study [Annexes](#). All country factsheets are available to download from: <https://url.de.m.mimecastprotect.com/s/tNu3Cw0o4YFvAzykHqhOsJUJm?domain=webgate.ec.europa.eu>

<sup>19</sup> See Annex IV summarising stakeholders’ consultations

<sup>20</sup> 114 responses received achieving a 61% response rate, covering all EU27 Member States and the UK

<sup>21</sup> 704 respondents took part in the public consultation

model<sup>22</sup>; JRC's meta-analysis<sup>23</sup> of ESF counterfactual impact evaluations; as well as a cost-benefit analysis<sup>24</sup>. Finally, 6 focus groups<sup>25</sup> with key stakeholders took place on between 4 June 2024 and 13 June 2024 to discuss preliminary evaluation findings and lessons learned. Further information on the methodology followed by the contractor of the study and the JRC support is provided in the Annex II.

The evaluation research was subject to several limitations, associated with the availability of data, the differences in cut-off dates used, the data quality, representativeness in the consultations, or limited evidence on more recent programmes. To start with, socio-economic indicators were not always available or up to date. Additionally, incomplete information or inconsistencies in the ESF monitoring data submission in SFC2014<sup>26</sup> hindered the analysis to some extent. Due to missing data when producing the supporting study, several cut-off dates were agreed to perform the analysis<sup>27</sup>. Another difficulty present in the analysis of monitoring data was the lack of clear linkages in the reporting between output and results indicators and financial indicators in the monitoring system. This made the identification of linkages between the measures and the intended target groups difficult and rendered the identification of how much the achievement of a specific output or result cost difficult. Furthermore, the limited evidence on recently introduced programmes such as CARE or REACT-EU at the moment of writing the report hindered detailed information on their impact in this evaluation. Lastly, overrepresentation of certain stakeholders in the public consultation (e.g. 47% of the total responses coming from Public Authorities, 43% of the total responses coming from Poland) and unavailability of some participants in the targeted consultations affected the interpretation of results.

The table below presents an overview of the main limitations of the methodology and how the limitations were considered during the supporting study's design and implementation, with measures introduced accordingly.

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<sup>22</sup> Casas, Pablo and Christou, Tryfonas and García Rodríguez, Abián and Lazarou, Nicholas Joseph and Salotti, Simone (2025): *The ex-post macroeconomic evaluation of the 2014-2020 European Social Fund, Youth Employment Initiative and REACT-EU labour market interventions*. Link to the publication: <https://mpr.ub.uni-muenchen.de/123410/>

<sup>23</sup> Haepf, T. and Serrano Alarcon, M., Meta-analysis of the European Social Fund counterfactual impact evaluations: Brief update with alternative measures, European Commission, Ipsra, 2024, JRC137571, Available at: <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC137571>

<sup>24</sup> See Annex III

<sup>25</sup> Conducted in June 2024 with a total of 62 attendants.

<sup>26</sup> System for Fund Management in the European Union (SFC2014)

<sup>27</sup> Notably, some submissions by Member States were incomplete or inconsistent, failing to adhere to established naming or classification rules. To address these issues, specific datasets and cutoff dates were agreed upon with the contractor of the supporting study. In September 2023, an extraction of financial and monitoring data from SFC2014, reflecting the status as of the end of 2022, was provided. This extraction served as the definitive data collection threshold for the study. However, the data from France's national employment OP, unavailable in the extract of September 2023 was incorporated into the final dataset in November 2024. Subsequent data cleaning included translating indicators and priority axes from native languages, reformatting numbers for large data operability, reclassifying indicators to resolve code ambiguities, and updating NUTS2 region classifications to 2021 standards. These measures ensure data accuracy and consistency, facilitating reliable analysis of ESF financial allocations, programme progress, and participant outcomes.

**Table 1: Summary of study limitations and mitigating measures in place**

Limitations	How it has been addressed
<b>Socio-economic indicators from official statistics</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• UK data was unavailable from 2019 onwards, thus socio-economic analysis for the UK was limited to data up until 2019.</li> <li>• Some time series data have not been updated or do not cover the entire evaluation period (for instance poverty and statistics on income and living conditions (SILC) are not articulated by region before 2020).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alternatives were sought for missing socio-economic indicators. If an indicator was not available for the year of interest, the latest available data was used and divergences were noted.</li> </ul>
<b>Monitoring data and targets</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For the sake of evaluation, the expenditure data is only available up to 2022, because data on the subsequent years will only be released in 2026.</li> <li>• ESF monitoring data in SFC2014 is largely complete but presents some inconsistencies and errors.</li> <li>• Targets for the programme indicators are affected by several limitations: their coverage is not uniform, there is no available information about how they were defined, some changed during the period, their achievement highlights a high variability which reflects definition issues in addition to performance issues.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Specific datasets and cutoff dates were used.</li> <li>• Data cleaning measures, including translating indicators, reformatting data, and updating classifications, were applied to ensure data accuracy and consistency.</li> </ul>
<b>Mapping of ESF-related investment priorities, target populations and types of operations</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The limited information included in the national lists of operations hampered a detailed categorisation of the interventions.</li> <li>• REACT-EU operations were characterised by incomplete updates (both Kohesio and National Lists) and missing mandatory information on TOs.</li> <li>• The identification of the CARE operations was constrained as not all OPs with a specific CARE axis allocated resources to projects by the end of 2022, making the analysis potentially incomplete.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Secondary desk research, such as thematic reports, EU-level sources, and national evaluations, was used to fill information gaps.</li> <li>• National evaluations were referenced where available to support the analysis.</li> </ul>
<b>Public Consultation</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A high number of responses came from Poland (43%; n=305), which can introduce biases in the interpretation of results.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Triangulation of data was undertaken, and appropriate clarifications were added when interpreting and reporting on the results of the Public Consultation.</li> </ul>
<b>Case Studies</b>	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Case study reports were produced before the datasets were fully finalised, especially regarding longer-term result indicators, affecting the completeness of the monitoring data included in some reports.</li> <li>• Due to the diversity of programme-specific indicators across MSs, programmes, and IPs, it was not feasible to analyse them.</li> <li>• REACT-EU and CARE case studies: limited availability of desk study materials and sparse/absent evaluations due to the short and late-introduced projects within the ESF period, complicating access to official sources for most selected MSs; thus, the assessment heavily relies on interviews, with only few projects evaluated to date.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When selected interviewees were unavailable, secondary desk research was conducted to supplement missing data.</li> <li>• National evaluations, thematic reports, and other secondary sources were used to address gaps in the data.</li> </ul>
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#### Analysing in-depth the ESF impact evaluations

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Findings on the sustainability, visibility, and communications criteria are limited in national evaluations.</li> <li>• Some MSs (IT, PL, DE) are more represented than others due to a higher number of reliable evaluations.</li> <li>• TO 11 is not considered in the analysis as few evaluations addressed this thematic objective.</li> <li>• Findings of the <i>Meta-analysis of the ESF counterfactual impact evaluations</i> were generally based on interventions implemented before 2020 and rarely included interventions implemented during or after the COVID-19. Findings did not include TO 9 and TO 10, because no, or too few, counterfactual evaluations were carried out in these thematic objectives.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The meta-analysis of impact evaluations was complemented with findings from interviews and other qualitative data where counterfactual data was unavailable.</li> <li>• TO 11 was excluded from the scope due to lack of available evaluations.</li> </ul>
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Source: Supporting study

## 2. WHAT WAS THE EXPECTED OUTCOME OF THE INTERVENTION

### 2.1. DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVENTION AND ITS OBJECTIVES

The European Social Fund is a key instrument of the European Union, rooted in Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, which underpins the EU's commitment to economic, social, and territorial cohesion. As a fundamental component of the EU's cohesion policy, the ESF operated through a shared management system, where the European Commission and member states collaborated to design and implement national and regional programmes. This collaborative approach allowed for tailored responses to the unique socio-economic challenges faced by different regions, leveraging the ESF's resources to promote employment, enhance education, training and skills development, and foster social inclusion across Member States.

Within the framework of Cohesion policy and the Europe 2020 strategy, the ESF's primary role was focused on addressing key challenges related to employment, social inclusion, and education, focusing on four Thematic Objectives (TO 8, TO 9, TO 10, TO 11)<sup>28</sup>. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, TO 13 was introduced with the financing of REACT-EU to address crisis response and recovery. It provided additional resources to the ESF and the European Regional

<sup>28</sup> For further explanation on each TO as well as a separate description for the YEI, see Annex II.B

Development Fund (ERDF) to support employment, social inclusion, healthcare, and the transition to a green and digital economy<sup>29</sup>.

The CPR and the ESF Regulation introduced several mechanisms to enhance the effectiveness and impact of the ESF. These included: (i) a minimum share of cohesion policy funding allocated to the ESF (as required in Art 92 of the CPR); (ii) thematic concentration of the Operational Programmes, by which all of them needed to comply with the requirement of focusing a minimum share of ESF allocation to the five largest IPs, which are those that bring the greatest added value to the Europe 2020 strategy (60% for OPs in less developed regions, 70% for transition regions, and 80% for more developed regions) (Art 4 of the CPR); and (iii) an allocation of 20% of the total ESF resources to social inclusion (TO 9).

### ***The overall Intervention Logic of the ESF and YEI***

The ESF and YEI invested in human capital with a view to achieving the employment and social policy goals supported by Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union and explained under Section 1.1. The Intervention Logic represents the underlying framework that guides the implementation of the European Social Fund and the Youth Employment Initiative during the 2014-2020 programming period. It outlines the causal relationships between the investments made, the activities implemented, and the expected outcomes and impacts of the programmes. In essence, the intervention logic explains how the ESF and YEI interventions are designed to address specific social and economic challenges, and how they are expected to contribute to the achievement of the programmes' overall objectives. By mapping out the sequence of events, from the initial needs assessment to the ultimate objectives, the intervention logic provides a clear and coherent narrative of the programmes' theory of change, allowing stakeholders to understand the rationale behind the investments and the expected results. This section presents the Intervention Logic of the ESF and YEI, highlighting the key components, inputs, and expected outcomes of the programmes, and providing a foundation for understanding the results and impacts presented in the subsequent sections of this report.

The 2014-2022 implementation period was characterised by evolving needs and the emergence of new crisis. Overall, the EU has faced a persisting need to address youth unemployment<sup>30</sup>, as well as different needs that appeared and evolved during the programming period. The implementation period was characterised, at the beginning, by the enduring effects of the financial crisis of 2008-2012, which then slowly faded away, and in the last years, by the emergence of new crises. The COVID-19 pandemic severely affected the EU economy in 2020, straining public health and social protection systems, and the Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has further exacerbated the challenges facing the UE, prompting the need for adaptability of the fund<sup>31</sup>. Furthermore, the labour market faced increasing skills mismatches over time, hindering the adaptation of the workforce to the demands of a rapidly evolving economy and limiting the potential of businesses, notably small and medium enterprises, to create jobs and drive economic growth. These interconnected challenges underscored the need

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<sup>29</sup>REACT-EU Regulation, (EU) No 2020/2221 (Available at : <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32020R2221>)

<sup>30</sup> To provide support focusing on the integration of young people in the labour market, YEI was implemented into ESF. Action under the IP 8.ii (See Article 3(1)(a)(ii) of the ESF Regulation).

<sup>31</sup> See Section 3.1 for an understanding on the economic and social evolution.

for targeted interventions that could address the complex and multifaceted nature of unemployment, skills, education and social exclusion.

In view of these described needs, Article 2 of the ESF Regulation defined that the ESF aims, among others, to promote high levels of employment and job quality, improve access to the labour market, support workers' adaptation to change, encourage a high level of education and training for all, support the transition from education to employment for young people, combat poverty, enhance social inclusion, and promote gender equality, non-discrimination and equal opportunities. The ESF also aimed to support Member States in pursuing the priorities and headline targets of the Europe 2020 Strategy taking into account the country-specific recommendations (CSRs) issued in the context of the European Semester. In addition, the YEI's main objective was to support the fight against youth unemployment in the worst-affected EU regions. It targeted all people aged 15 to 24 and paid a particular attention to young people neither in employment, nor in education or training (NEETs). The initiative is closely linked to the Council recommendation establishing a Youth Guarantee, which was formally adopted by the Council of the European Union in April 2013. The Youth Guarantee aims to ensure that every young person under 25 receives a good quality offer of employment, continued education, an apprenticeship, or a traineeship within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education, thus reinforcing the efforts of the YEI by providing a strategic framework for Member States to enhance youth employment and training opportunities. In order to contribute to the general objectives, specific objectives of ESF during the programming period 2014-2020 were defined under the thematic objectives set out in points (8), (9), (10) and (11) of the first paragraph of Article 9 of the CPR, as well as specified in the points (a), (b), (c) and (d) of Article 3 of the ESF Regulation. Namely, the ESF aimed at: promoting sustainable and quality employment and supporting labour mobility (TO 8); promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination (TO 9); investing in education, training and vocational training for skills and life-long learning (TO 10); enhancing institutional capacity of public authorities and stakeholders and efficient public administration (TO 11); and supporting and protecting employment, reinforcing healthcare systems as a response to COVID-19 (TO 13). Through the CARE initiative, the ESF also aimed at addressing the crisis of refugees following Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Further provisions are laid out in Articles 6-10 of the ESF Regulation relating to the horizontal principles, social innovation and transnational cooperation.

In addition, ESF operational objectives emerge from the specific objectives. They are defined as the investment priorities defined in Article 3 of the ESF Regulation. Among others<sup>32</sup>, ESF aims to support the access to employment for job-seekers and inactive people; sustain the integration of young people in the labour market; achieving equality between men and women in all areas, contribute to active inclusion; enhancing access to affordable, sustainable and high-quality services; promoting social entrepreneurship; reducing and preventing early school-leaving; improving the quality and access to tertiary and equivalent education; enhance equal access to lifelong learning for all age groups; promote capacity building for stakeholders.

The implementation of the ESF and YEI programmes during the 2014-2020 programming period relied on a range of resources and investments, which are referred to as 'inputs' in the

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<sup>32</sup> For a detailed list on the investment priorities under each Thematic Objective, see Annex II.B and Figure 1: Intervention Logic of the ESF (including REACT-EU and excluding YEI)

intervention logic. These inputs represent the financial, human, and material resources that were mobilized to support the implementation of the programmes, including the allocation of EU and national funding, the engagement of stakeholders and partners, and the deployment of institutional and administrative capacities. Together with the national contributions, the total ESF and YEI 2014-2020 budget was EUR 150.9 billion (current prices), which included the allocation to ESF of EUR 120.3 billion, EUR 20.1 billion by REACT-EU, as well as slightly over EUR 10.4 billion that was reserved for implementation of the YEI. The EU contribution of this budget was EUR 113.4 billion, consisting of the original ESF allocation (EUR 84.5 billion), the allocations to ESF from REACT-EU (EUR 19.9 billion) and a share (EUR 8.9 billion) that was allocated to YEI funding. This amounts to an average co-financing rate of 75%, meaning that 75% of the total budget was financed by the EU, and 25% by national contributions. In percentage terms, the funding was distributed as follows across various initiatives: 80% of the total EU and national contribution was allocated to the ESF (of which 49.5% was dedicated to less developed regions, 13.6% to transition regions, and 36.9% to more developed regions), 7% to the YEI, and 13% to REACT-EU. Allocations per Thematic Objective are available in the Annex II.B and section 3.2.

The inputs are intended to support activities that contribute to achieving the objectives. In the context of the ESF and YEI, these activities are delivered through Operational Programmes (OPs), which are the operational plans signed in partnership with national and regional authorities in Member States (MS) outlining particular areas where the fund is to be invested. During the 2014-2022 evaluation period, the ESF was implemented in 27 Member States and the United Kingdom through an overall number of 188 OPs, including mono and multi-fund programmes. Three of these OPs (in Greece, Spain and France) were fully dedicated to Technical Assistance (TA)<sup>33</sup>. The activities implemented through these OPs are diverse, including support to human capital and skills, matching labour market demand and supply, and self-empowerment and social inclusion measures. The YEI was implemented in 19 Member States and the United Kingdom with 34 Operational Programmes supported.

Each step of the intervention logic corresponds to specific parts of the monitoring framework of ESF. Under shared management, the investments are monitored by financial indicators broken down by thematic policy fields (the thematic objectives). The policies' outreach is depicted by (common and programme specific) output indicators. Result indicators describe the change in the participant's situation.

The activities implemented through the OPs are designed to produce direct and tangible outputs. Outputs represent the immediate products or deliverables of the activities. They are the direct consequence of the activities and are expected to contribute to the achievement of the operational objectives of the intervention logic. These outputs were recorded through common output indicators, which provided a standardised way of measuring the results of the funds. The outputs achieved through the ESF and YEI included, for example, the number of participations in training and employment programmes, broken down by categories such as employment status, age, educational attainment, and disadvantaged groups<sup>34</sup>. In terms of entities, outputs cover the number of projects implemented by social partners or NGOs, number of projects dedicated to sustainable participation and progress of women in employment, projects targeting public administration or public services and supported SMEs. By tracking these outputs, it was

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<sup>33</sup> Other countries also have TA, but not in the form of a dedicated OP, but rather as part of other OPs.

<sup>34</sup> ESF Regulation Annex I specifies the list of common ESF and YEI output indicators

possible to assess the immediate impact of the activities and identify areas where the intervention was having a direct and tangible effect.

By the end of 2022 a total of 64.6 million participations<sup>35</sup> were recorded across ESF and YEI interventions, including REACT-EU operations. Moreover, the ESF has supported over 2 million small and medium-sized enterprises from 2014 to 2022. More details on the outputs achieved are reported in Sections 3.2 and 4.1.

The outputs achieved through the ESF and YEI interventions were expected to lead to a set of intended results, addressing the general and specific objectives of the programmes. These results represent the changes or effects that occur as a consequence of the outputs, and are a key component of the intervention logic (i.e. among others, to promote high levels of employment and job quality, improve access to the labour market, support workers' adaptation to change, encourage a high level of education and training for all, support the transition between education and employment for young people, combat poverty, enhance social inclusion, and promote gender equality). The results can be categorised into two types: immediate and longer-term. Immediate results occur when a participant leaves the operation, and are reported through common immediate result indicators, measuring for instance inactive participants engaged in job searching, participants gaining qualifications, or participants in employment. They refer to individuals and not to entities. For YEI operations, immediate results include, among others, unemployed participants completing a YEI intervention, participants receiving an offer of employment, continued education, apprenticeship or traineeship upon leaving, etc.

Longer-term results, on the other hand, are defined to capture effects that occur six months after a participant has left the operation, and measure for instance the number of participants in employment, with an improved labour market situation. For YEI interventions, longer-term results include participants in continued education, training programmes leading to a qualification, an apprenticeship or a traineeship six months after leaving; in employment, in self-employment, etc. In addition, OPs may use programme-specific output and/or result indicators, which capture very concrete aspects of certain programmes<sup>36</sup>.

The outputs described above led to positive ESF and YEI immediate results (after leaving the operation) for 22.3 million participants corresponding to a success rate of 35%. More details on the results achieved are depicted in Section 3.2 and 4.1 of the report.

The immediate results achieved through the ESF and YEI interventions are expected to contribute to a set of broader, long-term impacts that reflect the ultimate objectives of the programmes. Impacts represent the lasting and profound effects of the interventions. They are the culmination of the activities, outputs, and results, and are expected to have a significant and lasting influence on the social and economic context in which they operate. In contrast to results, which are more immediate and tangible, impacts are more strategic and far-reaching,

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<sup>35</sup> Output and result indicators count “participations” rather than “participants”, as one person can take part in ESF programmes multiple times, however, for readability purposes, the report uses the term “participations” and “participants” interchangeably. Data based on the supporting study. Data were extracted in September 2023.

<sup>36</sup> ESF Regulation Annex I and II specify the list of common ESF and YEI immediate result indicators and longer-term result indicators. For more information, see also the Guidance document “Monitoring and Evaluation of European Cohesion Policy: European Social Fund” (2018) published by the European Commission.

such as the improvement of labour and social conditions in the EU, the support to disadvantage groups, the modernisation and support of innovative social support strategies and tools.

Under shared management, the net contribution of the policies' positive impact is estimated at the level of the individual, using counterfactual impact evaluations (CIEs) performed at national level, with support from the European Commission.<sup>37</sup> As far as labour market impacts are concerned, the results of CIEs are summarised via a meta-analysis (first edition in 2022<sup>38</sup>, regularly updated<sup>39</sup> since) that allows to compute average impacts across the EU. To estimate the ESF and YEI's macroeconomic effect, the Commission relies on JRC's Rhomolo model. Other expected impacts are measured by reported stakeholders' perceptions.

The intervention logic describes how the ESF and YEI are expected to work and what are the expected outcomes, results and impacts. However, the ESF and YEI funded policies might also have unintended effects which are not part of the intervention logic. Some unintended effects emerged during the evaluation fieldwork, mainly concerning the occurrence of "creaming" effect in some instances (e.g. TO8), involving a tendency to focus support on groups with less complex needs. According to the analysis, such effect sometimes occurred but did not significantly affect the functioning of operations and the intervention logic presented. Other unintended effects that emerged during the implementation of the funds are analysed where found to be relevant, such as in the analysis on efficiency (e.g. unintended inequalities in the application process and requirements).

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<sup>37</sup>DG EMPL, together with the JRC and DG REGIO, support work with the national authorities to improve evaluation capacity and culture, including capacity to conduct counterfactual impact evaluations. However, access to data poses a significant challenge. There is a lot of data available in administrative registers, such as employment registers or tax registers, which can be useful for evaluating policies financed by the ESF. Due to uncertainties about the legal basis often this data is often not available for evaluations, leading to a lack of evidence on policy effectiveness.

<sup>38</sup> [Meta-analysis of the ESF counterfactual impact evaluations - Publications Office of the EU](#)

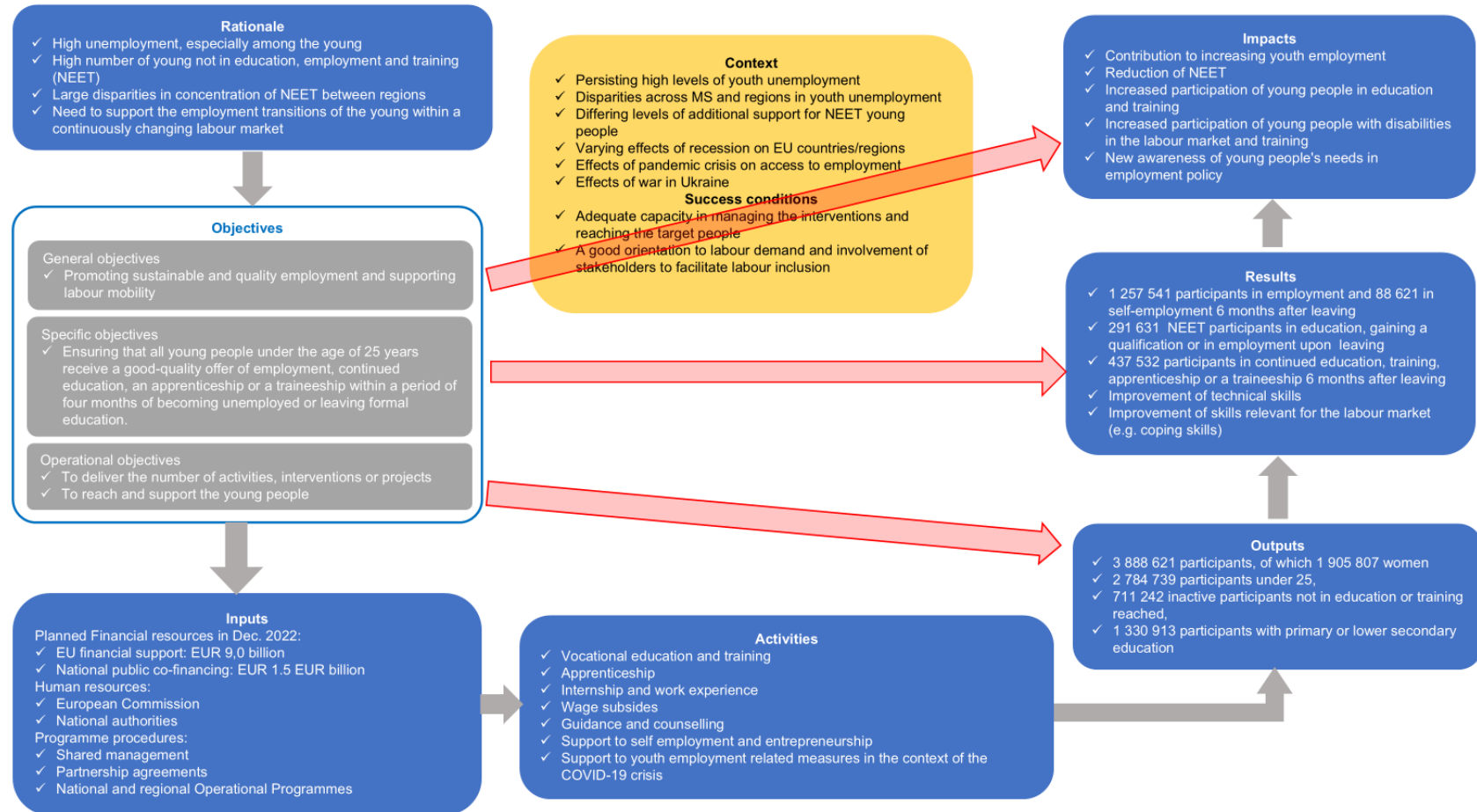
<sup>39</sup> [JRC Publications Repository - Meta-analysis of the European Social Fund counterfactual impact evaluations: Brief update with alternative measures](#)

**Figure 1: Intervention Logic of the ESF (including REACT-EU and excluding YEI)**



Source: Supporting Study

**Figure 2: Intervention Logic of YEI**



Source: Supporting Study

## 2.2. POINT(S) OF COMPARISON

The evaluation covers the implementation period from 2014 to 2022. It uses key comparison points or evidence to perform the analysis across the evaluation criteria (when evidence is available, and the comparison is relevant and informative). The following items are considered for comparison:

- Data from the ESF during the previous programming period between 2007-2013, which allowed a direct comparison with 2014-2020 performance. This includes the following:
  - The share of participations during 2007-2013 resulting in positive achievements including job searching, gaining a qualification or in education/training or in employment upon leaving;
  - The EU budget of the ESF in the previous programming period.;
  - number of entities successfully supported in 2007-2013
  - ESF's key target groups reached during 2007-2013
- ESF and YEI before and after the COVID-19 pandemic to assess and account for the changed delivery context as a result of this significant crisis affecting all Member States;
- Findings from the interim thematic evaluation reports<sup>40</sup> completed, allowing an assessment of progress since the earlier part of the programming period;
- Socio-economic context indicators from 2013 (as a baseline before the 2014-2020 programme) allowing an assessment of change;
- Findings from other related research or evaluations at EU or national level, including impact evaluations with counterfactuals to add context and additional information to assessments made.

This comparative analysis enables comparison points for the assessment of the support provided by ESF and YEI throughout the evaluation report (assessing them jointly or separately as possible and specified in the text). The comparison can only be indicative, however, due to the influence of other contextual factors over time.

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<sup>40</sup> For example: Fondazione G. Brodolini, Metis GmbH, Applica, Ockham IPS (2020) Study for the Evaluation of ESF Support to employment and Labour Mobility, for the European Commission, Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion.

European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, Donlevy, V., Sennett, J., Georgallis, M. et al., Study for the evaluation of ESF support to education and training (Thematic Objective 10) – Final report, Publications Office, 2020, available at: <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/301732>

Metis GmbH, Fondazione G. Brodolini, Applica, Ockham IPS (2020) Study for the Evaluation of ESF Support to Youth Employment, for the European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. p.141. Available at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/d063ca61-bcd8-11ea-811c-01aa75ed71a1>

ICF, Cambridge Econometrics and Eurocentre (2020) Study supporting the 2020 evaluation of promoting social inclusion, combatting poverty and any discrimination by the European Social Fund (Thematic Objective 09). p.120. Available at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/8788ec85-2308-11eb-b57e-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

Atkinson, I. et al (2023) Study supporting the preliminary evaluation of the support provided by ESF and FEAD under the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiatives (CRII and CRII+). Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8542&furtherPubs=yes>

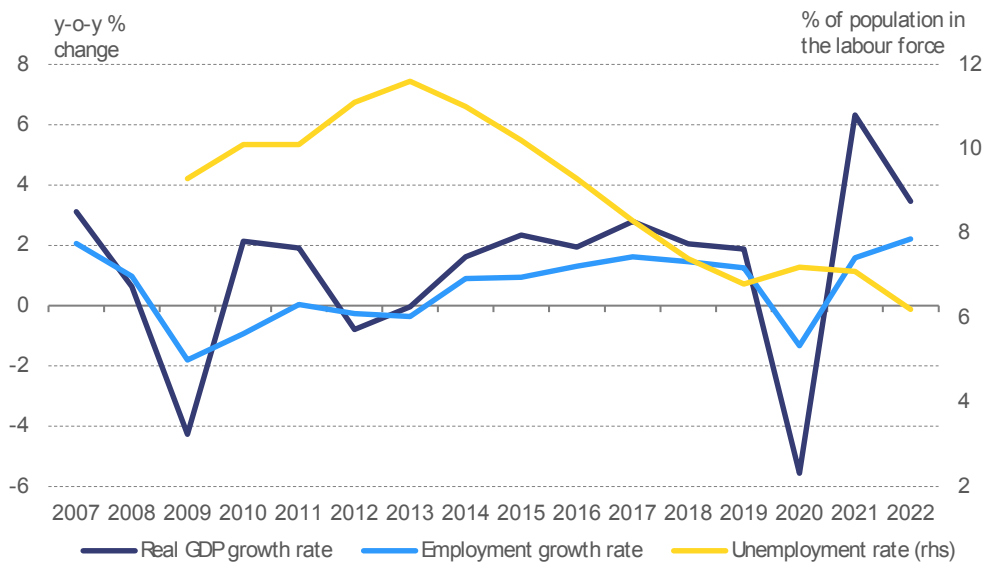
### 3. HOW HAS THE SITUATION EVOLVED OVER THE EVALUATION PERIOD?

#### 3.1. ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL EVOLUTION

##### 3.1.1 ECONOMIC EVOLUTION

Following the double-dip recession caused by the financial crisis in 2007-2008, the EU economy grew steadily around 2% per year in the first part of the evaluation period. At the same time, employment growth resumed and the unemployment rate dropped gradually to 6.8% of the population in the labour force in 2019 (see Figure 3: Evolution of the economic situation in the EU27 (2007-2022)). The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic led to an abrupt halt of economic activity in 2020, leading to sharp drops in real GDP. The impact on the labour market remained, however, limited as a result of the large-scale roll-out of job retention schemes. However, the EU economy and the labour market recovered rapidly, supported by public policy efforts at the national and EU level and also proved resilient in light of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine that resulted in high energy prices and high inflation in 2022. All throughout the evaluation period, structural changes, such as population aging, rapid digitalisation and the green transition, impacted the demand for occupations and required skills.

Figure 3: Evolution of the economic situation in the EU27 (2007-2022)<sup>41</sup>



Source: Eurostat

##### 3.1.2 SOCIAL EVOLUTION

Against this background, the ESF intervention tailored employment, welfare, education and training policies to include those excluded from the labour market, workers in precarious situations and those lacking access to essential social, housing, and health care services. It also sought to address disparities across Member States in terms of unemployment rates, labour market tightness and with respect to social inequalities and remaining concerns with respect to

<sup>41</sup> The unemployment rate is only available since 2009 based on a comparable methodology.

equal access to high quality education and jobs, especially for the young as well as skills mismatches and high school drop-out-rates.

The ESF intervention was strongly linked to the Europe 2020 Strategy<sup>42</sup> launched in 2010 and its headline targets related to the ESF set for the end of 2020:

- At least 75 % of the population aged 20-64 should be employed.
- The share of early school leavers should be under 10% and at least 40% of the younger generation should have a tertiary degree.
- 20 million less people should be at risk of poverty.

At the ESF programme level, the focus on social innovation and a specific earmark of 20% of the programme's resources for social inclusion and combating poverty also reflects the link to the Europe 2020 Strategy.

By the end of the evaluation period, the employment rate of the population aged 20-64 rose from 66.8% in 2013 to 74.6% in 2022, the share of early school leavers dropped by more than 2 pps. to 9.6% and the tertiary educational attainment of the population aged 30-34 increased to almost 43%. Also, some progress was made towards reducing the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion, but not to the same extent as for the other targets. Table A.13 in Annex VII presents the headline indicators associated with these targets<sup>43</sup> for the EU27 average, as well as the new headline targets set for 2030 by the European Pillar of Social Rights<sup>44</sup>(EPSR) Action Plan<sup>45</sup> in 2021.

Despite this progress, the aforementioned challenges persisted all throughout the evaluation period.

For labour market inequalities, this is for instance evidenced by persisting gaps in employment rates by gender, disability status and country of origin. The gender employment rate gap barely decreased during the evaluation period, and it remained high in 2022 at almost 11 pps. Furthermore, there was hardly a change in the disability employment rate gap (22.7 pps. in 2014 vs. 21.4 pps. in 2022) and the gap between persons with foreign origin and natives has even increased between 2013 and 2022 (from 3.5 pps. to 4.1 pps.). Other persisting inequalities relate to access to high quality jobs, wages<sup>46</sup> and working conditions. In addition, the COVID-19

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<sup>42</sup> European Commission (2010). Europe 2020 Strategy – A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eu2020/pdf/COMPLET%20EN%20BARROSO%20%20%20007%20-%20Europe%202020%20-%20EN%20version.pdf>

<sup>43</sup> The labour market and education and training indicators in the Table are based on the European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS), which revised some labour status definitions in 2021, causing a break in the time series. Eurostat provides break-free time-series for the most important labour market indicators, including employment rates by age and sex, while it does not provide break-free time series for the education and training indicators ([https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=EU\\_labour\\_force\\_survey\\_-\\_correction\\_for\\_breaks\\_in\\_time\\_series#Comparability\\_over\\_time\\_-\\_correction\\_of\\_breaks\\_in\\_time\\_series](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=EU_labour_force_survey_-_correction_for_breaks_in_time_series#Comparability_over_time_-_correction_of_breaks_in_time_series)). The AROPE indicator is based on the EU-SILC survey which also underwent a revision in 2021, therefore there is a break in the time series since 2020.

<sup>44</sup> [https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles\\_en](https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles_en)

<sup>45</sup> [https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/european-pillar-social-rights-building-fairer-and-more-inclusive-european-union/european-pillar-social-rights-action-plan\\_en](https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/european-pillar-social-rights-building-fairer-and-more-inclusive-european-union/european-pillar-social-rights-action-plan_en)

<sup>46</sup> In the EU, the unadjusted gender pay gap on gross hourly wages, although narrowing, remained high: in 2014 women's earnings were 15.7% lower than those of men, dropping to 12.7% lower than men's in 2021 and 2022 (Eurostat Gender Pay Gap Statistics, March 2024 [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Gender\\_pay\\_gap\\_statistics#Gender\\_pay\\_gap\\_levels\\_vary\\_significantly\\_across\\_EU](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Gender_pay_gap_statistics#Gender_pay_gap_levels_vary_significantly_across_EU)

pandemic might have undone some of the progress, resulting in disproportional declines in employment and total hours worked (or increases in temporary layoffs) for young, women, less educated and foreign-born workers during the first lockdown period in early 2020.<sup>47</sup>

In the area of education, challenges persisted during the period, even though the headline Europe 2020 targets have been achieved. For instance, the prevalence of low educational attainment among the EU population remained high (with 20.6% of persons aged 25-64 at ISCED levels 0-2 in 2022) and adults' participation in learning activities over the previous four weeks remained low (at 11.9% of the EU population aged 25-64 in 2022). Furthermore, while the percentage of male early leavers from education and training as well as the tertiary education attainment rate of men have moved into the right direction during the evaluation period, they still missed the overall EU-level targets. Similarly, the percentage of young people not in employment, education or training has declined to 11.7% in 2022 on average in the EU27 but remained high especially in some Central and Eastern as well as Southern European countries. On a more general level, skill shortages and gaps persisted<sup>48</sup> in large parts of Europe.

With respect to poverty and social inclusion, some progress was made. However, the share of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the EU27 still amounted to more than one-fifth (21.6%) of the population in 2022. In addition, the pandemic affected negatively the most vulnerable with a greater need for direct social support and lower access to Information and Communications Technology, for instance via the reduction in the provision of services, the increased use of teleworking and distance learning.

Across these three broad policy areas, positive convergence trends were observed during the evaluation period. However, significant differences persisted across and within countries and regions. A strong convergence process was registered in national and regional employment rates, but gaps between the best and worst performers remained high, especially on the regional level.<sup>49</sup> With regard to social inclusion and poverty reduction, most Central and Eastern European countries converged to the EU average during the evaluation period. Still, the at-risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) rate remained high in Southern European countries.<sup>50</sup> The landscape of educational attainment has become somewhat more uniform during the evaluation period, but large gaps between Member States persist.<sup>51</sup> In addition, the latest trends in educational achievements of 15-year-olds measured by the PISA tests raised concerns. The 2022 results showed unprecedented drops compared to 2018 in reading and mathematics in all EU countries, pointing to the adverse effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, and revealed large

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<sup>47</sup> European Institute for Gender Equality (2021), "Gender equality and the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic"; European Institute for Gender Equality, EIGE, Vilnius; Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2021

<sup>48</sup> European Commission (2024), Employment and Social Developments in Europe (ESDE), report 2023.

<sup>49</sup> European Commission (2024), Ninth Report on Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/information-sources/cohesion-report\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/information-sources/cohesion-report_en)

<sup>50</sup> European Commission (2024), Ninth Report on Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/information-sources/cohesion-report\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/information-sources/cohesion-report_en)

<sup>51</sup> In 2022, the proportion of tertiary-educated people among those aged 30-34 was above 45% in 15 Member States (compared to only 7 in 2014). Still, it remained below 30% in Romania and Italy and the share of people 25-64 years old with low educational attainment remained significantly higher than the EU average in Italy, Malta, Portugal, and Spain.

differences across countries.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, the ongoing megatrends often impact the EU's poorer regions more strongly.<sup>53</sup>

## **3.2. FINANCIAL AND OPERATIONAL IMPLEMENTATION OF ESF AND YEI**

### **3.2.1 FINANCIAL IMPLEMENTATION**

#### *Allocation and crisis response*

The implementation of ESF took place in 27 Member States and the UK and the YEI was implemented in 19 Member States and the UK, with an overall number of 188 Operational programmes, comprising of both national and regional programmes, covering ESF and YEI interventions of EUR 131 billion, of which EUR 93.5 billion coming from the EU

The distribution by thematic objective shows that total funding (ESF, YEI and REACT-EU) was primarily allocated to promoting sustainable and quality employment (TO 8), which received 32% of the resources. This was followed by operations to promote social inclusion, combat poverty, and eliminate discrimination (TO9) with 22%, and investments in education, training, and vocational training for skills and lifelong learning (TO10) with 22.5%. Initiatives to enhance the institutional capacity of public authorities and stakeholders, and to ensure efficient public administration (TO11) received 2.9% of total EU resources. Technical Assistance accounted for around 3.3%. The most recent interventions for "Fostering crisis repair" (TO13), introduced after the COVID-19 pandemic, received 17.3% of the EU total resources. Allocations are also in line with the thematic concentrations imposed by EU regulations<sup>54</sup>. On a Member State level, prioritisation is evident and aligned with country-specific recommendations<sup>55</sup>. Between 2012 and 2024, more than 50% of the CSRs related to the ESF were directed at TO 8, affecting all 27 Member States plus the UK. These CSRs specifically emphasised the need to strengthen labour market policies, increase participation in the labour market for disadvantaged groups (such as women, youth, and adults) and improve the efficiency of labour market services. For instance, Spain, Luxembourg and Slovakia allocated more than 50% of ESF funding to TO 8. Netherlands (71.2%) and Cyprus (56.2%) distinguished themselves for the large amount of funding dedicated to social inclusion (TO 9), while Portugal leads the ranking regarding the support for education which was made available

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<sup>52</sup> European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (2024), *The twin challenge of equity and excellence in basic skills in the EU – An EU comparative analysis of the PISA 2022 results*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2024. Available at: <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/881521>

<sup>53</sup> European Commission (2024), Ninth Report on Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/information-sources/cohesion-report\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/information-sources/cohesion-report_en)

<sup>54</sup> At least 20% of the total ESF resources in each Member State was allocated to the TO 9 "promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination" (Article 9 of Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013). In addition, MSs had to pursue thematic concentration according to the following modalities: (a) more developed regions were required to concentrate at least 80 % of the ESF allocation to each operational programme on up to five of the investment priorities; (b) transition regions were required to concentrate at least 70 % on up to five of the investment priorities and (c) Less developed regions, were required to concentrate at least 60 % on up to five of the investment priorities.

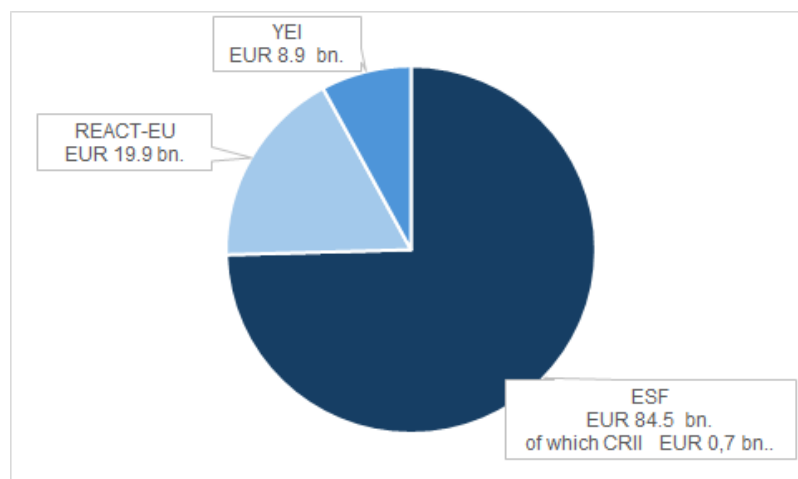
<sup>55</sup> See Annex IV, Appendix 7 of supporting study

under TO 10, with 50.3% of funds allocated to this TO.<sup>56</sup> The share of resources allocated to TO 11 was particularly high in Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania.

At the end of 2022, 49.5% of the total planned ESF funding was channelled to the less developed regions, about 36.9% to the more developed regions and the remaining 13.6% to the transition regions. In countries receiving Cohesion Fund support<sup>57</sup>, the intensity of the support per inhabitant is more than double the intensity than in countries not receiving Cohesion Fund, and this difference increases when purchasing power parity is considered<sup>58</sup>. However, among the former, the differences in both the intensity of the support (cost per inhabitant) and the level of assistance (expenditure per participant) are larger than in the latter<sup>59</sup>.

Resources and flexibility increased during the programming period to respond to emerging challenges, including through the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiatives, REACT-EU, CARE and SURE<sup>60</sup>. In particular, with the reallocations of the Cohesion Policy funds and the addition of REACT-EU, total EU resources available for ESF support reached EUR 113.4 billion in 2022, an increase of almost 26.5% compared to the initial amount in 2015. When including the national co-financing, the resources exceed EUR 150 billion over the period.

**Figure 4: Distribution of different EU financial sources in ESF programmes in 2022 (EU amounts)**



Source: Ecorys, Study supporting the ex-post evaluation of the ESF during the programming period 2014-2020, 2025. Figure 10.

The total declared expenditure reached EUR 111.7 billion in 2022. The overall absorption rate, i.e. the share of total eligible declared expenditure to Managing Authorities (MAs) against total eligible cost of selected operations, reached 98.4% for the ESF and 96.6% for the YEI on

<sup>56</sup> See Annex V for Distribution of EU and national planned funds by EU fund, country and category of region (national co-financing included) Top up funding of REACT-EU and YEI by country in 2022 (million EUR, %)

<sup>57</sup> EUR 469 per inhabitant compared to EUR 208 per inhabitant for countries not receiving Cohesion Fund.

<sup>58</sup> EUR 666 and EUR 112 per inhabitant. Values in EUR deflated by the EU27 Price Level Index in 2020 (Eurostat).

<sup>59</sup> See supporting study, analysis on the basis of SFC2014 data up to end of 2022, extracted in September 2023

<sup>60</sup> The SURE instrument acted as a second line of defence, supporting short-time work schemes and similar measures, to help Member States protect jobs and thus employees and self-employed against the risk of unemployment and loss of income.

1 August 2025.<sup>61</sup> In the previous programming period 2007-2013 and by the end of the period, a total of €116.76 billion was reported as certified, out of €114.64 billion allocated to the entire ESF, which corresponds to 101.8%. Most MS had reached full implementation by the end of the 2015. Implementation rates were often higher than 100% as some MS submitted higher payment claims than the allocated budgets.

Looking at the performance of declared expenditure in individual countries, some countries met and even exceeded their expenditure targets: Malta achieved the highest spending rate (137%), followed by Cyprus and Luxembourg with rates around 100%.

For the same period, the total value of contracted projects amounted at EUR 165.8 billion (combined ESF, YEI and REACT-EU funds), about 9.5% higher than the available funding. YEI recorded even higher selection rates compared to ESF (120.5% versus 108.7%)<sup>62</sup> Such progress is due to the fact that in the last years of the period several Member States preferred to overbook the available resources to maximise the possibility of reaching the expenditure targets.

As regards the total number of operations implemented, it exceeded 1.3 million, out of which more than 1 million were implemented under ESF and 266 864 under YEI. The average eligible cost per operation was EUR 123 740 at EU level. Average costs of YEI operations were about three times lower than those registered for ESF (EUR 47 184 for YEI compared to EUR 142 781 in the case of ESF).

### **3.2.2 OPERATIONAL IMPLEMENTATION**

#### *Participations and their characteristics*

With a total of 64.6 million participations, including 2.6 million participations in REACT-EU operations<sup>63</sup>, ESF and YEI funded operations reached a significant part of the general population of the EU27 and the UK. In addition, over 2 million micro-enterprises and SMEs (including cooperative enterprises, enterprises of the social economy) have been supported by ESF. Approximately 5.1 million products were delivered in projects, and 476 439 structures (networks, partnerships, and other type of entities) have been supported by ESF and YEI. 118 723 projects by social partners or non-governmental organisations were reported. Moreover, Member States reported by end 2022 to have supported 58 282 projects dedicated to the sustainable participation and progress of women in employment. Another 81 206 projects targeted public administration / public services<sup>64</sup>.

By labour market status, the highest share of participations was registered by inactive persons (39% in ESF operations and 18% in YEI), followed by unemployed persons (34% in ESF operations and 82% in YEI) and employed persons (for 27% in ESF funded operations<sup>65</sup>). These differences are coherent with the differing missions and scopes of ESF and YEI operations.

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<sup>61</sup> Data retrieved on 1 August 2025 from the [Open Data Portal for the European Structural Investment Funds - European Commission | Cohesion Open Data](#)

<sup>63</sup> Reported by 22 Member States at the end of 2022.

<sup>64</sup> Information based on the ESF Synthesis Report of AIR 2022, data extracted on July 6, 2023.

<sup>65</sup> Employed persons were not eligible for YEI operations.

In line with the objectives set out in the Regulation (see section 2.1), the distribution of participations also showed differences by region, disadvantages and age. From a regional perspective, 47% of all participations came from less developed regions, with a majority being inactive and/or over 54 years old. More developed regions covered 37% of participants and resources in these regions were targeted towards disadvantaged groups. Furthermore, 15% of the total participants had a migrant, foreign, or minority background, and 19% of participants belonged to ‘other disadvantaged groups’<sup>66</sup>. The share of women was slightly higher than that of men (53% over 47% of total participations).

### *Intensity of support*

On average, the total of ESF and YEI funding corresponded to EUR 294 per inhabitant (in current prices). This intensity of support was stronger in countries receiving Cohesion Fund support<sup>67</sup> than countries not receiving Cohesion Fund (by a factor of 2, respectively 6 when adjusting for purchasing power parity), reflecting the ESF’s mission to contribute to territorial cohesion.<sup>68</sup>

Based on the total declared expenditure, the average cost per participation<sup>69</sup> was EUR 1 732 in the EU. Across countries, declared expenditure and the number of participations is correlated, however significant differences exist between Member States, with the average cost per participation ranging from a maximum of EUR 4 546 per participant in Czechia to EUR 780 per participant in Bulgaria. These differences become even larger when taking purchasing power differences into account and are also prevalent between countries receiving and not receiving Cohesion Fund support. This may hint at different levels of efficiencies but is also related to different models of intervention, types of measures used and targeting of specific groups.<sup>70</sup>

### *Results*

ESF and YEI interventions reached a total of 64.6 million participations. Out of these, 22.3 million reported a positive result immediately after leaving the ESF or YEI intervention:

- Over 10 million participants had obtained a qualification;
- More than 7 million were in employment or self-employment and over 1.5 million previously inactive participants started searching for jobs;
- Over 3 million were enrolled in further education training;

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<sup>66</sup> Figures representing participants with characteristics in disadvantaged groups may be underrepresented in a significant way because: characteristics ‘rural background’ and ‘homelessness’ were only reported as minimum requirement in 2017 and as belonging to a minority is often based on self-identification and underreported when the minority is facing discrimination (especially in the case of Roma minority).

<sup>67</sup> Analysis refers to countries receiving Cohesion Fund support during the programming period and those that did not. Countries receiving Cohesion Fund support in the 2014-2020 period were: Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. Countries not receiving Cohesion Fund in the 2014-2020 period were: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom.

<sup>68</sup> See supporting study, Ecorys, *Study supporting the ex-post evaluation of the ESF during the programming period 2014-2020*, 2025.

<sup>69</sup> Calculated as the total declared expenditure, including indirectly targeted expenditure on technical assistance and on reinforcing services and institutions, divided by the number of total participants at the end of 2022.

<sup>70</sup> See supporting study, Ecorys, *Study supporting the ex-post evaluation of the ESF during the programming period 2014-2020*, 2025.

- Out of 3.9 million participants in YEI-funded projects, 1.1 million unemployed - of which around 0.3 million long-term unemployed and almost 0.2 million NEET - received an offer of employment, further education, apprenticeship or traineeship upon leaving the project.

Overall, this means that 35 % of recorded participations resulted in at least one of these positive short-term results. While this figure may seem low at first glance, it has to be highlighted that the monitoring system is based on “hard” indicators that capture final desired outcomes. It does not capture however intermediate steps or more “soft” outcomes that are targeted by operations e.g. in the area of social inclusion. In addition, while ESF typically target individuals with low employability, there is empirical evidence demonstrating the positive impact on, for example, employment probability of participants, as described in Chapter 4.

Longer-term result indicators show that 6.9 million participants that had received ESF or YEI support were employed six months after leaving, out of which 2.6 million were participants registered as part of a disadvantaged group and 0.4 million were above 54 years old. In addition, 1.4 million participants recorded an improved labour market situation<sup>71</sup> six months after leaving. These results and the corresponding success rate of around 10% positive longer-term results per participation are likely to be underestimated as not all countries have reported yet on the relevant indicators<sup>72</sup>.

The composition of achieved results varied by thematic objective, depending on the dominant activities and target groups. In TO 8, activities yielded the largest positive results in bringing persons into employment, with around 5 million participants being in employment or self-employment upon leaving and 4.1 million participants being employed six months after. By contrast, the dominant result in TO 10 was obtaining a qualification, which applied to 5.8 million participations.

Across Member States, there is a significant variation in the relationship between outputs and results<sup>73</sup>, which can reflect different target groups, the use of different types of activities as well as reporting practices.

#### **4. EVALUATION FINDINGS**

The evaluation has assessed the effectiveness, efficiency, coherence, relevance, EU added value and visibility of the European Social Fund and Youth Employment Initiative during their implementation period from 2014 to 2022. It thus aims (where possible) to draw conclusions about the causal effects of the EU intervention on the desired outcomes.

<sup>71</sup> Persons who are employed when entering ESF support and who, following the support, transitioned from precarious to stable employment, and/or from underemployment to full employment, and/or have moved to a job requiring higher competences/skills/qualifications, entailing more responsibilities, and/or received a promotion 6 months after leaving the ESF operation.

<sup>72</sup> Some countries and some programmes reported longer-term result indicators annually, while others will only do so in the Final Implementation Report (FIR) in 2026. Consequently, these results may increase when all the FIRs are available, especially in the countries with very low or zero results reported at the end of 2022.

<sup>73</sup> See supporting study, Ecorys, *Study supporting the ex-post evaluation of the ESF during the programming period 2014-2020*, 2025.

## 4.1. TO WHAT EXTENT WAS THE INTERVENTION SUCCESSFUL AND WHY?

### 4.1.1 EFFECTIVENESS

#### 4.1.1.1 ACHIEVEMENT OF OPERATIONAL OBJECTIVES<sup>74</sup>

##### *Achievement of targets*

On the EU level, aggregate targets were set for the ESF in the context of the annual EU budget performance and reporting exercise<sup>75</sup>, notably on the shares of participants in employment/self-employment, gaining a qualification as well as on inactive participants looking for a job. The ESF reached two out of these three targets by the end of 2022, with 32% of unemployed and inactive participants being in employment or self-employment upon leaving compared to a target of 24%, and 25% of all participations gaining a qualification compared to a target of 23%. It fell however short the target of 16% of inactive participants being engaged in job searching upon leaving, which was reached in 2018, but the ratio decreased afterwards to 13% at the end of 2022, also related to a shift of the programme focus during the pandemic towards maintaining jobs and providing services on the other target groups (including the inactive), rather than on pure activation measures.<sup>76</sup> YEI interventions reached all EU level targets.

##### *Target group reach*

The regulation lays out that the ESF and YEI shall benefit people, including disadvantaged people such as the long-term unemployed, people with disabilities, migrants, ethnic minorities, marginalised communities and people of all ages facing poverty and social exclusion and shall contribute to territorial cohesion.

Among all participations<sup>77</sup>, almost half of the persons reached had a low educational attainment level and around 20% of participations were from persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion (see Table 2). Also, 15% of participations were made up by migrants and persons with foreign background or from marginalised communities and 7% came from people with disabilities. When compared to data from a similar stage of the 2007-2013 programming period, the proportion of migrants and those from minority or marginalised communities and that of persons with disabilities among total participations has increased (compared to 9% and 5%,

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<sup>74</sup> See answers to evaluation questions 1, 2 and 4 of the supporting study.

<sup>75</sup> See EU core performance indicators available at: [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/european-social-fund-performance\\_en#mff-2014-2020--european-social-fund](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/european-social-fund-performance_en#mff-2014-2020--european-social-fund)

<sup>76</sup> See archive of the 2024 exercise here:

[https://wayback.archive-it.org/12090/20250228102931/https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/european-social-fund-performance\\_en#mff-2014-2020--european-social-fund](https://wayback.archive-it.org/12090/20250228102931/https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/european-social-fund-performance_en#mff-2014-2020--european-social-fund)

<sup>77</sup> The monitoring system is set up on the basis of participation records. This means that one individual can take part in multiple ESF funded operations, which will then be counted as several participations. An identification of the exact number of individuals benefiting from ESF+ support is therefore not possible on an aggregate level.

respectively for 2007-2013)<sup>78</sup>. This is first evidence that targeting the more disadvantaged parts of the society has effectively been achieved.

Comparing these shares to the proportion of the respective target groups in the overall EU population reveals that migrants, Roma and those with the lowest education levels were over-represented in the ESF data relative to their population in the EU, further indicating that there is a good reach of these target groups. At the same time, participations of those facing social exclusion closely mirrored prevalence within the EU population speaking for an adequate targeting. However, those with disabilities appeared under-represented in terms of the degree to which they are reached through ESF support.<sup>79</sup> Evidence from the YEI case study also hinted at a lower effectiveness in reaching the most marginalised young persons among the broader NEET population<sup>80</sup>.

**Table 2: Participation of ESF target groups as a proportion of overall ESF participations**

Target group	Proportion of overall participations – 2014-2020 programming period	Proportion of overall participations – 2007-2013 programming period
Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion	19%	n.a.
Migrants, people with foreign backgrounds or from marginalised communities such as Roma	15%	9%
Persons with ISCED level 2 education or lower	47%	45%
Persons with disabilities	7%	5%

Source: Supporting study, Section 4.1.1.4, ESF ex-post evaluation synthesis 2007-2013

In addition, the placement of the ESF and YEI intervention in the context of the Europe 2020 goals suggested a strong targeting of unemployed and inactive persons compared to the preceding programming period. Overall, economically inactive, including NEETs, made up 39% of total participations; the unemployed, including long-term unemployed, 34%; and those in employment 27%. While this distribution was still broadly balanced, it suggests a stronger focus on the non-employed. This is also confirmed by the comparison to the preceding programming period, where the shares of inactive and unemployed people were lower (with 36% and 30%) and the employed made up a larger fraction of 33% of total participations.

These findings are further nuanced by other data collected in the supporting study. Overall, the MA survey, interviews and case studies indicate that stakeholders perceived that ESF and YEI actions have reached the intended target groups. However, specific operations within certain IPs had challenges in reaching the most disadvantaged groups, for example the most vulnerable or marginalised within the larger NEET group, and the MA Survey confirmed greater challenges in reaching older persons, persons with disabilities, Roma and people that are homeless or affected by housing exclusion. Still, interviewees across stakeholder groups and respondents of the MA survey felt that the minimum allocation of 20% to the thematic objective on social inclusion had supported targeting of harder to reach populations. Civil Society Organisation (CSO) representatives at EU and national levels were more sceptical on the extent that this would translate into effective engagement and results.

<sup>78</sup> European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, *ESF ex-post evaluation synthesis 2007-2013 – EU synthesis report – Final version*, Publications Office, 2016, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/1734>

<sup>79</sup> In 2022, persons with disabilities were estimated to represent 27% of the EU population. See Supporting study, Section 4.1.1.4

<sup>80</sup> See Supporting study, YEI – 8.ii case study.

### *Contribution to CPR thematic objectives*

The Common Provisions lay out thematic objectives that are to be supported by the respective funds<sup>81</sup> (including European Regional Development Fund - ERDF<sup>82</sup>), which can be summarised for the ESF and YEI to four broad policy areas: Employment, Social inclusion, Education, training and vocational training and Capacity building.

In the broad policy area “Employment”, the ESF made a strong contribution to supporting people into employment and increasing social inclusion. Specifically, in TO 8 alone, around 5 million participants were supported into employment and around 1.9 million YEI participants were either in employment, education or gained a qualification upon leaving by end of 2022. Support was also provided to improve employability of disadvantaged persons in TO 9 and 10, with millions moving closer to the labour market by seeking employment or taking part in further education or training upon leaving. Thus, not only was the scale of operations large, with ESF support reaching 13.3% of the average EU27 + UK unemployed and 3.5% of inactive persons annually, but it also resulted in an improved labour market situation for a large number of participants. Furthermore, alongside other instruments like SURE, the ESF also contributed to maintain jobs and support adaptation during the COVID-19 pandemic through CRII/CRII+.<sup>83</sup> The positive contribution was further confirmed by the primary data gathered for the supporting study<sup>84</sup>, as well as being broadly reflected in applicable national evaluations<sup>85</sup>.

Interventions in the field of “social inclusion” reached almost 15 million persons under TO 9, with a significant reach among disadvantaged groups and marginalised communities. This is also reflected to the achieved results, with around 2.8 million disadvantaged participants seeking or entering employment, education or training upon leaving support<sup>86</sup> and around 1.1 million participants who gained a qualification upon leaving support<sup>87</sup>. In addition, around 115 000 SMEs and social enterprises as well as 23 000 NGOs and social partner projects were supported in this TO. A positive contribution was also broadly echoed in the TO9 case studies and primary data collected via surveys and interviews as well as in national evaluations. However, the results were slightly more nuanced than in the employment domain, with slightly less Managing Authorities declaring that operations had met their objectives to a large extent (59%, 67 out of 114, vs 65%, 74 out of 114 for TO8) and some interviewees from CSOs feeling that operations still struggle in some contexts to reach the most marginalised groups, such as Roma or persons with disabilities.

Operations in the area of “education, training and vocational training” reached more than 20 million participants in TO10, with a broad reach to disadvantaged or marginalised groups. Of

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<sup>81</sup> Thematic objectives set out in points (8), (9), (10) and (11) of the first paragraph of Article 9 of the CPR.

<sup>82</sup> The ERDF 2014-2020 has also contributed to those policy areas, through support to infrastructure, equipment and cooperation across borders investments under thematic objectives 8, 9, and 10. Effects thereof are not analysed in the text.

<sup>83</sup> See supporting study, Annex VIII. Available at: [Annexes](#).

<sup>84</sup> Including data from the surveys, stakeholder interviews and case studies undertaken for the study.

<sup>85</sup> Relevant evaluation evidence is considered in more detail in assessing the changes brought by ESF support at Section 4.1.1.5.

<sup>86</sup> Data from SFC relating to CR05 results under TO 9 – i.e. disadvantaged participants engaged in job searching, education/ training, gaining a qualification, or in employment, including self-employment, upon leaving. Further detail is provided in Section 3.3.8.

<sup>87</sup> Data from SFC relating to CR05 results under TO 9 – i.e. participants gaining a qualification upon leaving.

these, 5.8 million gained a qualification and around 1.4 million disadvantaged participants were seeking or entering employment, education, or training upon leaving. The overall results in this policy area were however higher, as 1) other TOs also contribute to education and training outcomes measured by the monitoring system and 2) not all operations under TO10 have the objective of gaining a qualification, for instance activities that use informal learning pathways or that aim at reducing school dropout. Further evidence collected in the supporting study, also speaks for a strong contribution by the ESF/YEI in this policy area. In particular, a high proportion of surveyed Managing Authorities felt that operations in TO10 had met their objectives to a large extent (63%, 72 out of 114).

Interventions relating to institutional capacity building under TO 11 were allocated a relatively small proportion of overall ESF funding (4%) and limited to a subset of countries<sup>88</sup>. By the end of 2022, under TO11 more than 3 500 projects targeting public administrations and labour market institutions had been supported by the ESF. However, the case studies results were inconclusive when it comes to achievements of intended objectives of selected operations. Overall, there is less evidence including from primary data collection in the supporting study<sup>89</sup>, so that an overall judgement on the effectiveness is not warranted.

Overall, the evidence presented in this subsection suggests that ESF and YEI interventions effectively reached a large part of the EU population and achieved many positive results among its participants. Focussing on participants entering employment and gaining a qualification, which can be directly compared to the preceding programming period, the ESF has been more effective, reaching higher shares of these common results. It also contributed to achieve the thematic objectives laid out in the Common Provisions. In addition, reach-out was good on most of the targeted groups, although for some subgroups (e.g. most disadvantaged among the NEET population) effectiveness in targeting was lower (e.g. due to their disengagement from public services and society more generally or limitations in terms of resources, capacity and/or expertise of delivery organisation). Regarding thematic objectives, the ESF made a strong contribution in the employment and education and training policy areas and also contributed positively to the social inclusion and poverty alleviation targets of the Europe 2020 strategy as well as to the third chapter of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

#### **4.1.1.2 CHANGES RESULTING FROM ESF AND YEI SUPPORT<sup>90</sup>**

##### *On a micro level*

This section analyses the changes brought to target groups and which types of operations appeared more or less effective, based on evaluation evidence<sup>91</sup>, case study findings and triangulation from other sources.

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<sup>88</sup> Member States eligible for cohesion funding or with at least one less developed region.

<sup>89</sup> For instance, almost two-thirds of respondents to the Managing Authority survey reporting that they did not know if operations had met their objectives.

<sup>90</sup> See answers to evaluation questions 3, 5, 7 and 9 of the supporting study. Available at: [Study supporting the ex-post evaluation of the 2014-2020 European social fund and youth employment initiative - Publications Office of the EU](#).

<sup>91</sup> 79 national impact evaluations were analysed as well as 12 implementation-focused evaluations, for further details see supporting study, Annex II and Annex IV. Available at: [Annexes](#).

In the broad policy area “Employment”, ESF and YEI funding increased opportunities for participants to find - or maintain - a job, or to improve their working conditions. This is shown by the JRC update to the meta-analysis of ESF counterfactual impact evaluations<sup>92,93</sup> which estimates a balanced average impact on employment of 5.9 pps. for the 2014-2020 programming period, meaning that the probability of being in employment of ESF participants is substantially higher than that of comparable non-participants. Importantly, these numbers should be read having in mind that they mostly refer to individuals who are difficult to employ. It is estimated that on average the employment rates for participants increased from 40.2% to 46.1% corresponding to a 15% increase<sup>94</sup>. The highest impacts were found for employment subsidy and financial aid programmes with 15.1 pps, followed by internships/traineeships (6.7 pps.), vocational training (5.2 pps.), other training (4.9 pps.) and 2.2 pps. for mentoring/social support. The lowest (and, on average, negative) effect was estimated for public employment programmes (-10.2 pps). These results are consistent with the findings of most studies in the academic literature<sup>95</sup>. The most likely reasons for the low probability of success of public work programmes are the lock-in effect (participants suspending their job search efforts and devoting time to programme activities) and stigmatisation (employers associating participation in the programme with low productivity). Public employment programmes also tend to pursue broader social inclusion objectives, which are not captured by evaluations focusing solely on employment outcomes. At the same time, while the majority of public work programmes show low or negative impacts on employment probabilities, some programmes have demonstrated positive effects, suggesting that favourable employment outcomes are possible when programmes are well designed and well targeted.

The overall positive effect of active labour market policies on employment is expected, in turn, to have beneficial economic effects at the level of individuals and for government revenues at the Member State level. Case study evidence also highlighted the importance of softer outcomes for participants, particularly for those further from the labour market, for instance in terms of enhanced confidence, skills such as personal interaction, and interview preparation and

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<sup>92</sup> These methods compare a ‘treatment’ group of individuals who participate in the intervention with a ‘comparison’ group of individuals not affected and use the difference in outcomes as an estimate for the treatment effect.

<sup>93</sup> Haepf, T. and Serrano Alarcon, M., Meta-analysis of the European Social Fund counterfactual impact evaluations: Brief update with alternative measures, European Commission, Ispra, 2024, JRC137571, available at: <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC137571>, On the basis of ESF counterfactual impact evaluations covering the 2014–2020 programming period published until November 2023.

<sup>94</sup> According to the coding of the 11 CIE reports published since February 2022, the reference employment rate in those studies was 40.2 percent. While this number does not correspond to all the CIEs of the 2014-2020 period, it provides an estimate of the possible reference employment rate (employment rate without ESF support) and facilitates the general interpretation that the ESF interventions have increased the employment rate of programme participants from 40.2 to 46.1 percent.

Source on reference employment rate (footnote 9): Haepf, T. and Serrano Alarcon, M., Meta-analysis of the European Social Fund counterfactual impact evaluations: Brief update with alternative measures, European Commission, Ispra, 2024, JRC137571, available at:

<https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC137571>

<sup>95</sup> See for example, David Card, Jochen Kluge, Andrea Weber, What Works? A Meta Analysis of Recent Active Labor Market Program Evaluations, *Journal of the European Economic Association*, Volume 16, Issue 3, June 2018, Pages 894–931, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jeea/jvx028>

techniques. Particularly effective in increasing the probability of finding a job or improving participants' job positions were operations on education and vocational training, work-based learning and financial incentives as well as traineeships, childcare services and entrepreneurship courses. Likewise, while limited in number, national level impact evaluations of ESF education and training support typically identify a positive net effect<sup>96</sup> at the level of individuals.

For interventions in the policy area “social inclusion”, national evaluations showed that operations were effective in reaching target groups, and in increasing employment rates, including for the most disadvantaged<sup>97</sup>. ESF support also helped in terms of access to services, in increasing self-confidence and participants' quality of life in general<sup>98</sup>. Case study evidence highlighted in particular the positive effects on moving disadvantaged and often inactive groups closer to and into employment as well as the positive soft outcomes achieved for target groups, particularly improvements to mental health, confidence, motivation, self-esteem, and improved integration in local communities. Effectiveness varied across operations, with the development of “one-stop-shops” for access to multiple services and operations providing individually tailored support and those adopting a holistic approach standing out positively.

Based on national evaluations, case study evidence and a JRC education meta-analysis<sup>99</sup>, operations in the area of “education, training and vocational training” improved educational environments for both students and teachers and resulted in improved competencies and qualifications. The JRC Meta-analysis<sup>100</sup> used 26 studies (of which 20 relate to the 2014-2020 programming period) and showed that average impacts on various education outcomes are positive at around 3.2 pps. (for studies measuring the outcomes in percentage points) and 7.1% (for studies measuring the outcomes in percentage changes). Evaluation reports find positive and significant impacts in 44% of the cases, no significant results in 43% of cases and significant, negative impacts in 13%. The share of positive and significant outcomes is the highest for interventions targeting students (68%) and for outcomes such as grades (70%) and progression to the next school year (68%). Case studies point to key changes in terms of the achievement of qualifications, increased participation in tertiary education and post-secondary education as well as reductions in early school leaving<sup>101</sup>. Furthermore, stakeholders perceived the focus on people from underrepresented socio-economic backgrounds positively and the collected evidence indicates effective targeting and positive results for these groups. However,

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<sup>96</sup> See supporting study, Annex IV, Appendix 5 for more detailed findings of the meta-analysis of national impact evaluations. Available at: [Annexes](#).

<sup>97</sup> For example, under IP8.i (Access to employment) the Netherlands supported job coaches for workers with a disability starting in a new job, achieving a 26% successful exit rate. In Cyprus, operations under IP9.iii supported continued development of a Disability and Functionality Assessment System including Disability Assessment Centres, which allowed an extension of support measures and services to people with autism.

<sup>98</sup> For example, in Latvia operators in healthcare and social services were targeted to improve the social inclusion of people with disabilities.

<sup>99</sup> HAEPP, T., Meta-analysis of the European Social Fund counterfactual impact evaluations: First quantitative results on education outcomes, European Commission, Ispra, 2025, JRC143146. Available at: <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC143146>

<sup>100</sup> Not all of the education studies used for the meta-analysis refer to the 2014-2020 programming period. Out of 26 studies corresponding to 271 estimates, 20 refer to the 2014-2020 programming period.

<sup>101</sup> See supporting study, Annex VIII IP10.i case study. Available at: [Annexes](#).

case study evidence on significant changes at the level of institutions or education and training systems was more limited, with the IP 10.ii case study (*improving the quality and access to tertiary and equivalent education and training*) identifying positive effects at the level of, for example, supporting the introduction of new or enhanced higher education courses and some examples of a contribution of more structural changes for example in Latvia<sup>102</sup>, Germany and Spain<sup>103</sup>.

### *On a macro level*

Given the limited size of the ESF and YEI funding (including REACT-EU, it corresponds to around 1.3% of 2014 nominal GDP in the EU to be spent across all implementation years), large macroeconomic impacts cannot be expected. In addition, the presence of external factors (such as the impact of national policies and budgets and the general economic environment) makes the isolation of the economic impact of ESF and YEI operations difficult. Econometric and/ or modelling approaches can, nonetheless, be used to derive an estimate on the basis of available data and assumptions. Such estimates might still be subject to influence from external factors if the used model's underlying assumptions are not correct.

The RHOMOLO model operated by the EC's Joint Research Centre was used to simulate the macroeconomic impact of the 2014-2020 ESF (including REACT-EU) and YEI programme compared to a "no-policy baseline".<sup>104</sup> In terms of employment, a positive impact is estimated on the number of individuals being in work relative to the baseline in which no policy is implemented. Generally positive impacts were also estimated with respect to reducing skills mismatches. In addition, the model estimates that in 2022, the EU wide GDP impact of ESF investments (including YEI and REACT-EU) stands at 0.086%, meaning that 9 years after the start of the programme, EU GDP is estimated to be 12.2 billion euro higher than the baseline GDP. The return on investment in terms of GDP shows that 1 euro spent is estimated to yield a total of 1.256 euro in 2030<sup>105</sup> (GDP multiplier based on cumulative change) for ESF, YEI and REACT-EU combined<sup>106</sup>. Compared to the CBA results described in section 4.1.2.1, the macro-

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<sup>102</sup> See supporting study, Annex VIII IP 10.ii case study. Available at: [Annexes](#).

<sup>103</sup> See supporting study, Annex VIII IP 10.iv case study. Available at: [Annexes](#).

<sup>104</sup> Casas, Pablo and Christou, Tryfonas and García Rodríguez, Abián and Lazarou, Nicholas Joseph and Salotti, Simone (2025): *The ex-post macroeconomic evaluation of the 2014-2020 European Social Fund, Youth Employment Initiative and REACT-EU labour market interventions*.

<sup>105</sup> Certain benefits and costs could not be quantified in monetary terms in the CBA, such as employer benefits (with the exception of employee training), improvement in the quality of life, reduction of dependence on certain services, integration into communities, macroeconomic effects, benefits related to good governance and capacity building as well as indirect costs. As a result, these aspects were only considered qualitatively, and their exclusion affected the monetary return calculations. Moreover, the reported cumulative costs were used as observed, hence at current prices and, therefore, were not corrected for differences in purchasing power. Macroeconomic knock-on effects are further benefits that were ignored in the CBA but are covered in the RHOMOLO modelling produced by the EC's Joint Research Centre.

<sup>106</sup> Looking only at YEI, the multiplier is 0.94 euro, and for REACT-EU only, it is 1.7 euro in 2030. For further details on results by TO or by country, please see Casas, Pablo and Christou, Tryfonas and García Rodríguez,

economic modelling applied led to lower impact results due to different reasons. While macroeconomic models as Rhomolo simulate system responses and offer a comprehensive view of long-term, interactions and indirect effects, they can lead to more conservative estimates. The CBA focused on discounting net returns of projects and can sometimes overstate benefits due to methodological limitations and underlying assumptions.

Among the thematic objectives, TO 11 (institutional capacity building) stands out, with the highest return on investment in terms of GDP (a total of 4.4 euros in 2030 for every 1 euro spent in this TO). These larger economic returns are due to public infrastructure investments increasing the public capital stock, subsequently raising productivity for all firms which then leads to a stimulation of labour demand.

A further assessment of the economic benefits of the ESF is presented when discussing the cost-benefit analysis in the section on efficiency.

### *On a structural level*

Given the relatively small size of the ESF/YEI budget compared to national ones, the ESF contributions to changes on a more structural level were comparatively more limited. Still, there was some evidence of positive influence of the ESF on policies and some more specific examples of changes at a more systemic level. This holds in particular for the implementation of the Youth Guarantee, with the YEI having a significant contribution to the delivery of the Youth Guarantee<sup>107</sup> and the ESF and YEI being a source of its funding in the majority of Member States. In line with previous findings<sup>108</sup>, stakeholders showed broad recognition of the YEI as crucial intervention, leading to a more coherent policy and funding approach to the integration of NEETs into the labour market as well as generating considerable EU value added by supporting interventions that were not funded by national policies<sup>109</sup>. In addition, support to structural changes especially around digitalised services was identified under TO11 operations. However, a direct association to ESF support is not possible, inter alia due to the context-specific nature of structural reforms and their longer implementation horizon<sup>110 111</sup>.

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Abián and Lazarou, Nicholas Joseph and Salotti, Simone (2025): *The ex-post macroeconomic evaluation of the 2014-2020 European Social Fund, Youth Employment Initiative and REACT-EU labour market interventions*.

<sup>107</sup> European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, Jeffrey, P., Naylor, I., Parissaki, M. et al., *Study for the evaluation of ESF support to youth employment*, Publications Office, 2020, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/681170>

<sup>108</sup> European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, Jeffrey, P., Naylor, I., Parissaki, M. et al., *Study for the evaluation of ESF support to youth employment*, Publications Office, 2020, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/681170>

<sup>109</sup> See supporting study, Annex VIII. Available at: [Annexes](#).

<sup>110</sup> See also European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, Thijs, N., Nakrošis, V., *Progress Assessment of ESF Support to Public Administration (PAPA) – Summary report*, Publications Office, 2020, available at: <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/03954>

<sup>111</sup> See also supporting study, Annex VIII. For instance, in IP level case studies, consulted stakeholders commonly noted that other cohesion/structural funds, alongside national policy reforms and strategies, were equally or more significant drivers of change in most cases

A positive influence of the ESF is also confirmed by a study on achieving structural changes in ESF<sup>112</sup>. Using a broad definition of structural reforms, the ESF contributed with funding to almost half of the analysed reforms between 2014 and 2022, and stakeholders acknowledged the importance of the ESF's contribution to designing and implementing these reforms. Additionally, the study shows a significant contribution of ESF towards capacity building efforts, highlighting the support of operations under TO11 as one of the key facilitators of structural change.

Country-specific recommendations (CSR)<sup>113</sup> issued to Member States on how to address structural challenges were also taken into account in the 2014 to 2020 programming period. Between 2012 and 2014, CSRs on labour market policies, quality employment, and labour mobility were the most frequent with 204 recommendations issued, followed by 116 in the area of education and training.<sup>114</sup> The supporting study found a broad correlation between Member States' socio-economic contexts (e.g. the prevalence of relatively low employment rates), CSRs issued to them, and ESF allocations at TO level. For instance, the CSRs addressed to Portugal placed a focus on improving the quality and relevance of the education system to the labour market and more than half of total resources were allocated to TO 10. 88% of relevant CSRs issued to Member States were linked to ESF or YEI funds and all stakeholder groups expressed positive views on the contribution of the ESF and YEI to implementing CSRs. However, a clear conclusion on the effectiveness of the ESF and YEI contribution cannot be made due to two factors. First, while case studies data provide multiple examples of how operations responded to CSRs, stakeholders were unable to attribute this to the active and systematic consideration of the CSRs as opposed to a natural overlap between the focus of CSRs and the ESF. Second, stakeholders assessed the potential of ESF funding to fully address the recommendations as limited compared to other national reforms or interventions due to its scope and scale.

The collected evidence demonstrates contributions to increased employment opportunities, the promotion of social inclusion, upskilling of workers and enhanced education provision. Effectiveness shows some variation at the level of operations. In addition, some evidence points to contributions at the macro and structural level, even though these are rather limited inter alia due to the small size of the ESF and YEI budget compared to national ones.

#### **4.1.1.3 THE ROLE OF ESF AND YEI IN CRISIS RESPONSE<sup>115</sup>**

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<sup>112</sup> European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, Ž. Martinaitis, A. Morozovaitė, M. Saletti, E. Colaiacomo, C. Pagnini, and G Dente, *Study supporting the Impact assessment of the future European Social Fund proposal - Achieving structural change: conditions for success in the areas of ESF intervention. Final report*, Publications Office, 2025, [Study supporting the impact assessment of the future European Social Fund proposal - Publications Office of the EU](#).

<sup>113</sup>In the context of the European Semester, the Commission provides guidance to Member States on an annual basis on how to respond to challenges and to deliver on policy objectives in the so-called Country Specific Recommendations; [https://commission.europa.eu/business-economy-euro/european-semester\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/business-economy-euro/european-semester_en)

<sup>114</sup> See supporting study, Annex IV appendix 7. Available at: [Annexes](#).

<sup>115</sup> See answer to evaluation question Q10 of the supporting study. Available at: [Study supporting the ex-post evaluation of the 2014-2020 European social fund and youth employment initiative - Publications Office of the EU](#)

Both the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine represented serious crises that the ESF sought to address during the 2014-2022 evaluation period. The CRII(+), REACT-EU (adopted in December 2020) and CARE (adopted in 2022) initiatives aimed at mitigating the economic and social impacts of the crises, while, in the case of REACT-EU, also supporting the EU's green and digital transition objectives. For that purpose, they offered, on the one hand, flexibilities to swiftly respond to the emerging crisis needs via reorientated funds, and on the other, additional funds via REACT-EU. The REACT-EU initiative continued and expanded the existing crisis response. Moreover, it supported longer-term recovery efforts and prepared structural actions for twin transition.

The preliminary CRII evaluation<sup>116</sup> highlighted that the rapid adjustments facilitated within ESF programming were pivotal to support the broader pandemic response's effectiveness. 23 countries reallocated ESF funding between TOs, with CRII flexibilities enabling almost EUR 2 billion of funding to be re-allocated to social inclusion responses (TO 9) and EUR 215 million to employment-related operations<sup>117</sup>. Evidence from the CRII case study confirmed that the rapid response, procedural simplification, and additional flexibilities effectively facilitated the adjustment of resource allocation to national and regional crisis response needs. Additionally, both the preliminary CRII evaluation and case study evidence indicates that the crisis response measures enabled by the CRII/CRII+ were more easily and rapidly adapted compared to the tools deployed in response to the financial crisis of 2007-2008.

Resource and time constraints were challenges despite the flexibilities offered. Nevertheless, they did not affect the overall stakeholder judgement of the effective and valuable response. Also, no strong evidence emerged relating to concerns that reduced allocations to TO 10 could result in possible long-term effects and a diversion from longer-term cohesion policy objectives<sup>118 119</sup>.

During the preparation of the supporting study<sup>120</sup>, information on the implementation of REACT-EU and CARE including from result indicators and dedicated evaluations was still limited. Furthermore, interventions were still being implemented during evidence gathering for the ex-post evaluation, implying also the lack of final implementation reports. However, preliminary evidence from the REACT-EU and CARE case studies<sup>121</sup> demonstrates a broadly positive picture. For REACT-EU, this holds in particular for the prevention of job losses through funding short-time work schemes (alongside the Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency (SURE) instrument) and for CARE, stakeholders noted that operations are proving broadly effective in labour market integration of persons fleeing the war in Ukraine and learning the receiving country's language.

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<sup>116</sup> European Commission: Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, Atkinson, I., Andriescu, M., Spyridopoulos, K., Broughton, A. et al., *Study supporting the preliminary evaluation of the support provided by ESF and FEAD under the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiatives (CRII and CRII+) – Final report*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2023, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/160531>

<sup>117</sup> Ibid

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> See supporting study, Annex VIII. Available at: [Annexes](#).

<sup>120</sup> For which a large part of primary research was completed by September 2023.

<sup>121</sup> See supporting study, Annex VIII. Available at: [Annexes](#).

Beyond the supporting study, the Commission's dedicated REACT-EU evaluation published in October 2025<sup>122</sup> finds that REACT-EU was rapid and - compared to its overall size - effective in addressing the health and economic impacts of the COVID-19, crisis as well as in bridging the two programming periods<sup>123</sup>. It brought forward the implementation of the next framework, notably through the recovery measures laying the foundation for the 2021-2027 programmes to enhance resilience of Member States.

To respond swiftly to migratory challenges following Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, CARE/FASTCARE measures provided Member States with flexibility, liquidity and simplification to facilitate the use of cohesion policy funds<sup>124</sup>. According to the supporting study, the support effectively reached the refugees and adapted services to their needs. For example, Hungary successfully financed public education for 5 700 young persons who fled Ukraine. In Italy, Germany and Sweden, stakeholders noted that support proved effective in addressing labour market integration and providing language support for refugees.

#### **4.1.1.4 KEY FACTORS INFLUENCING EFFECTIVENESS<sup>125</sup>**

Evidence from the interviews, public consultation, desk research and case study research were triangulated in the supporting study to identify the key factors that facilitated or hindered effectiveness. The following subsection groups these factors by broad topic and indicates a facilitating factor with a (+) and a hindering factor with a (-).

- Stakeholder involvement and synergies
  - (+) Presence of well-developed networks and strong cooperation among stakeholders and partners. This allowed to draw on the expertise of partners close to target groups in engaging these and responding to their (changing) needs, enhancing effectiveness in achieving intended outputs and results.
  - (+) Effective synergies with related operations, other policy instruments and funding sources. This facilitated referral between operations and results in positive reinforcement.
- Analysis of target groups and labour markets
  - (+) Effectively defining and understanding target groups, drawing on insights from various sources, including the expertise of organisations working with particularly hard to reach groups 'on the ground', alongside effective dissemination and communication to support outreach and engagement.
  - (+) Effective mechanisms to collate and disseminate learning from and to delivery organisations, for example via working groups on specific topics, as well as follow-up actions based on these findings.

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<sup>122</sup> Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the evaluation of REACT-EU. Published 10 October 2025. Available at:

[COM 2025 634 F1 REPORT FROM COMMISSION EN V4 P1 4084848.pdf](#)

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> European Court of Auditors Special report 05/2025: Cohesion's Action for Refugees in Europe

<sup>125</sup> See answer to evaluation questions 1, 2, 4 and 6 of the supporting study. Available at: [Study supporting the ex-post evaluation of the 2014-2020 European social fund and youth employment initiative - Publications Office of the EU](#)

- (+) Sufficient ex-ante and ongoing analysis of labour market, education and social inclusion priorities at all levels, thereby facilitating the needs' assessment across target groups and effective use of data and intelligence to match labour markets' and target groups' needs and capacities.
- Governance and institutional support
    - (+) Effective governance and implementation approaches; specifically, adequate staff resources and skills as well as well-designed governance structures with appropriate stakeholder representation and the ability to assess and adapt implementation as it progresses.
    - (+) Reduced administrative burdens and reporting requirements through simplification. Compared to the previous programming period, this refers specifically to the introduction of simplified cost options, alongside the digitalisation of funding application processes and procedures.
    - (+) The close link to the Europe 2020 Strategy and the EPSR as well as the requirement to allocate a minimum 20% of the ESF allocation to social inclusion has helped to better target programmes, to support advocacy for the inclusion of disadvantaged people and to enhance the focus on broader social objectives alongside employment support.
    - (-) Administrative burdens or costs, particularly for smaller organisations and the complexity of ESF management. The issue was a particular challenge in relation to understanding guidance, monitoring data, and ESF audit requirements.
    - (-) Limitations in terms of resources, capacity and/or expertise, particularly amongst smaller or more specialist delivery organisations and in relation to gender mainstreaming and non-discrimination and how to address discrimination in contexts where prejudices are still strong.
    - (-) Lack of a supporting national policy framework and levels of awareness of the social economy and its potential contributions.
  - Reaching target groups
    - (+) Adopting practical, individualised and tailored approaches to support individuals.
    - (-) Difficulties in motivating harder to reach target groups due to the disengagement of such individuals from public services and society. This limits participation numbers and hampers effective implementation.
    - (-) 'The creaming effect', in the sense of delivery organisations being incentivised via targets or payment structures to focus support at those groups more easily reached or closer to the labour market.
    - (-) Limited flexibility to shift attention and resources between target groups.
  - Technical issues
    - (-) Difficulties in monitoring of participants' development or results, especially those after six months, including due to data-sharing or access limitations.

(-) Delays concerning slow public procurement, technical delays in implementing digital systems, and later than anticipated implementation.

#### **4.1.2. EFFICIENCY**

The efficiency of operations is primarily evaluated through a cost-benefit analysis. This analysis informs judgments on efficiency across various operations and contexts, highlighting significant cost differences across Member States and Regions.

Beyond this core analysis, the examination also encompasses broader aspects of efficiency, including:

- The impact of organisational structures and implementation approaches on efficiency.
- The identification of unnecessary administrative burdens and instances of 'gold plating'<sup>126</sup>
- The extent to which simplification solutions have been utilized.
- The role of reporting and monitoring in supporting efficient and cost-effective delivery.

A comprehensive review of these dimensions has revealed both programme-wide common themes and issues specific to individual TOs, which are presented here-below.

##### **4.1.2.1 COST EFFECTIVENESS OF DIFFERENT ACTIVITIES<sup>127</sup>**

Looking at the data presented so far in the analysis, the declared expenditure at the end of 2022 of EUR 111.7 billion across 64.6 million participations results in a cost of EUR 1,729 per participation.

A CBA of ESF and YEI interventions was conducted in the supporting study<sup>128</sup>, leveraging monitoring data on output and result indicators as well as financial data to assess the cost-effectiveness of operations across different Thematic Objectives and Member States. This analysis was supplemented with external data, such as wage levels and tax rates, and assumptions, like those related to career breaks<sup>129</sup> and discount rates. Methodological details are available in Annex V of the supporting study.

The CBA compared costs and benefits of the ESF and YEI. Data on costs were taken from the SFC monitoring data, namely the money that the Managing Authorities have paid to beneficiaries – the so-called declared expenditures. These costs include both the share borne by Member States and the share reimbursed by the European Commission and were assumed to

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<sup>126</sup> Gold-plating is an expression which refers to Member States going beyond what is strictly required by EU legislation when they implement it at national level. This may enhance the benefits but can also add unnecessary costs for businesses and public authorities which are mistakenly associated with EU legislation.

<sup>127</sup> See answers to evaluation questions in section 4.1.2.1. Costs and benefits of operations of the supporting study and Annex III of the present SWD. Available at: [Annexes](#).

<sup>128</sup> See Annex V of the supporting study. Available at: [Study supporting the ex-post evaluation of the 2014-2020 European social fund and youth employment initiative - Publications Office of the EU](#) and [Annexes](#).

<sup>129</sup> In accordance with the Better Regulation Guidelines where applicable to calculate the so-called discount rate

include all direct costs for the purpose of the present analysis. Data on indirect costs may be available from a limited number of case studies but were ignored in the present CBA where the focus was on a workable methodology for all Member States and IPs.

Costs were in most cases calculated per participant since the calculation of unit costs and benefits per participant improves the comparability of costs and benefits between Member States and investment priorities .

Costs per participant were calculated as the ratio of declared expenditures to the total number of participants based on cumulative data up to and including 2022 (making the assumption that each participation recorded in the system corresponds to one participant). The reported cumulative costs were used as observed, hence at current prices instead of price levels of a fixed year. Costs per participant per IP are calculated excluding expenditures on REACT-EU. The EU average cost per participant was calculated by dividing the part of total declared expenditure (that in the present CBA was estimated to be spent directly on participants across all Member States) by the total number of participants. Thus, costs are not corrected for differences in purchasing power.

For certain IPs where certain Member States invest predominantly in projects (e.g. by social partners or NGOs, projects for women to employment, public administration projects, SMEs supported), the split of costs between participants (individuals) and entities or projects was estimated. The approach was to use data from other Member States that only support individuals or only entities to estimate the split of costs in Member States where a mix of individuals and entities or projects were supported. In doing so, the CBA also took account of differences in purchasing power parities. The cost per entity is then estimated as the remaining expenditures divided by the number of entities.

Results were expressed per unit for the same indicators as the costs. In most cases, these were results per participant. For most Member States and investment priorities, data on results were available from common indicators. Benefits of increased productivity are in most cases excluded from the analysis, except for employee training. Macroeconomic knock-on effects are further benefits that were ignored in the CBA but are covered in the RHOMOLO modelling produced by the EC's Joint Research Centre.

The analysis estimated costs and benefits at the level of investment priorities and Member States. The results of interventions generated various public and private benefits, including:

- Public benefits to governments in terms of higher income tax revenue, higher VAT revenue, and reduced benefit expenditures as a result of improved labour market outcomes (e.g. better employment and wages, less unemployment, a more productive workforce)<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Public benefits from increasing employment consist not only in income tax revenues, employee social security contributions and employer social security contributions, but also in the increase of VAT on increased consumer expenditures. Entering employment increases the household income of the participants, a higher household income means that more income is spent on consumer needs, which in turn generates additional VAT revenues. Because income gains are greater for higher educated workers than for lower educated workers, VAT revenues will also

- Private benefits to participants such as the increase in household income after entering employment, made possible through e.g. support for individuals, projects and small and medium-sized enterprises<sup>131</sup>

It is to be noted that certain benefits and costs could not be quantified in monetary terms, such as employer benefits (with the exception of employee training), improvement in the quality of life, reduction of dependence on certain services, integration into communities, indirect costs, macroeconomic effects, and benefits related to good governance and capacity building. As a result, these aspects were only considered qualitatively, and their exclusion affected the monetary return calculations.

To estimate which part of the result may be attributable to ESF and YEI, (i.e. net effectiveness rate), results of supported individuals needed to be compared with results for people with comparable characteristics who were not supported, the so-called counterfactual. A meta-analysis study on counterfactual impact evaluations has been done by JRC, who calculated the net effectiveness defined as the result that is attributable to ESF for different types of interventions<sup>132</sup>. From this analysis, the present CBA used data on net effectiveness for the 2014-2020 programming period (more specifically, only the data based on the balanced method which uses only the main result of each study to ensure that they all have an equal weight irrespective of the number of estimates provided).

This results in average impacts on employment at the EU level for different intervention types (see Table 3 below).

**Table 3: Balanced average<sup>133</sup> impact in employment of ESF by type of intervention (percentage points increase in employment probability for participants compared to non-participants)**

Type of intervention	ESF 2014-2020; Balanced estimate
Vocational training	5.2
Other training	4.9
Mentoring and social support	2.2
Employment subsidies and financial aid	15.1
Internships and traineeships	6.7

differ by educational level. Entering employment reduces social assistance transfers, which is a substantial part of public benefits. Training, education and qualifications open doors for employment or higher positions.

<sup>131</sup> The ESF interventions generate benefits to workers, which are equal to the returns because workers are assumed not to bear any cost. This may be too optimistic for some interventions such as training of unemployed and inactive participants who may face a lock-in effect of not being employed while in training. The private return to ESF investments to the jobseeker in IP9.i, 9.ii, 9.iii and 9.vi are naturally positive because the intervention increases the likelihood of employment. There are other private benefits like health or wellbeing improvement, but this could not be monetised.

<sup>132</sup> Haepf, T. and Serrano Alarcon, M., Meta-analysis of the European Social Fund counterfactual impact evaluations: Brief update with alternative measures, European Commission, Ispra, 2024, JRC137571, Available at: <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC137571>

<sup>133</sup> The table shows the balanced average effect, explained in Haepf and Serrano-Alarcón (2024). This selects only the single most representative coefficient from each intervention based on a pre-defined selection procedure, in contrast to the average effect, which assigns the same weight to each effect that has been coded, meaning that effects from an intervention for which many effects from different age and gender groups could be retrieved from a study report enter multiple times in the calculation of the overall average effect.

Type of intervention	ESF 2014-2020; Balanced estimate
Public employment	-10.2
<b>Average<sup>134</sup></b>	<b>5.9</b>

Source: Haepf and Serrano-Alarcón (2024)<sup>135</sup>. See also Section 4.1.1.2 above.

It is to be noted that the JRC meta-analysis did not estimate the net effectiveness for individual investment priorities or Member States. For the CBA, therefore, assumptions were made about the assumed predominant types of interventions within each investment priority and those were mapped with the corresponding net effectiveness rate from the meta-analysis or rates from other studies (see Table 4). If many types of interventions were used in one IP, the overall balanced average net effectiveness rate of 5.9 percentage points was applied. Also, a uniform ESF net effectiveness rate is applied across all Member States, irrespective of the country-specific rates.

**Table 4: Assumed average ESF net effectiveness assumption per investment priority<sup>136</sup>**

IP	Short description	Assumed main intervention	Rationale	Net %
8i	Access to employment	Overall balanced average	Many types of interventions	5.9
8ii	Youth employment	Vocational training	YEI evaluation report	2.9 <sup>a)</sup>
8iii	Self-employment	Financial aid	Start capital	15.1
		Mentoring, social support	Promotion, counselling	2.2
8iv	Gender equality	Overall balanced average	Many types of interventions	5.9
8v	Work adaption	Employee training	Mostly employed participants	--- <sup>b)</sup>
		Outplacement	Mix of interventions	5.9
8vi	Active and healthy ageing	Other training	Training improves adaptability	4.9
8vii	Labour mobility	Other training	Training improves adaptability	4.9
		Job counselling	Study on LMP services	0.6-2.3
9i	Active inclusion	Overall balanced average	Many types of interventions	5.9
9ii	Demarginalisation	Vocational training	Low-med educated participants	5.2
9iii	Combating discrimination	Varies	Each country different measure	--

<sup>134</sup> The average net effectiveness of 5.9 percentage points indicates that participants in ESF interventions have 5.9 percentage points higher probability to be employed than those who are not participating (counterfactual).

<sup>135</sup> Haepf, T. and Serrano Alarcon, M., Meta-analysis of the European Social Fund counterfactual impact evaluations: Brief update with alternative measures, European Commission, Ispra, 2024, JRC137571, Available at: <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC137571>

<sup>136</sup> The JRC net effectiveness rates are applied to individual investment priorities based on assumptions about the prevailing type of intervention. If many types of interventions were used in one investment priority, the average net effectiveness rate of 5.9% is used. The net effectiveness rate is the part that can be reliably attributed to the intervention. For instance, in the case of IP8i, the net effectiveness is 5.9 pps, and 20.9% of the participants entered employment, meaning that only 15 percent of the participants (20.9% minus 5.9 pps) would have entered employment without the intervention.

IP	Short description	Assumed main intervention	Rationale	Net %
9iv	Access to basic services	Training of medics	Employee training	-- <sup>b)</sup>
		Health promotion or checks	Integration of services	--- <sup>c)</sup>
9v	Social employment	Public employment	Non-regular employment	-10.2
9vi	Local development	Programme specific	Mostly projects	---
10i	Early school leavers	School counselling	Main result is education	12 <sup>d)</sup>
10ii	Access to tertiary education	Education grants	Main result is education	15 <sup>d)</sup>
10iii	Lifelong learning	Other training	Non-employed participants	4.9
		Employee training	Employed participants	--- <sup>b)</sup>
10iv	Labour market relevance	Overall balanced average	Many types of interventions	5.9

Source: supporting study, Annex V

a) For Youth employment, both ESF and YEI, the net effectiveness rate has been taken from the Study for the Evaluation of ESF Support to Youth Employment<sup>137</sup>

b) For employee training the net effectiveness has been estimated directly in an OECD paper<sup>138</sup>

c) For integration of services the return has been estimated in a recent study<sup>139</sup>

d) For IP10i and IP10ii other sources are used to estimate the additionality of the intervention

It should be noted that compared to the macro-economic modelling, the CBA applied led to higher impact results due to different reasons (e.g. different methodologies i.e. CBA discounting net returns while macro-modelling simulating system responses, or timeframes considered). Macroeconomic models as Rhomolo offer a comprehensive view of long-term, interactions and indirect effects, they can lead to more conservative estimates, while CBA focuses on specific projects and can sometimes overstate benefits due to methodological limitations.

## Returns at EU level

Benefits and costs were compared as a difference (called a return) or as a ratio (called a benefit-cost ratio) between the two<sup>140</sup>. The evidence points to a largely positive cost effectiveness of ESF in terms of net returns on investment and benefit-to-cost ratios. This implies that the benefits are achieved at relatively low costs, overall and at the level of investment priority, notably for the following IPs:

<sup>137</sup> See <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=22747&langId=en>

<sup>138</sup> Fialho, P., G. Quintini and M. Vandeweyer (2019), Returns to different forms of job related training: Factoring in informal learning, OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers No. 231, Available at: [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/returns-to-different-forms-of-job-related-training\\_b21807e9-en](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/returns-to-different-forms-of-job-related-training_b21807e9-en)

<sup>139</sup> Ecorys and Budapest Institute (2020), Study about the methodology to measure the returns on investment from integrated social assistance schemes, Available at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/e2a4c40c-3b60-11eb-b27b-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

<sup>140</sup> Ratios of private + public benefits to costs, 2014-2022: To compare the benefits in proportion to the cost, quantifiable private and public benefits were added and then divided by the cost (benefit-cost ratio) for each IP.

- + IP8.i: *Access to employment* (with a return of EUR 26,000 and a ratio of 16)
- + IP8.iii: *Self-employment* (with a return of EUR 40,000 and a ratio of 20.5)
- + IP9.i: *Active inclusion* (with a return of EUR 31,000 and a ratio of 16.2)
- + IP10.i: *Early school leaving prevention and learning pathways* (with a return of EUR 27,000 and a ratio of 43)
- + IP10.ii: *Access to tertiary education* (with a return of EUR 29,000 and a ratio of 14.8)

However, some benefits could not be quantified due to a lack of data and the difficulty in estimating them, such as most benefits to employers as well as intangible benefits (e.g. improvements to the quality of life), which means a significant advantage was not accounted for in the overall return on investment calculation.

Table 5 below shows the overall present value of private and public returns (benefits – costs) on investment per participant at EU level (see column D). It is noted that a strongly negative benefit-cost ratio may indicate either significantly negative benefits or low costs, rendering the exact value of negative ratios less meaningful. In such cases, negative ratios are only qualitatively indicated. A more detailed breakdown of the cost-benefit analysis and results for each TO is presented after this section.

**Table 5: EU Private and public lifetime return per participant (EUR), by investment priority, 2014-2022**

IP	Cost per participant (A)	Private return <sup>141</sup> (B)	Public return <sup>142</sup> (C)	Sum of returns <sup>143</sup> (D=B+C)	Benefit-cost ratio <sup>a</sup> (E = 1+ D/A)
<b>8i Access to employment</b>	1 767	11 152	15 316	26 468	16.0
<b>8ii Youth employment</b>	2 151	7 341	9 876	17 217	9.0
<b>8iii Self-employment</b>	2 060	13 862	26 292	40 154	20.5
<b>8iv Gender equality</b>	1 649	11 843	10 901	22 744	14.8
<b>8v Work adaptation</b>	1 203	2 189	2 062	4 251	4.6
<b>8vi Active and healthy ageing</b>	--	NA	NA	NA	NA
<b>8vii Labour mobility</b>	--	NA	NA	NA	NA
<b>9i Active inclusion</b>	2 028	11 211	19 588	30 799	16.2
<b>9ii Demarginalisation</b>	1 693	4 916	4 430	9 346	6.5

<sup>141</sup> The participant return (B) is equivalent to the private benefit, as ESF participants do not incur costs to participate in the intervention, except for IP10.i and IP10.ii (participants forgo income and pay college fees).

<sup>142</sup> The public return (C) is calculated as the difference between the public benefit and the cost per participant.

<sup>143</sup> The sum of private and public returns is the overall monetisable return of ESF, which can be expressed as a difference between benefits and costs, called returns (D), which in this study is calculated at the level of investment priorities, or as a ratio of benefits to costs or benefit-cost ratio (E). Benefits are greater than the cost if the return is greater than zero (column D), or if the benefit-cost ratio is greater than one (column E).

IP	Cost per participant (A)	Private return <sup>141</sup> (B)	Public return <sup>142</sup> (C)	Sum of returns <sup>143</sup> (D=B+C)	Benefit-cost ratio <sup>a</sup> (E = 1+ D/A)
<b>9iii Combating discrimination</b>	1 200	NA	NA	0	NA
<b>9iv Access to basic services</b>	1 577	NA	1 825	NA	NA
<b>9v Social employment</b>	2 176	68 327	-/- 103 866	-/- 35 539	NEG
<b>9vi Local development</b>	1 636	9 539	7 749	17 288	11.6
<b>10i Early school leavers</b>	642	17 824	9 180	27,004	43
<b>10ii Access to tertiary education</b>	2 073	23 530	5 076	28,606	14.8
<b>10iii Lifelong learning</b>	1 260	4 110	7 266	11,376	10
<b>10iv Labour market relevance</b>	2 182	1 799	-/- 450	1,349	1.6

Source: Supporting study, cost-effectiveness analysis NA means: unit costs could be calculated meaningfully for too few Member States to calculate an EU average

a) Because return = benefit – cost, it follows that benefit = cost + return, and benefit/cost = (cost + return)/cost = 1 + return/cost = 1+D/A

-/- means negative value

The benefit-cost ratio for each IP of TO 8, 9 and 10 were also presented by country and at EU level<sup>144</sup>. The benefit-cost ratio varied significantly across different countries as they targeted different groups or implemented different types of measures or because there are differences in efficiency<sup>145</sup>. Moreover, these results also differ from the macro-economic modelling applied (Rhomolo) due to different reasons as explained in section 4.1.1.2 above.

### TO 8

Within TO 8 the combined private and public returns on investment are highest for two areas: *access to employment* (IP8.i) and *self-employment* (IP8.iii). The public returns on self-employment were particularly substantial, primarily due to the effectiveness of financial support for inactive individuals starting their own businesses.

<sup>144</sup> See more detailed overview tables presenting i) unit costs, ii) successful exit rates per individual participant, iii) unit costs per successful participant, iv) public return (to the State) per participant of 2014-2022 for each IP in section 4.1.2.1. Costs and benefits of operations of the supporting study.

<sup>145</sup> For TO 11 (capacity building) and 13 (REACT-EU), benefits cannot be monetized because the type of benefit is generally unknown. For TO 11, participants are typically officials working at for example Public Employment Services, to improve their skills to support or to monitor job seekers. However, what benefits bring this support is unknown. For REACT-EU, even though funds are administratively allocated to one of the ESF investment priorities, the measures can be different from the standard investment priorities, and common output or result indicators for REACT-EU cannot be attributed to specific investment priorities as is the case for TO 8 through TO 10. Hence, for both TO 11 and 13 only result ratios and unit costs are presented in the annex related to the CBA to reflect cost-effectiveness. As a result, benefit-cost ratios were only provided for IPs belonging to TO 8, 9 and 10 and, therefore, it was not possible to compute an average benefit-cost ratio for the whole ESF.

Additionally, *investments in youth employment* (IP8.ii) and *gender equality* (IP8.iv) also yielded positive returns, with estimated values of around EUR 17,000 and EUR 23,000 per participant respectively. These investments focused on more disadvantaged groups, yet still generated positive outcomes. Specifically, gender equality support, which largely involved childcare assistance and access to employment for women re-entrants and migrant spouses, has shown to produce positive returns.

At the EU level, the sum of discounted future benefits is between 5 and 20 times higher than the cost for all five IPs where the EU average could be meaningfully calculated.

### TO 9

Investments under the TO 9 framework yielded varying returns on investment. Notably, *active inclusion initiatives* (IP9.i) and *vocational training to combat marginalization* (IP9.ii) generated the most positive combined private and public returns, with estimated values of approximately EUR 31,000 and EUR 9,000 per participant, respectively, at the EU level.

In almost all Member States, *active inclusion* (IP9.i) produced positive public returns, while *vocational training* (IP9.ii) yielded positive public returns in nearly all Member States, except for two with relatively high ESF unit costs. Furthermore, investments in *access to basic services* (IP9.iv) generated small but positive public returns in most Member States, primarily due to the labour market effects. Although the primary objectives of these investments were not employment or qualification gains, the outcomes were still moderately positive.

In contrast, investments in *social employment* (IP9.v) produced substantial negative returns, estimated at approximately EUR 36,000 per participant at the EU level. This was primarily due to two factors: the high costs of providing a full-time minimum wage until retirement age, and the reduced likelihood of regular employment by about 10 pps for those employed in public work schemes. However, investments in social enterprises can still be justified as a means of providing meaningful support to individuals with severe disabilities. Periodic re-examinations of disability, such as those implemented in Belgium, could potentially mitigate the negative effects. Also, it needs to be noted that these schemes often have mainly a social inclusion dimension. They rather target softer, intangible results such as improved well-being or a sense of belonging instead of moving participants into regular employment.

The benefits of *combating discrimination* (IP9.iii) and *local development* (IP9.vi) initiatives were more challenging to quantify. Many measures, such as investments in awareness of discrimination, cannot be monetised due to a lack of data on their impact on workers. Additionally, local development investments often have varying focuses on employment and differing ESF unit costs, which may be influenced by the reallocation of costs to participants.

For the three IPs where benefit-to-cost ratios at the EU level could be meaningfully estimated and were positive, the ratios vary between 6 and 16.

### TO 10

Investments in education yielded significant returns, both privately and publicly, particularly when focused on young individuals. At the EU level, the returns on investment are substantial:

- *Early school leaving prevention* (IP10.i) generated approximately EUR 27,000 per participant.
- *Tertiary education access* (IP10.ii) yielded around EUR 29,000 per participant.

*Lifelong learning investments* (IP10.iii) also showed promising returns, especially for unemployed or inactive workers, as it increased their employment prospects. However, for employed workers, investments are only estimated as fruitful if average costs remain low (under EUR 1,000 per participant).

Investments in *labour market relevance of education* (IP10.iv) also yielded a positive overall return on investment of around EUR 1,350 per participant, although accompanied by a negative public return of EUR 450 per participant. It is to be noted, however, that many of the benefits of such investments cannot be monetized, such as making vocational education more attractive, reducing early school leaving, and keeping curricula up-to-date.

The sum of private and public benefits was positive for all IPs and Member States under TO 10. Ratios of about 100 or higher are explained by low unit costs, as is the case for IP10.iii in Bulgaria (unit cost EUR 23), IP10.i in France (unit cost EUR 258) and IP10.iii in Spain (unit cost EUR 124). At the EU level, the ratio varied from 1.6<sup>146</sup> for IP10.iv to 43 for IP10.i.

## TO 11

### *IP11.i (good governance)*

The ESF invested in IP11.i (*good governance*) in a mix of participants and entities. The main result for participants was the achievement of a qualification or improved skills. In contrast, entity-level results were more varied, encompassing employee training, service integration, quality management enhancement, and ICT tool implementation. The success rates for supported participants were generally high at 80% to 100%.

When calculating unit costs, it was noted that Malta was the only Member State that reported only participants as output. Therefore, the other countries reported a mix of outputs (participants and entities) for which the assumption was made that half of the expenditures were on participants. Four countries (EE, PO, SI, SK) invested in addition in a mix of projects and entities, in which cases further additional assumptions were made.

For entities the aims of interventions vary, from training of employees, integration of services, improved quality management and the implementation of ICT tools. The aim of project interventions of IP11.i is rarely specific but rather described in terms such as “implementation of processes” or “reduced administrative time”. The success rates per entity or per project vary between a few per cent to about 100%.

### *IP11.ii (capacity building)*

Under IP11.ii (capacity building), only seven Member States (France, Croatia, Italy, Malta, Poland, Portugal and Slovenia) invested, mostly in the capacity of civil society organizations. Costs per participant varied from about EUR 400 in Italy to about EUR 6 000 in France. The support to projects and entities was difficult to separate and are not presented. Investments in

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<sup>146</sup> meaning that benefits are 160% of the cost (e.g. EUR 160 of benefits compared to EUR 100 of costs results in a benefit-to-cost ratio of 1.6)

participants resulted in achievements of close to 100% qualification gains in France, Italy and Slovenia, and about 50% in Malta. Portugal only invested in entities at a cost of close to EUR 200 000 per entity, to promote capacity building and regional development, with undocumented results.

### TO 13 – REACT-EU

The primary focus of investments under the REACT-EU initiative was on short-term work measures, with additional investments made in Germany and Spain for access to healthcare, social services, and childcare, and in Belgium, Bulgaria, and Finland for the activation of individuals. Activation and job preservation were the most common aims of the intervention, although Germany and to a lesser extent Spain in addition invested in people to gain a qualification under TO13. In the Netherlands and Belgium, ESF resources were primarily used to support the administrative management of COVID-19 measures, rather than investing in short-term work measures.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the conventional concern about lost productivity due to employee training was less relevant, as the period of inactivity presented an ideal time for investing in skills development. The estimated costs per participant supported under REACT-EU varied widely across countries, ranging from approximately EUR 5 in Austria to EUR 12,600 in Slovakia.

OECD estimated mixed impacts for short-time work measures during the financial crisis<sup>147</sup> However, a similar assessment cannot be made for short-time work measures during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the lack of comparable treatment and control groups among supported and unsupported enterprises. Nevertheless, the justification for short-time work measures during the pandemic was clear as the alternative would have been widespread layoffs that would have overwhelmed social insurance institutions and public employment services, resulting in significant unemployment benefit expenditures and the collapse of viable businesses.

While short-time work measures may have reduced job losses, they may also have limited "creative destruction" like the one triggered through former employees starting their own business or through resources (financial, human) reallocated from declining firms and sectors to thriving ones. However, the pandemic was not an ideal time for entrepreneurship, which may have mitigated the costs associated with reduced "creative destruction". On the other hand, short-time work measures provided an opportunity for employee training, which was particularly beneficial for workers who would have otherwise been unemployed. This not only helped to maintain workforce skills but also reduced the administrative burden and expenditures associated with processing unemployment benefits.

The Commission's dedicated REACT-EU evaluation published in October 2025 finds that REACT-EU was rapid and - compared to its overall size - effective in addressing the health and economic impacts of the COVID-19, crisis as well as in bridging the two programming

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<sup>147</sup> Hijzen, A. and D. Venn (2011), The Role of Short-Time Work Schemes during the 2008-09 Recession, OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers No. 115, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1787/1815199X>

periods<sup>148</sup> but could also not include a cost benefit analysis and an efficiency assessment due to the lack of data on implementation.

In conclusion, the cost-benefit analysis revealed generally positive outcomes in terms of net public returns on investment, though variations in cost-effectiveness were observed across different Investment Priorities. Unit costs differed significantly across countries, primarily due to distinct target groups and the implementation of diverse measures.

#### **4.1.2.2 FACILITATING FACTORS TO EFFICIENCY<sup>149</sup>**

Administrative procedures within the ESF have undergone significant improvements during the programming period, primarily driven by the implementation of simplified cost options (SCOs) proposed by the Commission, digitalisation and streamlined reporting. These innovations have collectively contributed to a notable reduction in administrative burdens.

##### *Implementation of simplified cost options*

One key factor in enhancing the efficiency of ESF administrative processes has been the widespread adoption of SCOs, such as flat rates and standard unit costs. These measures facilitated simplified financial reporting and monitoring, thereby alleviating the administrative burden on beneficiaries. A substantial majority (89%) of respondents in the Managing Authority survey reported that SCOs improved operational efficiency. Case studies from multiple Member States have demonstrated the positive impact of SCOs on reducing administrative burden. As such, SCOs were the most important simplification proposed by the Commission that had to a significant extent improved the efficiency of operations compared to the previous programming period.

However, some Member States, such as Spain, initially faced administrative challenges with the introduction of SCOs, which required the development of new certification methods for each operation. Moreover, some case studies highlighted instances where the new rules were not clearly explained to beneficiaries, leading to concerns.

Related to SCOs, there was limited reference to Joint Action Plans as an additional mechanism to use SCOs in a more strategic and secured framework. As such, evidence is lacking as to whether Joint Action Plans improved the efficiency of operations.

##### *Digitalisation*

The digitalisation of application and reporting procedures has also significantly supported the efficient implementation of ESF and YEI operations across the EU and therefore was identified

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<sup>148</sup> Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the evaluation of REACT-EU. Published 10 October 2025. Available at:

[COM\\_2025\\_634\\_F1\\_REPORT\\_FROM\\_COMMISSION\\_EN\\_V4\\_P1\\_4084848.pdf](#)

<sup>149</sup> See answers to evaluation questions in section 4.1.2.6 of the supporting study. Available at: [Study supporting the ex-post evaluation of the 2014-2020 European social fund and youth employment initiative - Publications Office of the EU](#)

a key good practice to reduce unnecessary administrative burden. Many managing authorities reported that they have successfully leveraged online tools and platforms to enhance operational efficiency. Although some Member States, such as Romania and Slovakia, encountered challenges when introducing new IT platforms, the potential for positive returns in the future remains, pending the resolution of difficulties, e.g. in introducing new IT platforms, delays or a lack of linkage between different systems or in using the systems which contributed to the administrative burden on its users. Nonetheless, in general digitalisation has been a welcome development.

### *Streamlined reporting*

Other good practice elements of simplification were identified in the case study work on IP9vi (Local development). In light of, and responding to, the resource intensive nature of the small allocations associated with Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) activity, some Member States introduced much lighter monitoring and reporting structures to help ease the burden on recipient organisations as well as Managing Authorities. Simplified reporting at the end of the funding period was also identified including ‘soft’ evaluation of projects introduced in some Member States so that project owners completed a short self-evaluation form, rather than undertaking an external evaluation. Lighter touch reporting was also introduced in the context of crisis response programmes as shown in other sections of the present report.

#### **4.1.2.3 ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN<sup>150</sup>**

According to estimates based on a 2018 study and spending data collected by end 2023<sup>151</sup>, the total costs of administering the ESF and YEI programmes for public authorities amounted to EUR 3.6 billion, or 2.7% of total spending. This level is considered modest, as administrative costs for public authorities below 4% are generally not regarded as excessive<sup>152153</sup>. In relative terms the average administrative costs for ESF programme authorities are estimated to be EUR 27,600 per million euros spent. The majority of these costs fell on managing authorities (80%), followed by audit authorities (13%) and the costs for other authorities (certifying authorities, national coordination and authorities involved in programme preparation) were relatively small. The most cost-intensive tasks for programme authorities were selection of operations and information to beneficiaries (EUR 2,616 per million spent), followed by verifications for reimbursement of beneficiaries (EUR 2,391 per million) and information and communication (EUR 1,668 per million). Average costs are influenced by programme size, with smaller programmes tending to be more costly per million spent. Based on estimates for all ESIF funds,

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<sup>150</sup> See answers to answers to evaluation questions in section 4.1.2.2 of the supporting study. Available at: [Study supporting the ex-post evaluation of the 2014-2020 European social fund and youth employment initiative - Publications Office of the EU](#)

<sup>151</sup> European Commission: Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy, Spatial Foresight and t33, *New assessment of ESIF administrative costs and burden*, 2018, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2776/36663>. Calculations are based on raw data of this study and spending data by end 2023. For more information on methodology, see Annex II.

<sup>152</sup> European Court of Auditors Special Report 07/2020, point 68. [Implementing Cohesion policy: comparatively low costs, but insufficient information to assess simplification savings](#)

<sup>153</sup> *New assessment of ESIF administrative costs and burden*, 2018, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2776/36663>, page 8-9

Thematic Objective (TO) 11 (Institutional capacity and efficient public administration) had the highest administrative costs, while TO 10 (Education, training and lifelong learning) recorded the lowest.

The administrative costs are also incurred by beneficiaries and consisted of costs of preparing a funding application (overall EUR 3.3–6.6 billion; 2.5%–4.9% of total spending) and project management costs ranging from overall EUR 14.6 to 19.2 billion (10.8%–14.3% of total spending).

It should be noted that administrative cost estimates, especially for beneficiaries, should be treated with caution. The cost estimates are based on an extrapolation from a 2018 study and not on actual costs incurred during the period. This also implies that the regulatory changes after 2018 were not considered. The sample size for beneficiaries was rather limited – only 66 ESF beneficiaries. Moreover, the cost estimates for beneficiaries do not only cover the administrative costs stemming from cohesion policy regulatory requirements, and it was not possible to distinguish them from those arising under the national regulatory framework.

In the 2014-2020 programming period several simplification measures<sup>154</sup> were introduced to streamline the processes and increase flexibility. These measures have likely produced efficiency gains for programme authorities. The 2018 study suggests that the overall costs for programme authorities have decreased by 10% or from EUR 30,520 to EUR 27,600 per million spent in 2014-2020 in comparison to the 2007-2013 programming period. An especially high decrease was for the managing authorities which fell from EUR 27,800 per million spent to EUR 22,200 per million spent. However, the decreases for managing authorities were partly offset by increases for audit authorities (from EUR 1,180 to EUR 3,500 per million spent), certifying authorities (from EUR 400 to EUR 700) and authorities involved in programme preparation (EUR 1,100 to 1,200).

A comparison of costs by selected tasks shows a significant decrease in costs for information and communication activities (from EUR 6,100 to EUR 1,400 per million spent) in 2014-2020 as compared to 2007-2013 programming period. The costs of administrative verifications of payment claims also declined, from EUR 3,400 to EUR 2,400, which can be explained by the simplifications introduced in the 2014–2020 programming period, particularly the extended use of simplified cost options. Increased attention to monitoring and evaluation did not lead to higher administrative costs. On the contrary, monitoring and evaluation costs for programme authorities fell from EUR 2,200 to EUR 1,600, suggesting that common indicators and various supporting tools (SFC, guidance on monitoring and evaluation) supported the work of managing authorities. Cost increases were observed for tasks related to the selection of operations and information provided to beneficiaries, which rose from EUR 1,800 to EUR 2,400 per million spent. In addition, the costs of audit operations tripled (from EUR 460 to EUR 1,400), suggesting that part of the control workload associated with the verification of payment claims shifted from managing authorities to audit authorities.

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<sup>154</sup> See section 4.1.2.2. of this SWD. For an overview of the simplification measures see: European Commission, Sweco, t33 & Spatial Foresight, 'Use of New Provisions on Simplification during the Early Implementation Phase of ESIF', 2017. [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/sources/studies/new\\_prov\\_simplification\\_esif\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/studies/new_prov_simplification_esif_en.pdf).

Despite the substantial strides made in reducing administrative burdens compared to the previous programming period and the estimated reduction in administrative costs for programme authorities, ESF programmes kept facing negative perceptions of unnecessary administrative burdens. Stakeholders from national and regional MAs and beneficiary organisations across Member States reported that complicated and burdensome administrative processes including "gold plating"<sup>155</sup> were present. These issues were acknowledged as hindering the efficiency of operations, often leading to project implementation delays.

While these issues varied across Member States, some respondents to different consultations felt that such burden existed but had a limited impact on efficiency, and the benefits of simplification offset them. Managing Authorities survey results showed that 61% of respondents (69 out of 114) believed ESF-related administrative burden significantly or moderately hindered efficiency for project beneficiaries, and 51% (58 out of 114) reported similar burden for MAs. The high volume of data and documentation required from applicants to request the subsidies was considered high and unintendedly conducive to inequalities between small and larger entities in terms of capacity and ease of access to the measure.

Challenges remain in specific IPs or Member States, particularly in areas such as financial reporting, claim preparation and submission, documentation, audit requirements, and control systems. Examples of issues causing administrative burden across different TOs identified in the case study work were the following:

- *Audit and reporting requirements*: unclear requirements for collecting participants' data, timesheets, and supporting documentation contributed to high administrative burdens (e.g. Italy, Czechia, Denmark). They resulted in delays, additional resources needed, and challenges in securing partners due to uncertainties associated with reimbursement rates. Different levels of audits (at regional, national and EU level) were viewed as causing delays and complications, which ultimately have an impact on efficiency.
- *Project administration and management*: difficulties in setting up and running project administration, such as registering hours and determining eligible hours (e.g. Greece, The Netherlands, France); high administrative burdens due to largely paper-based processes and justification documents (e.g. Hungary, Croatia).
- *Unconnected management systems and different reporting requirements and deadlines in certain countries*<sup>156</sup>: these issues added to the administrative burden; *Bureaucratic and directive oversight*: Perception of national institutions being overly directive and bureaucratic (e.g. Estonia).
- *Public procurement procedures*: lengthy public procurement procedures led to delays in implementation and cancelled calls (e.g. Lithuania); *Staff turnover and changes in legislation*: high turnover in administrative staff due to changes in country legislations,

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<sup>155</sup> Gold-plating is an expression which refers to Member States going beyond what is strictly required by EU legislation when they implement it at national level. This may enhance the benefits but can also add unnecessary costs for businesses and public authorities which are mistakenly associated with EU legislation.

<sup>156</sup> For more information refer to the case study on TO 10

resulting in the loss of competences and skills acquired in previous programming periods; *Delays in implementation as a result of disagreements among stakeholders, staff shortages, and frequent changes in the legislative framework* <sup>157</sup>.

- *Eligibility and registration requirements*: The need for participants to be registered as unemployed by the Public Employment Service (PES) created additional administrative procedures for beneficiary organisations (e.g. Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania concerning YEI).

A minority view emerged from some MAs and public authority stakeholders, who considered the administrative burden to be acceptable and necessary. They argued that proper justification and transparency were essential for efficient management of funds, and that the administrative burden was justified by the project outcomes and resources used.

#### **4.1.2.4 ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN IN RESPONDING TO CRISES<sup>158</sup>**

The evaluation of crisis response programs, CRII and CRII+, revealed mixed views on the administrative burden associated with these programs. While simplified and accelerated processes helped Member States respond quickly to crises, MAs reported difficulties in familiarising themselves with the rules, such as the administrative requirements<sup>159</sup>, and flexibilities. Key challenges included high administrative workload for managing and planning authorities, increased data and documentation requirements, which were deemed burdensome and may have created inequalities between small and large entities and stringent national audit requirements in some Member States.

However, some positive examples were noted such as an open-ended funding application process for CARE funding in Sweden or the setup of guidance webinars and a dedicated task force in Italy, which helped to simplify the implementation process and provide effective support to beneficiaries.

#### **4.1.2.5 THE MANAGEMENT AND CONTROL SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS<sup>160</sup>**

Evidence indicates that the *monitoring and control system* was largely effective, demonstrating flexibility, partnership, and a results-driven approach. The monitoring requirements, as defined

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<sup>157</sup> C.f. Evaluation Helpdesk (2023) Evaluations of Cohesion policy programmes published in 2014-2020 period: Thematic report: TO 11, Enhancing institutional capacity

<sup>158</sup> See answers to answers to evaluation questions in section 4.1.2.4. of the supporting study. Available at: [Study supporting the ex-post evaluation of the 2014-2020 European social fund and youth employment initiative - Publications Office of the EU](#)

<sup>159</sup> The case study research revealed that in several Member States, including Italy, Portugal, and Estonia, MAs found the volume of data and documentation required from applicants to be overly high, particularly for small entities. As a result, this may have inadvertently created inequalities in access to the support. Additionally, a previous evaluation of CRII identified that in other Member States, such as Greece and Poland, the administrative burden was also attributed to strict national audit requirements.

<sup>160</sup> See answers to evaluation questions in section 4.1.2.3. of the supporting study. Available at: [Study supporting the ex-post evaluation of the 2014-2020 European social fund and youth employment initiative - Publications Office of the EU](#)

in the EU regulation, were broadly functioning well, largely providing a complete overview and quality data on the participants and their basic characteristics on a regular basis. This allowed for the performance analysis during implementation and was also achieved at a reasonable cost. In addition, MA stakeholders recognised significant steps made to simplify ESF/YEI processes by many national ESF monitoring committees. Digitalisation and the effective use of online tools and platforms were widely discussed as elements aiding efficiency of monitoring and evaluation and reducing costs.

Still, opportunities for efficiency improvement exist, particularly in areas such as digitalisation, financial reporting, and streamlining national audit requirements and control systems. In this context, a number of stakeholders indicated excessive monitoring and financial reporting requirements as a primary source of administrative burden, in particular related to control systems and auditing processes at regional, national, and EU levels, which hindered efficiency. For instance, among MA respondents, 45% (51 out of 114) considered that the complexity of monitoring arrangements hindered the efficient implementation of operations. Beneficiary stakeholders, through the consultations and case study work, likewise outlined challenges with particular aspects of the data required for monitoring either in terms of the nature of the data or in terms of the format it was collected. Somewhat in contrast, the case study research identified some positive examples of high-quality monitoring activity being facilitated despite the perceived challenging requirements (e.g. The Netherlands).

Similarly, the *evaluation system* showed significant improvements concerning the number and quality of evaluations. In the 2014-2022 period 1 352 evaluations involving ESF and YEI interventions were carried out, which is significantly more than in the previous programming period. The attention on impact and results evaluations was also important, with around 30% of the evaluations focused on final effects. The methodological approaches also showed an increasing maturity in the evaluation system with, for instance, 35% of the impact and results evaluations using counterfactual methods, which were almost absent in the previous programming period. In general, evaluation has increased its importance and has become a more systemic and well-integrated component of the monitoring and control system. Information available from the national evaluations are incomparably richer than in the past programming period.

Yet, some specific limitations remained which undermined the ability to evaluate implementation more deeply, notably:

- Capacity constraints: some Member States struggled with evaluation quality, particularly countries with a smaller administration or those without prior evaluation experience.
- Perceived obligations: evaluation was sometimes seen as a formal requirement, not influencing decision-making mechanisms.
- Limited scope: evaluation was often restricted to supporting implementation, rather than informing strategic choices or programming.

These areas can be targeted in future programmes for further support from the Commission to address capacity constraints and promote more effective evaluation practices.

Both, monitoring and evaluation systems could be improved by introducing certain novelties, which are described in ‘Lessons learned’ (c.f. section 5).

The 2021-2027 framework has already incorporated several simplification measures such as reduced list of policy objectives, clearer intervention logic through indicators, lighter reporting and single audit arrangements, which demonstrates a positive step towards simplifying ESF implementation processes.

#### **4.1.2.6 OTHER HINDERING FACTORS TO EFFICIENCY<sup>161</sup>**

Additionally, other hindering factors to efficiency identified by stakeholders across different groups include:

- Limited administrative capacity of project beneficiaries, exacerbated by a heavy administrative burden, lengthy project processes, and complex guidance manuals.
- Delays in funding, high staff turnover, and lack of specialised technical skills.
- Data protection requirements, which create misunderstandings and additional resource needs in terms of time and costs, hindering the efficient implementation of projects. Specifically in Germany, strict data protection rules were cited as causing a significant administrative burden.

### **4.1.3. COHERENCE**

#### **4.1.3.1 COMPLEMENTARITY AND SYNERGIES OF ESF AND YEI WITH NATIONAL AND REGIONAL ACTIONS AND POLICIES<sup>162</sup>**

The complementarity and synergies of ESF and YEI with national and regional strategies or activities were strong. From the case studies and stakeholder interviews, coherence with other national or regional activities was assessed by stakeholders of all types as very good. Some 84% of respondents to the MA survey (N=114) reported a view that ESF operations were coherent with national/regional policies to a large extent. This was supported by numerous examples identified from the case studies, mapping of operations and examples provided by national and regional stakeholders of national strategic documents being in alignment with ESF objectives. The high degree of coherence between national and EU policies and funds was found to have been greatly aided by years of experience in delivering the ESF. The embeddedness of ESF in public administrations, particularly in labour market institutions, was widely seen as facilitating the transfer of programming and managing mechanisms into national measures, with substantial similarities and cross-fertilisation among national and EU-funded

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<sup>161</sup> See answers to evaluation questions in section 4.1.2.5 of the supporting study. Available at: [Study supporting the ex-post evaluation of the 2014-2020 European social fund and youth employment initiative - Publications Office of the EU](#)

<sup>162</sup> See answer to evaluation question 18 of the supporting study.

programmes. Case study evidence on social innovation however points at a need for greater convergence between European, national and regional resources dedicated to social innovation to facilitate implementation and scaling up of social innovation projects at local level<sup>163</sup>.

The ESF and YEI demonstrated good level of internal coherence with the different parts of the programmes, working well together to achieve their objectives. The various projects funded under different areas of intervention (Thematic Objectives) were distinct yet complementary. Deeper analysis revealed only limited overlaps and in general Thematic Objective 9 operations, focusing on particular target groups like Roma and people with disabilities, were distinct from Thematic Objective 8 operation for the same target groups. Adjustments made in response to COVID-19 also maintained coherence by targeting different groups and using varied delivery mechanisms. Despite rapidity, REACT-EU remained consistent with the broader objectives of cohesion policy as well as acted in synergy with other instruments, in particular the SURE.

#### **4.1.3.2 COMPLEMENTARITY WITH OTHER EU INSTRUMENTS<sup>164</sup>**

There was robust evidence of dedicated EU support being coherent with other EU funds. EU level interviewees consistently noted what they saw as a strong coherence of ESF with other funds, such as European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) (including Interreg), the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD), or Erasmus+ in terms of complementary objectives, scope and target groups. This emphasis on ERDF is reflected in the public consultation results (701 respondents), where 61% of respondents reported the ESF was complementing or reinforcing ERDF. This was in turn also reflected in the EESC evaluation exercise with 67 civil society organisations, where 80% of respondents believed ERDF was fully or at least moderately integrated with the ESF. With respect to TO 8, it was reported by the supporting study of the ex-post evaluation of ESF and YEI that a few ERDF Investment Priorities directly contributed to TO 8. At the same time, the ERDF ex-post evaluation found scope to leverage synergies with ESF more consistently and effectively, such as in fostering equal access to services, the ICT sector and territorial instruments. ERDF allocations were higher under TO9 and TO10. Stakeholders in the ERDF evaluation also pointed to administrative challenges that prevented optimal synergies with the ESF across interventions, including in the area of e-government and e-business.

Regarding other instruments, the ESF also presented strong coherence with the FEAD. According to the ex-post evaluation of FEAD 2014-2020, the legal texts governing the ESF regulation and FEAD regulation, demonstrate a good degree of complementarity, with specific provisions designed to ensure complementarity between these funds or to prevent overlaps or duplication.

Examples from the case studies in the ex-post evaluation of FEAD highlight good practices in several Member States in terms of complementarities between FEAD and the ESF such as: designing ESF and FEAD operational programmes to complement each other; actively informing and supporting food aid recipients to access ESF-funded training and employment measures including via helpdesks and teams of professionals delivering accompanying

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<sup>163</sup> See case study “Social Innovation” available in the supporting study.

<sup>164</sup> See answer to evaluation question 16 of the supporting study.

measures; or using ESF-funded measures to support specific target groups for training or other labour market-related operations.

Operations funded by the EARDF focused on contributing to promoting employment and creating new jobs in rural areas. The Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI) strand focused more on operations that are upstream with respect to the ESF, but nonetheless the EUROpean Employment Services (EURES) axis in particular was considered by the supporting study of the ex-post evaluation of ESF & YEI as offering specific synergies to TO 8, specifically that of improving labour mobility and particularly its support of language training.

Activities supported by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), and in particular those related to the legal migration and integration specific objective under the AMIF, were considered to be complementary by the stakeholders' views recorded in the study supporting the 2014-2020 ex-post evaluation of ESF & YEI to operations carried out under IP8.i. given they both promote access to employment and labour mobility.

The use of ESF funds under TO 9 in conjunction with other EU Funds was identified mainly in relation to ERDF<sup>165</sup>. A common pattern in the examples identified was where ERDF provided funds for physical capital measures such as infrastructure and equipment while ESF provided funds for human capital measures including staff and activities. Examples identified in the earlier research included in Spain, where an ESF-ERDF plan was developed to support the eradication of shanty towns. ERDF funds supported the provision of adequate, and quality non-segregated social housing for families who live in slums and in deprived homes while ESF support for TO 9 financed social integration activities targeting families that had recently moved from slums to homes. Coherence of TO 9 operations with other funding than ERDF was evident in the previous research but to a lesser degree in terms of fewer examples identified. Several country examples highlighted the complementarity in the coordinated implementation of FEAD in coordination with ESF, including in Italy, a project that aimed to support people experiencing homelessness drew on both ESF support to social inclusion and FEAD funding in a complementary manner.

Evidence of synergies and coherence at an implementation level was more varied in respect of TO10. In Czechia, under IP10ii the ERDF was used to purchase new equipment, which was complemented by the ESF fund to train teachers on the use of the new equipment. In Croatia, the IP10.iii case study highlighted that the combination of resources facilitated the “e-schools” operations, which was crucial for the transition to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Evidence to assess synergies between TO 11 operations and other EU Funds was much more limited. A small number of examples were cited by national MA stakeholders through the case study research. For example, IP11.ii operations in the ESF OP in French Guyana were aimed to support the creation of the ‘Collectivité Territoriale Unique de Guyane,’ in complementarity with ERDF-ESF OP – Guyane Conseil Régional 2014-2020, jointly tackling the need to

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<sup>165</sup> [Study supporting the 2020 evaluation of promoting social inclusion, combatting poverty and any discrimination by the European Social Fund \(Thematic Objective 09\) - Publications Office of the EU](#)

reinforce the effective professionalisation of public actors. However, MA or public authority stakeholders variously reported in the consultations, MA survey or public consultation practical difficulties in creating complementarity in practice, notably due to different administrative requirements across funds; in particular, the fact that co-financing opportunities between EU funds (e.g. ESF and ERDF), although possible in theory, were in reality not reflected in the launch of fund-coordinated announcements or calls. The sometimes-complex institutional structure within which funds were managed was also cited.

The Recovery and Resilience Facility, introduced in 2021 as a central instrument of the EU's response to the COVID-19 crisis, played a significant role in the transition between the 2014–2020 and 2021–2027 programming periods. As concerns the period of this evaluation, evidence from the case study published alongside the RRF Mid-Term Evaluation indicates that no substantial substitution effects occurred between the RRF and the 2014–2020 Cohesion Policy Operational Programmes. Only limited cases of reallocation or reprogramming were identified—such as in the Murcia region of Spain—though it remains unclear whether these involved ESF resources specifically. By contrast, more pronounced substitution effects have been observed between RRF and ESF+ projects over the period 2021–27, as highlighted in the Mid-Term Evaluation of the ESF+<sup>166</sup>. These effects were confirmed by managing authorities and national stakeholders through surveys and interviews, pointing to instances of overlap and potential competition for funding (some of the projects originally planned in the 2021–27 Cohesion Policy programmes were shifted under the national Recovery and Resilience Plans).

In terms of complementarities between ESF and RRF objectives, evidence from the case study on the functioning of the RRF and other EU funds<sup>167</sup>, conducted in the context of the Mid-Term Evaluation of the RRF, shows that Recovery Plans enhanced policy areas already covered by Cohesion Policy, providing supplementary financial resources and equally addressing the challenges and priorities as defined in the Country Specific Recommendations. Both the ESF and RRF strengthened social inclusion by financing initiatives that aim to break the cycles of poverty and social exclusion: both the ESF and RRF funded projects and investments to improve access to employment, education and training for vulnerable groups. These were complemented by structural reforms contained in national Recovery and Resilience Plans. Moreover, both funds address the problem of inequalities and focus on boosting employment and enhancing skills: the ESF aimed at supporting disadvantaged groups by designing inclusive labour markets and lifelong learning opportunities, ensuring the workforce to adapt to evolving demands; likewise, the RRF incorporates measures to improve socio-economic development across regions to address territorial imbalances, with the aim of creating jobs and upskilling/reskilling the labour force, particularly in areas like digital skills and green jobs. By focusing on social welfare and health resilience, the ESF and the RRF contribute to building a social safety net: both the ESF and the RRF supported the access to efficient social services.

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<sup>166</sup> Staff Working Document available at: [EUR-Lex - 52025SC0391 - EN - EUR-Lex](#)  
Executive summary available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/AUTO/?uri=CELEX:52025SC0392&qid=1764846889685&rid=2>

<sup>167</sup> [https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/c203ce47-c5d4-4fa1-abfc-50343d9ddcb6\\_en?filename=case-study-on-the-functioning-of-the-rrf-and-other-eu-funds.pdf](https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/c203ce47-c5d4-4fa1-abfc-50343d9ddcb6_en?filename=case-study-on-the-functioning-of-the-rrf-and-other-eu-funds.pdf)

Furthermore, many national Recovery and Resilience Plans included investments and reforms to improve health infrastructure and the social care systems<sup>168</sup>. Overall, both funds contribute to execute the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights<sup>169</sup>.

#### **4.1.3.3 COMPLEMENTARITY WITH WIDER EU POLICIES<sup>170</sup>**

Overall, dedicated EU support through the ESF and YEI programme was strongly coherent with other EU policies. Throughout consultations with all types of EU and national stakeholders and the case study work, stakeholders consistently reported that Member States used key EU-level policies as the main point of reference when designing interventions. Most commonly mentioned EU policies were the Europe 2020 Strategy, the European Pillar of Social Rights and the European Skills Agenda. Other EU level policies or Council Recommendations seldom mentioned include the European Disability Strategy, the European Green Paper on Ageing and the Council Recommendations on establishing a Youth Guarantee, on validation of non-formal and informal learning, and on long-term unemployed in the labour market.

Member States used the EU-level policies as the main point of reference when designing ESF interventions and this was evident in TO 8 case study countries too (e.g. Greece, Slovakia, Belgium, Ireland). Across all TO 9 case studies, MA and national ministry stakeholders repeatedly asserted that TO 9 operations across the different IPs were coherent with the European Pillar of Social Rights principles and Action Plan promoting the need to tackle the gender employment gap and increase the provision of formal early childhood and education and care services. The link with the Europe 2020 strategy was also visible and highlighted by stakeholders in IP9.v operations across all Member States engaged in the case studies (including Greece, Bulgaria, Poland, Croatia, Romania and France), as their main goals included increasing the employability of vulnerable groups. This was supported by the previous mid-term thematic research on social inclusion where these were the main EU policies mentioned in planning documents for TO 9 operations<sup>171</sup>.

The key EU policies of the European Pillar of Social Rights and Europe 2020 strategy were equally cited by MA stakeholders in the case study research as being aligned with TO 10 operations, but no specific examples were provided through this strand. TO 10 operations were funding initiatives in the field of early childhood education and care which aligned with the Council Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems. Strong alignment between the New Skills Agenda for Europe and TO 10 was also evident, with a direct reference to ESF made in the Communication's introduction and its actions clearly aligned with ESF TO 10, including in particular, IP10.iii (lifelong learning) aligning with Action 1 (Upskilling pathways: new opportunities for adults) and IP10.iv (labour market relevance) aligning with Action 6 (Vocational Education and Training - VET). Other policies cited in the previous research with evidence of alignment included the Council

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<sup>168</sup> [Recovery and Resilience Plans - Reform Support - European Commission](#)

<sup>169</sup> [The European Pillar of Social Rights in 20 principles - Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion](#)

<sup>170</sup> See answer to evaluation question 17 of the supporting study.

<sup>171</sup> Study supporting the 2020 evaluation of promoting social inclusion, combatting poverty and any discrimination by the European Social Fund (Thematic Objective 09) - Publications Office of the EU

Recommendation on Common values, inclusive education and the European dimension of teaching and the EU Digital Education Plan.

For TO 11, MAs and public authority stakeholders regularly pointed to good coherence among TO 11 activities and other EU policies, with operations creating the conditions for guaranteeing the fulfilment of the principles set in wider strategies, such as those pursued by the European Pillar for Social Rights, and other sectoral policies.

## 4.2. DID ESF AND YEI MAKE A DIFFERENCE AND TO WHOM?

### 4.2.1. EU ADDED VALUE

Like the mid-term evaluation performed of the 2014-2018 ESF support to employment and labour mobility, social inclusion and education and training<sup>172</sup>, the present evaluation found that ESF and YEI continued to bring unique value and produced several beneficial effects that would not have taken place in its absence<sup>173</sup>.

The added value of ESF and YEI can be reflected in terms of four different effects<sup>174</sup>:

➤ *Volume effects*<sup>175</sup>:

ESF and YEI made a significant difference in terms of volume effects, allowing Member States to reach more individuals and entities that would have otherwise been possible. To start with, the total EU budget for ESF and YEI increased compared to the previous programming period (from EUR 76.8 billion<sup>176</sup> to EUR 93.5 billion), with an additional increase of EUR 19.9 billion of REACT-EU funding to the ESF.

The ESF and YEI have enabled an increase in support to a higher number of participants. Beneficiary organisations confirmed the increased volume of participants thanks to ESF support. For instance, in Cyprus, ESF support was crucial in financing interventions for youth employment amidst fiscal austerity measures, while in France, ESF funding amplified support to job seekers and inactive people. In Greece, the Harmonisation of Family and Professional Life operation saw a substantial rise compared to the previous programming period, and in Italy, more persons over 54 were supported. Other examples include Portugal, where ESF funding led to a 0.9% increase in participants in training or educational activities compared to 2014<sup>177</sup>. These volume effects were supported by the majority of the Managing authorities survey

<sup>172</sup> See Brussels 27.1.2021 SWD (2021) 11 final based on three thematic supporting studies for TO8, 9, and 10.

<sup>173</sup> All type of stakeholders, and particularly national stakeholders involved in managing or delivering ESF support made strong assertions that the effects identified would otherwise not have taken place without ESF support. However, this could not be robustly assessed for each Member States due to the data collection approach and sampling.

<sup>174</sup> See answer to evaluation question 25 of the supporting study.

<sup>175</sup> Volume effects refer to the provision of additional resources and increased in participation.

<sup>176</sup> European Commission (2016) ESF ex-post evaluation synthesis 2007-2013 – EU synthesis report – Final version, p.11. Available at: <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/1734>.

<sup>177</sup> Evidence gathered in the supporting study from consulted Managing Authorities stakeholders and case study research.

respondents, as well as from EU and national stakeholders<sup>178</sup>. In addition, 86% (568) of respondents to the Public consultation stated that more can be done with ESF than with national or local resources only.

In terms of additional instruments, REACT-EU enabled to increase the number of individuals supported, for instance in Sweden, where more than twice the initial target of participants was reached for training programmes and employment opportunities. Moreover, CRII/CRII+ operations and CARE's funding have contributed to a rapid increase in resources, allocating resources that governments could not provide from national sources alone, or not sufficiently fast. In Poland, 4,000 people received tangible assistance and material, health or social support.

As mentioned in Section 3.2, the intensity of the support has been bigger in countries receiving Cohesion Fund support countries compared to countries that did not. Overall, the ESF and YEI have played a crucial role in scaling up support to those in need, particularly during times of crisis, and have demonstrated significant EU added value through their ability to increase the volume of support provided.

➤ *Scope effects*<sup>179</sup>:

The ESF and YEI operations broadened the actions to diverse target groups and new or underdeveloped policy areas.

While ESF and YEI generally continued to serve the same main target groups, the funds' support increased for hard-to-reach groups (see section 4.1). Consulted Managing Authorities<sup>180</sup> and beneficiary stakeholders confirmed the significant and positive impact of the support for groups that were not adequately covered in previous programming periods, or were not as adequately covered by national policies and which would not have been possible without the ESF and YEI. Additional examples for TO8, TO9 and TO10 include broadening the range of lower socio-economic status students accessing scholarships in Croatia, Greece, Lithuania or Malta; identifying NEETs in Bulgaria and Latvia as a specific target group, which would not have been offered support otherwise; extending childcare services available to children with mild disabilities in Greece, and the provision of services to old people in mountainous or island regions, which was not previously present. Support from CARE enabled broader and more individually tailored measures to Ukrainians fleeing Russian military aggression. In addition, expansions of action and beneficiaries to more developed regions were evident as a result of the REACT-EU funding available during the periods of crisis.

Additionally, the ESF and YEI showed scope effects through the broadening of policies and types of services available. For instance, in Lithuania, consulted stakeholders reported that IP8.ii-YEI projects introduced new types of support for young people in the country that had not been available before (e.g., psychological or legal support, traineeships, and apprenticeships). The funds also supported areas of intervention where there was insufficient national funding for employment and social inclusion (Slovakia) as well as in adult learning

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<sup>178</sup> 94% (107 out of 114) Managing Authorities survey respondents reported that the ESF produced volume effects to a large or moderate extent.

<sup>179</sup> Scope effects refer to the broadening of actions and target groups.

<sup>180</sup> 87% of the MA survey respondents (99 out of 114) reported scope effects to a large or moderate extent in relation to target group reach and policy areas.

(Germany)<sup>181</sup> ; focused on areas that are not on the national policy agenda, and addressed more long-lasting objectives than national programmes, as well as relying on broad stakeholder engagement (Sweden).

Lastly, ESF and YEI enabled activities at larger scale and in several new areas, including for Ukrainians fleeing Russia's military aggression (e.g. Finland).

➤ *Role effects*<sup>182</sup>:

One area where ESF has added value to national and regional policies is the sustained focus on the implementation of systematic and innovative actions. More specifically, the implementation of ESF and YEI generated role effects linked to supporting innovation and the transfer of ideas and enabled changes in national systems/ structures in some instances.

As per the ESF Regulation, social innovation is relevant to all the TOs. The Regulation highlights that “the ESF shall promote social innovation within all areas falling under its scope, in particular with the aim of testing, evaluating and scaling up innovative solutions, including at the local or regional level, in order to address social needs.” The Regulation then specifies that “ESF should encourage and support innovative social enterprises and entrepreneurs as well as innovative projects taken on by non-governmental organisations and other actors within the social economy. In particular, testing and evaluating innovative solutions before scaling them up is instrumental in improving the efficiency of policies and thus justifies specific support from the ESF.”

In terms of programming of social innovation, Article 11 of the ESF Regulation introduces the opportunity to identify a specific priority axis dedicated to the development of social innovations in the Operational Programmes. It also allows the maximum co-financing rate for a priority axis wholly dedicated to social innovation or to transnational cooperation, or a combination of both, to be increased by ten percentage points (but not exceeding 100%).

Successful examples were present in Italy, where ESF funding offered opportunities to try various social innovation approaches and subsequently replicate them at the national, regional, or local level. Impact and implementation evaluations also showed that TO10 interventions introduced new approaches and enabled the adoption of new methods and practices, especially in relation to teaching. For instance, in Portugal, the ESF enabled more flexible training models in line with the needs of the labour market and regional characteristics, while in Belgium-Flanders, ESF supported operations enabling the testing of an innovative community-building approach and a network of partners.

The evidence is, however, not even across TOs and IPs. TO8 operations presented fewer role effects compared to other TOs. Some successful cases in this TO included companies that have

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<sup>181</sup> A recent study analysed the effectiveness, coherence and efficiency of the ESF supported voucher and grant schemes in different Operational Programmes in Germany for the period 2014-2020, which aimed at supporting non-formal job-related adult learning and contributing to upskilling and reskilling.

The study highlighted that the instruments introduced help to fill gaps left by the main instruments of public funding used within the German adult learning system. Concretely, ESF-co-funded instruments for adult learning became particularly important in areas where it was more difficult to adopt formal laws due to the complex split of responsibilities for funding adult learning between the German Länder and the federal government.

Further information is available in the study: “[Study on the effectiveness, coherence and efficiency of the ESF supported voucher schemes in different operational programmes \(funding period 2014-2020\) - European Commission](#)”

<sup>182</sup> Role effects refer to innovative actions or mainstream of activities.

gained greater innovative capability and competitiveness through the implementation of new technologies (e.g., Germany)<sup>183</sup>; mainstreaming horizontal principles such as equal opportunities and sustainable development (IP8.ii-YEI in Spain), or allowing cross-fertilisation of ideas. From stakeholder consultations and case study research for the supporting study, role effects were reported by 58% (69 out of 114) of the respondents to the MA survey, and 41% of respondents in the public consultation agreed that the ESF enables experimenting with new ways of delivering services (n=269).

The presence of role effects was also evidence by impacts on the national and regional systems and structures. This has been achieved through decentralization and community-led development, where ESF/YEI have led to changes in the responsibilities of municipalities and NGOs, engaging local communities in addressing social exclusion, as seen in (Bulgaria) where municipalities were able to provide targeted social services to address local needs. Additionally, ESF support has strengthened local institutions and social partners, enabling them to diversify their activities, such as in Croatia where financing focused on thematic areas like social development and strengthening democratic political culture, which had received less funding from national and local sources. Managing authorities and beneficiaries interviewed supported that the ESF has also promoted policy shifts and innovative measures, such as in Latvia where ESF interventions contributed to the de-institutionalization of long-term care, and in Greece where the ESF supported the development of a National Strategy for Accessibility to Higher Education. Lastly, it was noted that the YEI led to a re-orientation of national policies in France in line with priorities established at the European level.

➤ *Process effects*<sup>184</sup>:

The ESF and YEI have also had a range of positive process effects on the stakeholders, organisations and authorities involved. 61% of MA survey respondents (69 out of 114) reported process effects that included enabling collaboration among stakeholders towards long-term objectives, increasing the capacity of government administrations and participating beneficiaries, and enhancing the efficiency of their processes. National stakeholders of all type interviewed for the supporting study also expressed the view that ESF management and implementation has been a cumulative learning process, which led to new capabilities, benefits and increased professionalisation.

National evaluations also show that ESF allowed MA and implementing bodies to gain new competences and experience for successive programming periods. Under the TO8, operations allowed to create new networks for the YEI implementation (e.g. Sweden), as well as increase capacity building for beneficiary organisations and the development of new partnerships (e.g. Belgium, IP8.ii). New tools developed for ESF operations have been subsequently used by public authorities for services funded by other sources (e.g. Lithuania, IP8.i). Under TO9, ESF and YEI allowed managing and implementing bodies to adopt new approaches and practices that could be successfully replicated in the next programming periods. The active involvement of public institutions and the creation of effective networks with relevant stakeholders (e.g., municipalities, trainings centres, NGOs, social centres, etc.) has also been highlighted by different evaluations (e.g., Germany, Poland, Sweden). Under TO10, process effects were visible through increased operational capacity of beneficiary organisations to navigate ESF requirements (Hungary, IP10.ii) or improved capacity of the municipalities to support schoolwork while integrating transparency and accountability into regulations (Portugal,

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<sup>183</sup> Reported by consulted MA and public authority stakeholders

<sup>184</sup> Process effects refer to the improvement of systems and structures in place.

IP10.i). Additionally, under TO11, the ESF and YEI contributed to the development of a new regulatory framework for the functioning and further training of the civil service (Slovakia, IP11.i) and knowledge sharing and institutional cooperations, increasing social dialogue (Poland, IP11.ii).

The ESF and YEI led to sustainable changes by increasing the capacity and cooperation of government administrations and stakeholders. These programmes have enabled beneficiary organisations, especially NGOs, to continue or expand their activities and enhance their ability to meet ESF requirements. In addition, various ESF-co-funded vouchers and grants under the 2014- 2020 funding period showed good sustainability selected for continuation in the ESF+ 2021-2027 period<sup>185</sup>. However, stakeholders commonly reported the concern about over-reliance on EU funding, which could create future funding gaps if national funding is not maintained. A number of factors are likely to play a role and mediate sustainable outcomes, such as national and local policy environments and available funding, further investments, the ownership over current practices and outcomes, as well as specific factors linked to each area of intervention.

#### **4.2.2. VISIBILITY**

This section assesses to what extent operations funded by the ESF and YEI were visible to relevant stakeholders, beneficiaries and the wider public<sup>186</sup>. On the basis of the evidence gathered, overall good levels of visibility were observed, with differences between TOs, Member States and operations, and less visibility towards the general public.

Throughout the implementation of the ESF/YEI programmes, diverse activities were carried out to promote the visibility and awareness of the EU's role in the support provided towards beneficiaries and the general public. The most common visibility actions implemented include the set-up of a dedicated website about the project and available support, the clear display of the EU logo, and specific communication campaigns and events.

Examples included Poland, where support to newly arrived Ukrainians fleeing Russia's military aggression was in both Polish and Ukrainian; or Spain, where, to promote YEI visibility, they used indicators to measure the visibility of the supported projects. Up to 2020, in total 1 389 events were organised with overall more than 200 000 participants.

Overall, as per the supporting study, the activities carried out were effective in achieving reasonable levels of visibility of the EU's involvement in the projects supported by the ESF/YEI, in particular for groups which were more closely involved in the management, implementation or coordination of the projects. In the survey of ESF/YEI managing authorities, respondents reported that visibility has increased in comparison to the previous programming period, and some suggested that the emphasis on visibility activities was strengthened.

However, evidence as regards the visibility of the ESF/YEI towards the general public is less robust, and where it is available, it suggests a more mixed picture, indicating differing levels of visibility across Member States. Moreover, differences in visibility also emerged across

<sup>185</sup> See "[Study on the effectiveness, coherence and efficiency of the ESF supported voucher schemes in different operational programmes \(funding period 2014-2020\) - European Commission](#)"

<sup>186</sup> See evaluation question 30 of the supporting study.

TOs. For instance, while evidence from stakeholders and case studies suggests that there were overall good levels of visibility of ESF/YEI projects supported under TO 8, TO 9 and TO 10, this was less the case for operations under TO 11 and TO 13 (REACT-EU). For TO 11, visibility depended on the nature of the supported operations, with notable differences in visibility for projects aimed at public officials, which were often promoted via internal channels, and those targeting public services for citizens which were more visible. Results from the public consultation also suggest a low visibility of TO 13, with few respondents providing any replies, indicating little knowledge about REACT-EU both among the general public and organisations involved in ESF programmes. Evidence from case studies also suggests that there were limited activities and media coverage specifically covering support from REACT-EU. In general, challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of ensuring visibility were also identified across the case studies, as many communication activities could not be implemented as planned.

The factors which were considered most successful by stakeholders of all types in promoting visibility of the projects supported by ESF/YEI are continuous communication, including across programming periods, having dedicated websites in place that are of high quality, a clear branding and use of the EU logo, using social media, cooperation between different actors and community outreach. In this context, a combination of different activities and channels emerged as a key element facilitating visibility.

Results from the public consultation suggest that the multiplier effect was also relevant in raising awareness of the available support: ESF beneficiaries that replied to the consultation indicated that they learned about the support through several additional channels, including their employer, education and training institutions or through employment services or information centres<sup>187</sup>.

Particularly good results in terms of enhancing visibility and awareness of the ESF, including towards the general public, were reached with the bottom-up, community-led local development approach of IP9vi, as shown in the case study conducted on TO 9 (see Supporting Study Annexes). This approach facilitated access to ESF support and empowered local communities to decide how ESF support was allocated, thereby strengthening visibility too.

Nonetheless, communication and visibility were often mentioned by stakeholders as a key area where further improvements could be made. Evidence from a review of national evaluations of ESF and YEI programmes in several Member States and related to different TOs suggest that there was a need to strengthen the dissemination of different approaches and good practices of visibility activities as well as the dissemination of achieved results.

### **4.3. ARE THE ESF AND YEI STILL RELEVANT?**

To be able to assess whether the ESF and YEI were relevant to the needs of their target groups, this section examines the relationship between the objectives of the two funds and the needs and challenges which they intended to alleviate, including how well they were addressed and how they potentially evolved over the implementation period. It also looks into the continued relevance of the ESF/YEI in view of emerging needs and future trends.

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<sup>187</sup> However, the sample of respondents to the public consultation who received ESF support is small, with 47 replies received.

### 4.3.1 RELEVANCE OF ESF AND YEI<sup>188</sup>

This evaluation found that ESF and YEI exhibited an overall good relevance to the needs of the supported targeted groups, namely unemployed people, inactive people, (young) NEET and disadvantaged groups, albeit with more mixed views and nuanced findings when it comes to specific targets groups, while there is less evidence as regards the relevance to the target groups' needs of the scope and intensity of support provided.

Evidence from the evaluation (MA survey, public consultation, case studies and participation data) suggests that the objectives of and operations supported by ESF/YEI were largely relevant in addressing the needs of the target groups concerned and that target groups were appropriately defined. In particular, data from the participations in ESF/YEI-supported operations indicate that the provided support was well aligned with the needs of the target groups as presented in the programmes, and that the ESF/YEI were able to reach a considerable share of people from disadvantaged backgrounds (see section 4.1). When considering the annual coverage rates, unemployed people were the most covered by ESF/YEI operations, with on average 13.3% of all unemployed people in the EU (incl. the UK) having received support from the two funds and reaching as many as 40% of unemployed people in Hungary or 33.6% in Belgium.

In addition, the evaluation (analysis performed in the context of the supporting study) also indicated that the link established in the programming period with the CSRs addressed to Member States in the context of the European Semester has helped enhancing the focus of the measures on addressing the main labour market and social issues, thereby contributing to increasing the relevance of ESF/YEI support (see also section 4.1).

However, more mixed views as regards the relevance of the ESF/YEI to the needs of specific target groups were expressed by national and regional stakeholders as well as representatives from civil society organisations. Such stakeholders were of the view that relevance was stronger for broader target groups (e.g., unemployed), whereas accounting for the needs of more specific target groups such as the Roma, refugees and migrants, persons with disabilities or older workers as well as persons with intersecting vulnerabilities was considered more difficult. This was also recognised by respondents to the MA survey, where only 27% (of in total 114 respondents) considered that the Roma were adequately prioritised, whereas the majority of respondents did state that this was the case for the unemployed (87%) and the long-term unemployed (82%). In addition, evidence from the case studies also pointed to a risk of 'creaming' effects, i.e., the risk of prioritising individuals with a higher likelihood of achieving employment to the detriment of those who are furthest from the labour market.

#### *Factors enabling relevance*

Evidence from the MA survey and case studies suggests that the relevance of supported interventions overall increased both as compared to the previous programming period as well as within the 2014-2020 period. This can be attributed to several factors; for instance, stakeholders consulted in the case studies stated that a better knowledge of the needs of target groups had been developed based on the experience of the previous programming period which has helped increase relevance. Other factors that emerged from the case studies as contributing to improving relevance of ESF/YEI-supported interventions relate to regular and continuous

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<sup>188</sup> See answers to evaluation questions 19 and 20 of the supporting study.

monitoring of implementation, and the application of the partnership principle and multi-level governance. Evidence from various case studies further indicates that involving stakeholders from the design phase of operational programmes as well as during their implementation was a crucial aspect for the relevance of ESF/YEI operations. In particular, engaging CSOs and NGOs that have direct knowledge of or experience with specific target groups in the design and implementation of interventions contributed to strengthening the relevance of the ESF/YEI. Nonetheless, while overall the application of the partnership principle has been strengthened as compared to the previous programming period (see also section 4.1), the case studies also point towards a lower involvement of stakeholders in some Member States, in particular those with more centralised programme management or with less of a tradition of working with partners.

### *Relevance across TOs*

Respondents to the MA survey also indicated differences as regards the relevance of ESF interventions to the needs of supported target groups across TOs. Whereas around two thirds of respondents considered that interventions implemented under TO 8 (65% of in total 114 respondents), TO 9 (62%) and TO 10 (63%) were to a large extent relevant to the needs of the defined target groups, this was less the case for TO 11 (only 19% of respondents to the MA survey considered supported interventions as relevant to a large extent) and YEI (only 31%). For the latter two, the majority of respondents indicated that they ‘do not know’, which might point towards an overall lower knowledge of operations under TO 11 and YEI<sup>189</sup>. The case studies conducted on the different TOs provide a number of examples and insights as regards commonalities and differences in ensuring relevance to the target groups’ needs.

Evidence from the case study on TO 8 indicates that a number of Member States were able to rely on experience from previous programming periods to ensure increased relevance of ESF operations. For instance, in Denmark, specific elements from projects implemented in the previous period that were considered as success factors were replicated in similar projects for the 2014-2020 period. The case study on the YEI underlines the importance of involving and cooperating with CSOs to ensure the relevance of supported operations. For instance, in Ireland, cooperation with relevant CSOs with a youth focus has helped adopt a holistic approach to respond to the specific needs of the target group (early school leavers), considering also mental health support. Nonetheless, interviews conducted with stakeholders from Cyprus and Lithuania also suggest some difficulties in reaching the most vulnerable NEET and in accounting for intersectional vulnerabilities of young NEET (e.g., young people with disabilities, rural youth). Furthermore, there is also evidence from the case study indicating that the focus and definition of YEI operations did not allow to address the needs of young, employed people in terms of e.g., training or upskilling activities.

Stakeholders interviewed in the context of the case studies covering operations under TO 9 overall considered that targeted outreach and specifically tailoring interventions to marginalised communities and potential beneficiaries at risk of social exclusion has helped ensure the relevance of ESF operations to responding to the needs and difficulties these groups encounter when it comes to access to employment, essential and social services. For instance, in some Member States, an approach was adopted where other relevant actors in close contact with the intended target groups were reached to raise awareness and ultimately facilitate their

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<sup>189</sup> TO 13 is not covered as respondents to the MA survey were not specifically asked about their views as regards the relevance of TO 13 in the relevant survey question.

participation (e.g., in Italy, care-givers were engaged; in Lithuania, social enterprises employing people with disabilities were targeted). Nevertheless, as also mentioned above, respondents to the MA survey largely perceived that the needs of the Roma were not adequately addressed. Participants to the focus group on TO 9 referred to the issue of persisting social stigma which can further hamper reaching the most vulnerable target groups.

Examples from the case study of TO 10 highlight the importance of systematically assessing and considering the needs and specific circumstances of the target groups. For instance, under IP10.i, Spanish authorities systematically analysed the reasons for early school leaving (e.g., income needs, lack of family support), on the basis of which they were able to design drop-out prevention measures accounting for these underlying reasons that were potentially preventing target groups from participating in ESF measures.

As mentioned above, most respondents to the MA survey indicated that they were not able to assess the relevance of interventions implemented under TO 11, likely linked to a more limited knowledge of this TO and considering its narrower scope. Nonetheless, evidence from the case study points towards the importance of involving relevant stakeholders in the design and implementation of interventions to ensure that the nature and content of the supported operations (e.g., trainings, digitalisation of processes) is relevant and timely.

In the future, the positive results of ESF and YEI support across all TOs<sup>190</sup>, both on micro and macro levels (see section 4.1), are likely to continue after the end of EU funding. In particular, 88% of MA survey respondents (100 out of 114) suggested that results for participants are likely to be sustained. Notably, activities and operations that continue under the ESF+ or are integrated into national or regional initiatives contribute to the long-lasting effect of results and moreover indicate the continued relevance of the support provided to the target groups. For instance, services have continued after 2022 in Italy (childcare services vouchers), Malta (Work Programme Initiative), Finland (one-stop-shops to help young people integrate into the labour market now embedded in the national system) or Lithuania, where operations financed by IP10ii have now been taken over by state financing<sup>191</sup>.

#### *Continued relevance in changing circumstances*

As suggested in previous sections, due to the flexibility enabled in the implementation of ESF programmes during the COVID-19 pandemic and the crisis of Ukrainians fleeing Russia's military aggression with the introduction of the CRII/CRII+, REACT-EU and CARE initiatives, the ESF has been able to ensure continued relevance of its objectives and support in line with evolving needs and circumstances. In this regard, the case study of TO 13 (REACT-EU) suggests that supported operations were highly relevant in addressing newly emerged needs, such as regarding remote education or to protect jobs (e.g., support to short-time work schemes or to the adaptation of workers and enterprises to the changed circumstances). This is also confirmed by the REACT-EU evaluation<sup>192</sup>.

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<sup>190</sup> As reported by national stakeholders of all types, including Managing Authorities, public authorities and beneficiary stakeholders; and variously reported in national evaluations.

<sup>191</sup> For more information, see the supporting study Evaluation Question 28.

<sup>192</sup> Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the evaluation of REACT-EU. Published 10 October 2025. Available at:

[COM\\_2025\\_634\\_F1\\_REPORT\\_FROM\\_COMMISSION\\_EN\\_V4\\_P1\\_4084848.pdf](#)

In addition to the flexibility provided with the above-mentioned initiatives, Member States were also able to introduce formal amendments to their programmes following regular procedures foreseen in the set-up of the funds, to reflect changed circumstances and priorities and thereby contribute to ensuring continued relevance. For instance, in Bavaria (Germany), operations were amended to reduce the planned focus on supporting the long-term unemployed given that their needs were not as high as expected.

*Relevance achieved through contributions to horizontal principles<sup>193</sup>, the EU 2020 strategy and the European Pillar of Social Rights*

All Member States addressed the horizontal principles of gender equality and non-discrimination in their OPs, thereby also contributing to enhancing the relevance of the support operations in view of their target groups. However, only a subset provided for specific allocations to these themes including Czechia, Germany, Poland and the Netherlands<sup>194</sup>. 93% of MA respondents reported that the principle of gender equality, equal opportunities and non-discrimination<sup>195</sup> was applied to a large or moderate extent, representing the strongest response on horizontal principles. Stakeholders of all types underlined the positive improvement, compared to the past, in the commitment and capacity to concretely address the non-discrimination principle. Mainstreaming gender equality, equal opportunities and non-discrimination principles took place through systemic measures such as knowledge-sharing and awareness-raising, tackling social stereotypes, supporting stakeholders' capacity-building and involving NGOs and associations with experience and knowledge of working with vulnerable groups, the latter identified as a key factor in strengthening the relevance of provided support (see above). Still, challenges persist such as more limited knowledge, experience and institutional capacity; difficulties in actively involving NGOs and representatives of discriminated groups in programme design and implementation; as well as limited effectiveness of implemented actions. Also, there is a minority view that there were gaps between formal statements and actual implementation.

The implementation of the partnership and multi-level governance principle<sup>196</sup> has improved compared to the 2007-2013 programming period and contributed to strengthening relevance<sup>197</sup>. Member States and Managing Authorities adopted a variety of arrangements and operational mechanisms to ensure effective involvement of partners in different stages of the programming

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<sup>193</sup> The horizontal principles pertain to the promotion of gender equality and non-discrimination, sustainable development as well as the involvement of partners and were to be reflected in operational programmes and by appropriate amounts of ESF funding. See Chapter II, articles 6, 7, 8 of the ESF Regulation.

<sup>194</sup> Specifically, according to the ESF categorisation data, only 17 Member States reported allocating around EUR 4.46 billion on 25 898 operations related to the gender equality secondary theme, see Case study report on Gender Equality.

<sup>195</sup> In accordance with Article 7 of the ESIF Common Provisions Regulation, (EU) No 1303/2013 (Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32013R1303> and in Articles 7 and 8 of the ESF regulation, (EU) No 1304/2013, Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=celex:32013R1304>

<sup>196</sup> The legal basis for the 2014-2020 programming period lays in article 5 of the Reg(EU)1303/2013, which refers both to the Partnership Agreement and Programme levels. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=celex:32013R1304>

<sup>197</sup> For more information, see the supporting study Evaluation Question 21.

cycle. As noted above and underlined in the relevant case study, this has been a key factor in enhancing the relevance of supported operations to the target groups' needs, by engaging the knowledge and networks of local actors and authorities. However, effective and efficient implementation of the partnership principle depended strongly on the capacity of both partners and Managing Authorities. At the same time, the application of the principle was also found to contribute to supporting the capacity building of both public administrations and other involved stakeholders. The COVID-19 pandemic had negative implications on this principle due to meeting restrictions and fast reallocation needs, however, in some Member States the creation of new working groups and task forces strengthened cooperation and partnership processes became more digital<sup>198</sup>, favouring the involvement of a larger number of organisations and stakeholders, although sometimes at a more superficial and less effective level.

Interviewed national and regional level stakeholders of all types stated that the principle of sustainable development was taken on board well in ESF operations. However, case study evidence was more limited and less consistent than for the other two principles and according to the survey among Managing Authorities, this principle was less applied in ESF implementation than for the other horizontal principles. Still, research conducted in the context of the supporting study indicated the importance for sustainable development of involving relevant stakeholders as well as target groups early on, as of the design phase of the operations.

Some stakeholders also expressed dissatisfaction with the degree to which horizontal principles had been used to inform the design and implementation of ESF and YEI operations and the variety of implementing and monitoring practices across countries. Furthermore, stakeholders generally felt that the need to rapidly respond to crises took precedence over more considered application of the horizontal principles.

The evaluation also found that some ESF and YEI operations were relevant in promoting social innovation. The relevance of social innovation operations under the ESF varied widely between countries and projects (as per the evidence gathered in the case study on social innovation), depending on the existing social innovation ecosystem and the capacity to involve the key social innovation actors. Social innovation was reflected in a number of Member States, with a total of 78 operational programmes in 22 Member States allocating finances in a specific priority axis or focussing on social innovation as a secondary theme. However, challenges existed relating to finding a common way to approach the concept and to address its implementation through operations. With respect to the ESF's regulatory and administrative framework, stakeholders felt that it needed further tailoring and simplification to better support the implementation of social innovation interventions.

Finally, the collected evidence also points to a contribution to the Europe 2020 employment rate target as well as to the first chapter of the European Pillar of Social Rights. This is also mirrored in the MA survey, where 79% (90 out of 114) indicated a large or moderate contribution to the employment rate target and 87% (99 out of 114) feeling that the ESF and YEI had contributed to a large or moderate extent to the first chapter of the European Pillar of

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<sup>198</sup> European Committee of the Regions, Holstein, F., Böhme, K., Münch, A. et al., Application of the principles of partnership and multi-level governance in Cohesion Policy programming 2021-2027, European Committee of the Regions, 2021, available at: <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2863/602544>

Social Rights. Stakeholder views corroborated these aspects but pointed to the need to support more disadvantaged and marginalised groups. Concerning social inclusion, 52% (59 out of 114) of the MA survey respondents felt that the ESF/YEI contributed to a large or moderate extent to the Europe 2020 poverty alleviation target and 59% (67 out of 114) felt that the ESF/YEI had contributed to a large or moderate extent to the third chapter of the EPSR. Relating education and training, stakeholders felt that the ESF/YEI contributed to both the Europe 2020 targets in this domain<sup>199</sup>. Therefore, the ESF has made a substantial contribution to expanding and improving education, training and vocational training.

#### 4.3.2 FUTURE TRENDS<sup>200</sup>

Beyond the relevance of ESF/YEI interventions during the evaluation period, ‘mega’-trends such as the digital transformation, demographic ageing, environmental and climate challenges and migration have profound consequences for the future relevance of ESF/YEI-type funding, triggering new and deepened labour market and social challenges across Member States, but also presenting new opportunities to be exploited.

Notably, the EU is faced with urgent and increasing labour and skills shortages in various sectors and occupations, for both low-skilled and high-skilled workers<sup>201</sup>, heightening the need to upskill and reskill the workforce to meet the evolving demands of the labour market. Moreover, the digital transition and increasing use of artificial intelligence tools are markedly impacting on employment and working conditions across all sectors, requiring that workers develop new and updated skills and competences, while they can exacerbate already existing socio-economic inequalities and disparities in terms of access to the labour market, to training and to essential services, e.g., of rural and less developed areas. Similarly, climate change and the green transition call for equipping the workforce with the right skills and competences to foster the development and deployment of clean technologies. At the same time, an inclusive approach in this regard is needed, to avoid exacerbating existing inequalities across groups, sectors and regions. On the other hand, demographic change in terms of a declining working age population will further increase current labour shortages, social and territorial disparities and pressure on the EU social and welfare model, whereas migration and attracting skills from abroad is often considered as a way of countering labour shortages. In this context, the social inclusion of third-country nationals also remains a key policy concern. Finally, some population groups are at an increasing risk of falling into poverty and social exclusion, such as low-educated persons, NEETs, or people living in rural and remote areas, and progress in reducing poverty rates across the EU and in particular those of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion has stalled.

Therefore, in view of these new and persisting policy challenges, the relevance of funding in policy areas that were covered by ESF/YEI can be expected to remain high and even increase

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<sup>199</sup> Reducing early school leavers to 10% and increasing the share of the population aged 30-34 having completed tertiary education to 40%.

<sup>200</sup> See answer to evaluation question 24 of the supporting study.

<sup>201</sup> See also Draghi’s Report on Competitiveness, available here: [https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-competitiveness/draghi-report\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-competitiveness/draghi-report_en)

in the future considering the different mega-trends described above that already have significant and transformative impacts on EU labour markets, skills needs and socio-economic inequalities as well as on the overall competitiveness and social model of the Union.

## **5. WHAT ARE THE CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED?**

In this section, we set out the conclusions and lessons learned deriving from the evidence gathered and reflected in previous sections. Lessons learned are presented in boxes after each set of conclusions.

### **5.1 EFFECTIVENESS**

Based on the available evidence, ESF and YEI operated effectively during the 2014-2022 evaluation period, achieving their objectives and contributing to wider EU policies, while successfully reaching the intended target groups. To a lesser extent, they assisted Member States in tackling the challenges raised in Country Specific Recommendations and in achieving changes at a macro or more structural level. With the flexibilities introduced via CRII/CRII+, CARE and REACT-EU, they effectively allowed Member States to quickly adapt to the emerging needs due to the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

#### *Achievement of operational objectives*

Operations reached a total of 64.6 million participations. Immediate common result indicators reveal that 35% of ESF participants at the end of 2022 had achieved a positive result upon leaving ESF and YEI funded operations, including supporting 7.4 million participants to find a job and 10.3 million gaining a qualification. In addition, 1.5 million were engaged in job search and 3.0 million were in education/training after the intervention. 6.9 million participants with positive results are disadvantaged participants. Focussing on participants entering employment and gaining a qualification, which can be directly compared to the preceding programming period, the ESF has been more effective, reaching higher shares of these common results.

The evidence points at a good effectiveness of ESF and YEI interventions in reaching the target groups. Compared to the previous programming period, the shares of inactive and unemployed participants among all participants have been increased, as has the ESF's reach among migrants and persons from minority or marginalised communities. In addition, the shares of those facing social exclusion closely mirror prevalence within the EU population and the shares of Roma people as well as of those with the lowest education levels are over-represented in the ESF data relative to their population. However, there is room for improvement. In particular, challenges persist in reaching the most disadvantaged groups (such as the most vulnerable or marginalised within the larger NEET group and people that are homeless or affected by housing exclusion) e.g. due to their disengagement from public services and society more generally or limitations in terms of resources, capacity and/or expertise of delivery organisation. Effectiveness in reaching persons with disabilities is also still limited.

Regarding thematic objectives, the ESF made a strong contribution in the employment policy area. Stakeholders reported that it contributed to reaching the Europe 2020 employment rate target as well as implementing the first chapter of the European Pillar of Social Rights. The policy area of education and training also benefitted from a strong ESF contribution, and stakeholders reported that ESF/YEI contributed to both the Europe 2020 targets in this domain.

The ESF also contributed positively to the social inclusion and poverty alleviation targets of the Europe 2020 strategy as well as to the third chapter of the European Pillar of Social Rights. Despite the complexities of addressing social inclusion and poverty challenges, notable efforts have been made to reach disadvantaged groups, laying the groundwork for continued progress and improvement in this critical area.

### *Changes resulting from ESF and YEI support*

ESF and YEI programmes were overall effective in achieving changes at the individual level such as contributions to increased employment opportunities, decreased unemployment, the promotion of social inclusion as well as successful upskilling of workers and enhanced education provision for young people. On average, evidence available from 110 national counterfactual impact evaluations shows that support from ESF and YEI made a difference by increasing participants' chances to find employment by nearly 6 percentage points compared to non-participants. It is estimated that, on average, the employment rates for participants increased from 40.2% to 46.1% corresponding to a 15% increase. Importantly, these numbers should be read having in mind that ESF mostly targets individuals who are relatively more difficult to employ. Particularly effective in increasing the probability of finding a job or improving participants' job positions were operations on education and vocational training, work-based learning and financial incentives as well as traineeships, childcare services and entrepreneurship courses. Similarly, the development of "one-stop-shops" for access to multiple services and operations providing individually tailored support and those adopting a holistic approach stand out positively.

Contributions to changes on a more macroeconomic or structural level have to be looked at taking the scope and scale of ESF and YEI funding as well as other – powerful – factors of influence into account. Therefore, the availability of robust statistical evidence is more limited than for changes on the individual level. Based on the Rhomolo model, ESF and YEI funding had a positive effect on employment rates of participants and a positive impact on GDP and employment levels. One euro spent on the ESF, YEI and REACT-EU is estimated to yield a total of 1.26 euro in 2030. In addition, some more specific examples of changes at a more systemic level were observed, especially in the context of the implementation of the Youth Guarantee. In addition, a large majority of relevant country-specific recommendations was taken up in programming and all stakeholder groups expressed positive views on the contribution of the ESF and YEI to implementing country-specific recommendations. The supporting study found a broad correlation between Member States' socio-economic contexts (e.g. the prevalence of relatively low employment rates), CSRs issued to them, and ESF allocations at TO level. However, it is not possible to assess the precise contribution due to, among others, the large overlap between focus of the European semester and the objectives of the ESF as well as fact that a number of CSRs are broad, calling for significant structural reforms, on which the ESF has limited influence.

### *Role of the ESF in crisis response*

Both the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine represented serious crises that the ESF addressed while negotiations and the setup of programmes for the 2021-2027 programming period were still ongoing. Additional funds and reprogramming options were introduced via CRII, CRII+, REACT-EU and CARE, in coordination with support under ERDF. Evidence shows that CRII/CRII+ made a valuable and substantial contribution to

the pandemic response, enabling ESF operations to be adapted, and at times newly developed, to address emerging needs from COVID-19. These crisis response measures were also more easily and rapidly adapted compared to the tools deployed in response to the financial crisis of 2007-2008. Moreover, REACT-EU extended the crisis response both in volume and scope. The additional financing helped alleviate financial constraints in public services, as well as prepared the ground for longer-term investments with a view to twin transition. CARE effectively helped people fleeing from Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine to learn the receiving country's language and integrate in the labour market.

### *Facilitating and hindering factors*

The analysis on key factors influencing effectiveness, based on triangulation of different sources, showed that facilitating factors include effective governance and implementation approaches, the presence of well-developed networks, strong cooperation among relevant stakeholders and partners as well as effective synergies with related operations, other policy instruments and funding sources. Further facilitating factors were the analysis of labour market, education and social inclusion priorities, the effective definition and understanding target groups as well as effective mechanisms to learn from previous experience. Finally, reduced administrative burden and reporting requirements through simplification were key factors facilitating effective implementation. In the context of CRII/CRII+ the rapid response and additional flexibilities were key. The main hindering factors are the reverse of the elements mentioned above.

### **Lessons learned on 'Effectiveness'**

Despite being overall effective across the various assessed domains, a number of areas for further improvements could be considered. Importantly, most of these lessons learned have already been incorporated under ESF+ in the 2021-27 programming period:

#### *Effectiveness in leading to change*

- Specific and targeted approaches to supporting certain groups show higher effectiveness in reducing the employability gap between those without and with disabilities and between the overall working-age population and older workers.
  - In the 2021-2027 programming period, a new impetus to social innovation was given for instance with the launch of the European Competence Centre for Social Innovation<sup>202</sup>. This is expected to help develop more targeted approaches to support certain groups.
- To ensure that horizontal principles (such as gender equality) are more consistently and concretely embedded in ESF operations, specific monitoring requirements could be set that track the expenditure and the outcomes related to each horizontal principle. Additional weight could also be placed in national evaluations on assessing contributions to horizontal principles.
  - In the 2021-2027 programming period, secondary dimensions to track, among others, gender equality contributions were added to the financial planning and

<sup>202</sup> See: <https://european-social-fund-plus.ec.europa.eu/en/esf-social-innovation-initiative>

reporting. This should provide a clearer picture of how much ESF+ funds contribute to horizontal principles.

#### *Increasing the ability to assess effectiveness*

- More guidance could be provided on target setting and efforts on validating the targets set by Member States to ensure greater consistency in target setting and thus increase the value of their analysis in evaluations.
  - In the 2021-2027 programming period, the Commission increased its offer to check on draft methodological documents on indicators and targets, provided targeted guidance documents and dedicated sessions of its data network meetings with Managing Authorities to the topic of target setting in an effort to improve and share knowledge.
- Annual reporting of all indicators, including longer-term result indicators, could also be considered so that performance in terms of results can be more consistently and reliably assessed throughout programme delivery.
  - In the 2021-2027 programming period, annual reporting on most indicators was introduced to allow for a better performance assessment.

## **5.2 EFFICIENCY**

Stakeholder consultations and case studies consistently highlighted that both EU institutions and national/regional authorities made notable efforts to reduce unnecessary administrative burden e.g. substantial strides were made driven by simplified cost options, digitalisation efforts and streamlined reporting. The use of SCOs was widely recognised as a key factor in reducing administrative burdens, facilitating efficient payment administration to beneficiaries and improving financial reporting and monitoring. Digitalisation, and online tools, also resulted in decreased administrative costs, particularly for Managing Authorities and some light monitoring and reporting structures were introduced in certain situations.

However, challenges remain in specific IPs or Member States, particularly in areas such as financial reporting, claim preparation and submission, documentation, audit requirements, and control systems. Also, some beneficiary organisations faced challenges with the introduction of SCOs and digitalisation due to limited knowledge, in particular of EU funding and cost justification requirements. Nonetheless, the long-term potential of digitalisation and SCOs remains promising, pending the resolution of existing challenges.

#### *Overall cost-effectiveness of ESF and YEI*

The cost benefit analysis carried out as part of this evaluation found largely positive evidence of cost effectiveness in terms of net public returns on investment, although with some differences across Investment Priorities and countries. The sum of private and public returns on investment per participant were highest for direct investments in employment measures such as under IP8.i *access to employment* (EUR 26 000), IP8.iii *self-employment* (EUR 40 000), IP9.i *active inclusion* (EUR 31 000), and for investments in formal education such as IP10.i *early school leaving and learning pathways* (EUR 27 000) and IP10.ii *access to tertiary education*

(EUR 29 000). It should be noted that certain benefits could not be monetised due to a lack of data and the impossibility to robustly estimate them in quantitative terms (e.g., benefits to employers).

In all TOs, unit costs varied among countries, also reflecting the targeting of different groups and the implementation of different types of measures.

#### *Facilitating factors to efficiency*

The European Social Fund has made significant improvements in administrative procedures during the programming period 2014-2020, driven by:

- Simplified Cost Options: Flat rates and standard unit costs have simplified financial reporting and monitoring, reducing administrative burdens.
- Digitalisation: Online tools and platforms have enhanced operational efficiency, although some Member States faced challenges with introducing new IT systems.
- Streamlined reporting: Some Member States introduced lighter monitoring and reporting structures, including simplified reporting and self-evaluation forms, to ease the burden on recipient organizations.

These innovations have collectively contributed to a notable reduction in administrative burdens. However, some challenges remained, including limited knowledge of EU funding and cost justification requirements among beneficiary organisations, initial administrative challenges with introducing SCOs in some Member States, delays or difficulties with introducing new IT systems.

Overall, significant progress was made in simplifying ESF processes, and the long-term potential of digitalisation and SCOs remains promising, pending the resolution of existing challenges. In contrast, there was low take up of Joint Action Plans, likely due to low awareness.

#### *General administrative burden*

Total costs of administering the ESF and YEI programmes for public authorities are estimated at EUR 3.6 billion, or 2.7% of total spending. This level is considered modest, as administrative costs for public authorities below 4% are generally not regarded as excessive. The most cost-intensive tasks for programme authorities were selection of operations and information to beneficiaries, while it was preparing a funding application in the case of beneficiaries.

Significant strides were made in reducing administrative burdens in ESF programmes compared to previous periods, driven by simplified cost options, digitalisation, and streamlined reporting, which reflected a clear commitment to improving efficiency and reducing complexity. These simplification measures are estimated to have produced efficiency gains for programme authorities of around 10% decrease of costs.

Despite these advancements, some stakeholders (national/regional Managing Authorities and beneficiary organizations) still perceived lingering administrative challenges in specific IPs or Member States, such as "gold plating" and complex processes in project management. In particular, areas such as public procurement, reporting, claim preparation and submission, documentation, audit requirements, and control systems were acknowledged as needing further improvement. Unconnected management systems, staff turnover and changes in legislation or eligibility requirements were also issues occasionally contributing to project implementation

delays. The recognition of these challenges by stakeholders highlights opportunities for targeted improvements, ensuring future programming periods can build on existing successes.

#### *Administrative burden in responding to crisis*

Streamlined and expedited processes for amending Operational Programmes and reallocating resources enabled Member States to respond swiftly to emerging crises<sup>203</sup> However, in the evaluation of crisis response programmes, notably CRII and CRII+, Managing Authorities of certain countries reported difficulties in navigating the rules or fulfilling stringent administrative and national audit requirements with high data/documentation demands, which were perceived as burdensome and potentially unfair to smaller entities.

To improve the effectiveness of these types of programmes, stakeholders pointed to the need to strike the right balance between simplifying and making flexible administrative processes and ensuring clear guidance, accountability and transparency. By adopting flexible and supportive administrative practices, such as those implemented in Sweden and Italy, Member States can reduce the administrative burden and facilitate access to funding for beneficiaries.

#### *Management and control systems*

The monitoring and evaluation systems generally functioned well, providing regular comprehensive, high-quality data on participants and enabling effective performance analysis at reasonable costs. The system was praised for its flexibility, partnership approach, and results-driven focus. However, challenges remained in aligning expenditure with performance indicators and clarifying the relationship between common and specific indicators. Similarly, there were opportunities for improvement, particularly in further digitalisation, streamlined financial reporting, audit requirements and control systems.

The number and quality of evaluations at national and regional level improved significantly. However, limitations persisted such due to capacity constraints in smaller administrations or countries lacking evaluation expertise, perceived formality of evaluations, which often failed to influence decision-making or the limited scope, focusing on implementation rather than strategic programming or the design of new programmes.

Future programs could address these by bolstering capacity and aligning evaluations with strategic goals. Overall, while current systems are functional, targeted improvements in efficiency, digital tools, and evaluation practices could provide for more critical and deeper insights as well as operational effectiveness.

#### *Other hindering factors to efficiency*

Stakeholders have identified following factors leading to additional costs, higher administrative burdens and lower efficiencies:

- Limited administrative capacity of project beneficiaries, worsened by heavy administrative burdens, lengthy project processes, and complex guidance manuals.

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<sup>203</sup> Evidenced in case study research for the study on CRII, REACT-EU and CARE. See Atkinson, I. et al (2023) Study supporting the preliminary evaluation of the support provided by ESF and FEAD under the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiatives (CRII and CRII+). Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8542&furtherPubs=yes>

- Operational challenges such as funding delays, high staff turnover, and a lack of specialised technical skills.
- Data protection requirements causing misunderstandings and demanding extra resources (time/costs), with Germany highlighting strict rules as a major administrative burden.

### **Lessons learned on ‘Efficiency’**

There were positive improvements on efficiency as a result of the simplifications proposed by the Commission and the other good practices implemented by the Member States. Processes could still be simplified further to reduce the administrative burden, streamline procedures, and enhance the overall efficiency of the ESF. A number of areas for further simplification or reform emerged from the evaluation which could be considered as future developments. Importantly, the 2021-2027 framework has already incorporated several simplification measures in these domains, including fewer policy objectives, clearer indicators, lighter reporting requirements and single audit arrangements. This shows a positive step towards simplifying ESF implementation processes that could be further enhanced in the future.

*General simplification measures could include:*

- Making cost options flexible to external shocks by allowing due consideration to the rise of living costs and inflation.
- Streamlining national application and selection processes where redundant or excessive information not directly related to project activities is requested.
- Simplifying monitoring and reporting requirements by reducing data collection requirements and by shortening annual implementation reports.
- Streamlining and expediting the amendment of Operational Programmes and reallocating resources enabled Member States to respond rapidly to emerging crises as done in the crisis response programmes CRII and CARE.
- Simplifying information requirements for small institutions like NGOs and regional bodies and offering them better capacity building support to avoid that too large a proportion of the ESF and YEI grant funds goes to administration, audit and control.
- Streamlining auditing requirements by reducing control or verifications and documentation requirements, by requiring a proportionate audit trail system and by eliminating excessive auditing processes, different audit rules and interpretations, and repeated requests for the same information.

*Streamlined and effective monitoring systems could be improved with:*

- Clearer linkages between expenditure and indicators allow detailed analysis of expenditure and intensity of the support on participants specifically.
- The obligation to publish the list of projects, already in force, could additionally be associated with a simple classification of the intervention and other information such as target groups or delivery mechanism, being mindful of not adding excessive

additional burdens, to facilitate improved understanding of linkages with the Intervention Logic as well as performance, efficiency and effectiveness.

- Enhancing the usability and significance of the programme specific indicators. At the moment, those indicators are not clearly and functionally connected to the performance framework and the common indicators. Creating clear categories of specific indicators (e.g. for persons, systems and equipment), providing an explicit link between specific and common indicators (e.g. what part of a common indicator is explained by a specific indicator) and explaining what internal objective the specific indicator relates to would assist in more clearly identifying the performance story.
- Reviewing indicators so they more robustly capture the quality of operations. Indicators were, in many cases, ‘overly quantitative’ and overlooked the quality of operations (targets are monitored the main achievement of the operation was not really measured).

*Streamlined and effective evaluation systems could be enhanced through:*

- Building evaluation capacity in Member States (particularly countries with a smaller administration or those without prior evaluation experience, to improve the quality and usefulness of evaluations) and broadening the scope of evaluation. This would inform strategic choices and programming, rather than just supporting implementation.
- Further support from the Evaluation Helpdesk and increasing the promotion of effective evaluation practices. This would help reducing the perception of evaluation’s being obligatory instead of a tool for decision-making.

### **5.3 COHERENCE**

#### *Complementarity and synergies of ESF and YEI support with national and regional policies*

The evaluation showed that ESF and YEI operational programmes had strong complementarity with national and regional strategies. Most stakeholders, including those surveyed, agreed that ESF operations aligned well with national and regional policies.

As regards internal coherence, ESF and YEI had good level of it with the different parts of the programmes working well together to achieve their objectives. The various projects funded under different areas of intervention (Thematic Objectives) were distinct yet complementary. Adjustments made in response to COVID-19 also maintained coherence by targeting different groups and using varied delivery mechanisms. Member States generally drew on lessons from previous programming periods, involving multiple stakeholders in the design phase and using EU-level policies as references, ensuring complementarities and reducing overlap.

#### *Complementarity with other EU instruments*

The evaluation concluded that there was good external coherence with the European Regional Development Fund, as it was also pointed out in the 2014-2020 ERDF ex-post evaluation, through the use of a targeted policy mix. Numerous examples of complementarities are reported in the evaluation. At the same time, the ERDF ex-post evaluation found scope to leverage

synergies with ESF more consistently and effectively, such as in the ICT sector and territorial instruments. Stakeholders in the ERDF evaluation also pointed to administrative challenges that prevented optimal synergies with the ESF in e-government and e-business interventions.

ESF stakeholders highlighted that there was also coherence with other funds such as FEAD, and Erasmus+. According to the ex-post evaluation of FEAD 2014-2020, the legal texts governing the ESF regulation and FEAD regulation, demonstrate a good degree of complementarity, with specific provisions designed to ensure complementarity between these funds or to prevent overlaps or duplication. Examples from the case studies in the ex-post evaluation of FEAD highlight good practices in several Member States in terms of complementarities between FEAD and the ESF.

In relation to other funds, the RRF, introduced in 2021, played a significant role in the transition between the 2014–2020 and 2021–2027 programming periods. As concerns the period of this evaluation, the RRF complements Cohesion Policy by enhancing policy areas and addressing challenges aligned with Country Specific Recommendations. Both the ESF and RRF strengthen social inclusion and address inequalities while contributing to the European Pillar of Social Rights. The case study on the functioning of the RRF and other EU funds, within the context of the Mid-Term Evaluation of the RRF, reported no significant substitution effect with respect to the 2014-2020 Cohesion Policy Operational Programmes, except from minor reallocations identified in Spain (e.g. Murcia), which nonetheless cannot be confirmed as related to an ESF programme.

Overall, challenges remained due to complex institutional structures which did not allow for further coherence with other EU funding instruments.

#### *Complementarity with wider EU policies*

In relation to the coherence with EU policies, it was shown that there was good complementarity, with national authorities and stakeholders commonly using EU-level policies as references when designing interventions. The Country Specific Recommendations of the European semester, the Europe 2020 Strategy, the European Pillar of Social Rights, and the European Skills Agenda were frequently mentioned, showing alignment with employment objectives and coherence with social inclusion goals. Overall, the ESF objectives related to employment were the most coherent with EU policy objectives, while social inclusion and training policy objectives were prioritised to a lesser extent.

#### **Lessons learned on ‘Coherence’**

- Most Member States have centralised mechanisms that ensure that funding and operational objectives are allocated appropriately across ESF operations. This internal coherence could be further built-upon reducing the risk of overlaps between activities and to reinforce shared objectives and complementarities between operations by engaging and sharing knowledge with all relevant stakeholders.
- Many Member States used EU level policies as the main point of reference when designing interventions, providing a framework and focus for key mainstream issues such as unemployment. However, it was noted that in general few references were made in planning documents to EU policies for specific target groups (e.g. Roma and persons

with a disability). Member States could consider the full range of EU policies in their planning process regarding all target groups and types of operations.

## 5.4 RELEVANCE

### *Relevance to the needs of the target groups*

The evaluation provides robust evidence that ESF/YEI programmes were relevant to and well aligned with the needs of their target groups, in particular unemployed and inactive people as well as (young) NEET. Respondents to the MA survey reported that a better knowledge of the target groups' needs, based on the experience of previous programming periods, has contributed to increasing the relevance of operations in the 2014-2020 period.

ESF/YEI operations were able to reach people from disadvantaged backgrounds, including people living in rural areas, migrants, people from marginalised communities, and the homeless. However, stakeholders shared that there could be scope for better reflecting in ESF/YEI interventions the specific needs of target groups such as Roma, refugees and migrants, persons with disabilities or older workers as well as persons with intersecting vulnerabilities.

The application of the partnership principle and the involvement of stakeholders (in particular NGOs and CSOs with direct knowledge of the specific target groups' needs) in the design, implementation and monitoring of interventions consistently emerged as a key factor for the relevance of the ESF/YEI. In addition, the importance of regular and continuous monitoring of implementation and of systematic needs assessments was also raised by stakeholders.

Some differences can be observed in the relevance of ESF/YEI operations across TOs, with the majority of respondents to the MA survey considering that interventions under TO 8, TO 9 and TO 10 were relevant to a large extent, whereas most respondents indicated an overall lower knowledge of TO 11 and YEI operations and their relevance. The flexibility provided under TO 13 (REACT-EU) and the introduction of the CRII/CRII+ and CARE initiatives is considered to have helped ensure the continued relevance of the ESF in view of changing needs.

The horizontal principles of gender equality and non-discrimination, sustainable development and involvement of partners have been widely considered in the OPs. However, the overall picture is more mixed in terms of achievements. Concerning gender equality and non-discrimination, challenges persisted such as limited knowledge and institutional capacity or regarding the active involvement of relevant stakeholders in programme design and implementation. With respect to the partnership principle, its effective implementation depended strongly on the capacity of both partners and Managing Authorities. Finally, evidence on the effectiveness of the implementation of the sustainable development principle was more limited than for the other two horizontal principles.

### *Future trends*

Looking ahead, 'mega-trends' such as the digital transition, demographic ageing, climate change and migration, are expected to have significant impacts on the structure and functioning of EU labour markets and social systems. Notably, these trends will further increase the need

to urgently address current and emerging skills and labour shortages, a policy priority that already features prominently in the political agenda<sup>204</sup>.

### **Lessons learned on ‘Relevance’**

- Member States could rely more on the use of ex-ante impact assessments and systematic needs assessments to inform the design of interventions tailored to the specific needs and circumstances of target groups, in particular considering their intersectional vulnerabilities. In this regard, exchanges and the dissemination of good practices could be fostered as well as capacity-building to strengthen the skills and competences of managing authorities and implementing bodies to conduct ex-ante impact and needs assessments.
- A multi-faceted and holistic approach specific to the target group can be beneficial to address the concrete needs of those target groups that are particularly vulnerable and/or outside of the labour market, incl. the Roma, people with disabilities or migrants/refugees, considering the various challenges and obstacles they encounter when accessing the labour market, essential services and social system. Alternative approaches such as targeting adjacent groups (e.g., care-givers, health care and social service providers, social enterprises) can be helpful in reaching the most vulnerable groups and addressing their needs.
- Important enablers could be: continued support to the partnership principle and further promotion of the involvement of stakeholders in the design, implementation and monitoring of operations (in particular NGOs and CSOs with direct knowledge of the specific target groups or representing the target groups), incl. by providing dedicated capacity-building opportunities to public administrations, implementing bodies as well stakeholders directly or encouraging the set-up of dedicated partnership fora at the appropriate (regional/local) level.
- Furthermore, there is room for further promoting capacity-building and the exchange of experiences and good practices for the effective and efficient monitoring of the implementation of programmes, fostering careful monitoring of target groups in particular where these are defined more broadly (incl. to address the risk of ‘creaming-effects’).
- In view of the multiple crises affecting the implementation of the ESF/YEI programmes, allowing for sufficient flexibility in the design and implementation of future funding instruments could account for changing circumstances, while ensuring stability and predictability for beneficiary organisations.
- Finally, there is scope to increase awareness on future trends with a significant impact on labour markets and social systems, to contribute to ensuring that emerging needs and challenges can be tackled in a proactive manner.

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<sup>204</sup> See for instance the Commission Communication on the Union of Skills (COM(2025) 90 final) and the Commission Communication on A Competitiveness Compass for the EU (COM(2025) 30 final).

## 5.5 EU-ADDED VALUE

### *Added Value of ESF and YEI: volume, scope, role and process effects*

The evaluation has provided strong evidence of the ESF and YEI having produced several beneficial effects beyond what would have been achieved by Member States acting alone, adding significant value in terms of volume, scope, role and process effects.

- *Volume effects:* ESF and YEI have, to a significant extent, generated a difference in terms of volume effects, allowing Member States to reach more individuals and entities than would have otherwise been possible solely through national funding, as well as a larger number and scale of activities. In addition, during the pandemic, ESF and YEI proved significant EU added value through their ability to increase the volume of support provided and expand the type of services.
- *Scope effects:* The ESF and YEI operations broadened the actions to diverse target groups and new or underdeveloped policy areas, increasing the support for hard-to-reach groups compared to the previous programming period, as well as the institutions and enterprises supported. It also allowed the support to new services available, and areas of intervention where there was insufficient national funding.
- *Role effects:* The implementation of ESF and YEI generated role effects linked to supporting innovation and the transfer of ideas and enabled changes in national systems or structures in some instances. While evidence is not even across TOs and IPs, successful cases implementing social innovation approaches and its replication in the national regional, or local level are present. The evaluation showed that ESF and YEI strengthened social partners and local institutions and promoted policy shifts. However, less clear evidence is available on the contribution to structural changes.
- *Process effects:* The ESF and YEI have produced to a moderate extent process effects on the stakeholders, organisations and authorities involved. ESF and YEI operations enabled Member States administrations and participating organisations to gain new competences. The funds also enabled collaboration among stakeholders towards long-term objectives, increasing the capacity of government administrations and participating beneficiaries, and enhancing the efficiency of their processes. It allowed drawing lessons learned from previous experiences, which resulted in the provision of new implementing tools.

The available monitoring information, complemented by stakeholder interviews, the MA survey, the public consultation and case study research provided a positive picture, identifying data, numerous examples and assertions from national stakeholders that ESF and YEI have generated effects that would not have been possible in their absence. The available national impact and implementation evaluations, as well as the results of the reports summarising the mid-term evaluations on the TOs, confirm these findings of EU added value across all dimensions. Stakeholders of all types, but particularly national stakeholders involved in managing or delivering ESF support, made strong assertions that the identified effects would otherwise not have taken place or would have to a lesser extent without ESF support, showcasing the beneficial effects beyond what would have been achieved by Member States alone.

### **Lessons learned on ‘EU-added value’**

- Building on the ESF achievements, continued investment can unlock synergies and amplify the positive impacts achieved so far. To maximise the fund's value, it is essential to conduct an early assessment, in close cooperation with national authorities, to identify which objectives can be best pursued through existing operations, which innovative approaches can be scaled up and replicated across Member States, and where EU support can add the most value in ensuring the long-term sustainability of these operations
- There is a need to avoid the risk that EU-funding could replace national funding in areas that are not policy priorities. Therefore, ensuring further alignment in terms of priorities between EU- and national-level investments avoiding funding gaps could be considered for the future. Enhancing sustainability of operations by integrating into national and regional initiatives could help. However, a number of factors are likely to play a role and mediate sustainable outcomes, such as national and local policy environments and available funding, further investments, the ownership over current practices and outcomes, as well as specific factors linked to each area of intervention.
- The use of flexibilities provided by crisis instruments to face the COVID-19 pandemic deepened and expanded the support for participants most in need, which would not have been possible without EU support. While being mindful of the original programme goals, an enhanced flexibility in programming could allow ESF to better contribute to emerging crisis and objectives.

## **5.6 VISIBILITY**

ESF/YEI programmes have overall achieved reasonable levels of visibility, with good levels of visibility in particular for those organisations and stakeholders which were directly involved in the implementation of the supported projects, although evidence suggests notable differences across TOs and Member States. Successful communication and awareness-raising activities that were highlighted by stakeholders in the context of the supporting study include high quality and dedicated websites, the display of the EU logo, specific communication campaigns and events, the use of social media and continued communication, including across programming periods. The combination of different communication and awareness-raising activities also emerged as a key factor that can facilitate visibility.

Nonetheless, less visibility is perceived among the general public. In addition, visibility was most often raised by stakeholders as one of the main areas for improvement, and evidence from national evaluations highlights the need to disseminate good practices as well as of results of ESF/YEI support.

### **Lessons learned on ‘Visibility’**

- A multi-faceted approach towards achieving higher levels of visibility could be promoted, which combines different communication channels, formats and tools

(including communication and local/social media campaigns, events, dedicated community outreach, etc.), considering the specificities of the target groups at hand.

- More emphasis could be put on setting up high-quality websites with clear and concise information on the support provided to ensure that potential beneficiaries as well as beneficiary organisations can benefit from a single entry-point when looking for relevant information and to foster a coherent brand identity.
- Exchanges between Member States of good practices and approaches towards achieving visibility could be enhanced in the future. In addition, the dissemination of results achieved in EU-funded projects could be strengthened, including via different (EU-level) channels and fora.

## 6. Annexes

Annex I:	Procedural information
Annex II:	Methodology and analytical models used
<i>Annex II.a:</i>	<i>Methodology followed by external contractor</i>
<i>Annex II.b:</i>	<i>Intervention logic</i>
<i>Annex II.c:</i>	<i>Evaluation matrix</i>
<i>Annex II.d:</i>	<i>Administrative costs</i>
Annex III:	Overview of benefits and costs
Annex IV:	Stakeholders consultation - synopsis report
Annex V:	Public consultation report
Annex VI:	Factual summary report
Annex VII:	Key data and additional information
Annex VIII:	Focus group summary report

### **Lead DG, Decide Planning/ CWP references**

The evaluation was led by the Directorate-General Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion Directorate G – Funds, Programming and Implementation Unit G.5. – Better Regulation. The Decide planning reference is PLAN/2022/953

### **Organisation and timing**

An interservice Steering Group (ISG) was set up, coordinated by the Directorate-General for Employment, Inclusion and Social Affairs (represented by staff from the Better Regulation unit and other policy and geographical Units) including members from the Secretariat-General (SG); the Joint Research Centre (JRC-Seville and JRC-Ispra); the Directorate-Generals for Migration and Home Affairs (HOME); Justice and Consumers (JUST); Regional and Urban Policy (REGIO); Agriculture and Rural Development (AGRI); Digital Services (DIGIT); Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (MARE); Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (EAC).

The ISG also acted as steering group for the external study supporting the evaluation, which was carried out by a consortium of Ecorys, Ismeri Europa, and 3s, under the Framework Contract VC/2021/0336. The tender was awarded to Ecorys on September 14th, 2022 (REF.ARES/2022/6355724). The contract for the study was signed on September 29th, 2022.

On 30 May 2024 the contractor sent the draft final report (ARES 2024/3871739) and on the 29 July 2024 the contractor sent the revised final report. From July 2024 to August 2025 successive rounds of revisions took place until reaching the published version<sup>205</sup>.

The call for Evidence published from 17 October 2023 to 23 January 2024 explained the context, purpose and scope of the evaluation and informed stakeholders that an external evaluation study was being carried out, supported by a public consultation. The public consultation was open for 12 weeks from 16 October 2023 until 23 January 2024. The factual summary was published on 22 March 2024. Targeted consultations were carried out mainly from April to June 2023. See Annex IV for further details on the stakeholder consultations carried out and the Supporting Study.

### **Exceptions to the better regulation guidelines**

All Better Regulation requirements were fulfilled.

### **Consultation of the RSB (if applicable)**

The evaluation was not selected for the scrutiny of the Regulatory Scrutiny Board.

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<sup>205</sup> Available at: [Study supporting the ex-post evaluation of the 2014-2020 European social fund and youth employment initiative - Publications Office of the EU](#) and [Annexes](#).

## Evidence, sources and quality

The evaluation was based on the evidence collection and analysis carried out by external experts (contract with Ecorys/Ismeri/3S to carry out the supporting study<sup>206</sup>, see above) as well as additional sources: the ESF Synthesis Report of 2022 AIR<sup>207</sup>, the JRC report “The ex-post macroeconomic evaluation of the 2014-2020 European Social Fund, Youth Employment Initiative and REACT-EU labour market interventions”<sup>208</sup>; the meta-analysis of Counterfactual impact evaluations<sup>209</sup>; additional support provided by the Evaluation Helpdesk for the European Commission summarising national evaluations. Cut-off data between the different sources differ in some cases, which are mentioned in the report.

Annex II provides additional information on the methodological approach taken. To ensure quality, the ISG provided feedback throughout all steps of the evaluation process and ensured accuracy of the factual information and data in each study deliverable.

### ANNEX II: METHODOLOGY AND ANALYTICAL MODELS USED

The main objective of this ex-post evaluation is to provide an assessment of the effectiveness, efficiency, coherence, EU added value, relevance and visibility of ESF and YEI for the period 2014-2022.

DG EMPL took a mixed approach to this evaluation, by relying on the work of external evaluators to (i) collect and analyse the relevant evidence (including consultation work); (ii) provide initial answers to all evaluation questions; and (iii) present evidence-based conclusions and lessons learnt. The supporting study followed a mixed methods data collection approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research tools and sources to collect wide evidence on ESF and YEI performance. The evaluation did not assess the performance of the fund in each individual Member State but focused on evaluating the performance of ESF and YEI at a broader EU-level.

The external contractor collected and examined evidence covering 2014-2022 for the supporting study and performed. This included a collection of case studies and country fiches, available in the

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<sup>206</sup> Available at: [Study supporting the ex-post evaluation of the 2014-2020 European social fund and youth employment initiative - Publications Office of the EU](#) and [Annexes](#).

<sup>207</sup> European Commission (2023) ESF Synthesis Report AIR 2022. Available at: [ESF Synthesis Report of 2022 AIRs - European Commission](#)

<sup>208</sup> Casas, Pablo and Christou, Tryfonas and García Rodríguez, Abián and Lazarou, Nicholas Joseph and Salotti, Simone (2025): The ex-post macroeconomic evaluation of the 2014-2020 European Social Fund, Youth Employment Initiative and REACT-EU labour market interventions. Link to the publication: <https://mpr.ub.uni-muenchen.de/123410/>

<sup>209</sup> It should be noted that at the moment of preparing this SWD, the available updated meta-analysis was used: Haepf, T. and Serrano Alarcon, M., Meta-analysis of the European Social Fund counterfactual impact evaluations: Brief update with alternative measures, European Commission, Ispra, 2024, JRC137571, Available at: <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC137571>. In 2025, a new update was published using 112 Counterfactual Impact Evaluations. In the 2025 update, ESF made a difference by increasing participants' chances to find employment, on average, by 6.6 percentage points (or by 16%) compared to non-participants. Available at: Haepf, T., Jessen, J., Pompili, M. and Seebauer, J., Meta-Analysis of ESF/YEI Counterfactual Impact Evaluations - A comprehensive update including new methodology, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2025, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/1873376>, JRC141819

published supporting study annexes<sup>210</sup>. Evidence was complemented with additional sources. Moreover, JRC carried out a quantitative analysis to assess the macroeconomic impacts of the ESF and YEI, which served for complementing the analysis. The Joint Research Centre simulations using the RHOMOLO<sup>211</sup> model to evaluate the macroeconomic impact of the 2014-2020 ESF and YEI programme compared to the “no-policy baseline” 2013.

General equilibrium models like RHOMOLO must rely on simplifying assumptions. The modelling results should therefore be interpreted bearing inter alia in mind that modelling assumptions have been used to incorporate information on the amount of money spent in the programmes into the scenario simulations and on how to translate the inputs into outputs and that the modelling results are affected by the way in which the interventions are introduced into the model.

The intervention logics – one for ESF and YEI as a whole, and one for each Thematic Objective (Annex II.B) set out a high-level understanding of the rationale, inputs, activities, outputs, results and impacts of ESF and YEI and provided a framework for a standardised approach to the evaluation. The intervention logics formed the foundation of the evaluation’s analytical framework encompassing the evaluation inquiries. To conduct the evaluation, the supporting study team completed eight tasks (see Figure A. 1).

The evaluation questions to which the supporting study gave answer are included in the Annex II.C “Evaluation Matrix” covering the five evaluation criteria.

#### *ANNEX II.A: METHODOLOGY FOLLOWED BY EXTERNAL CONTRACTOR*

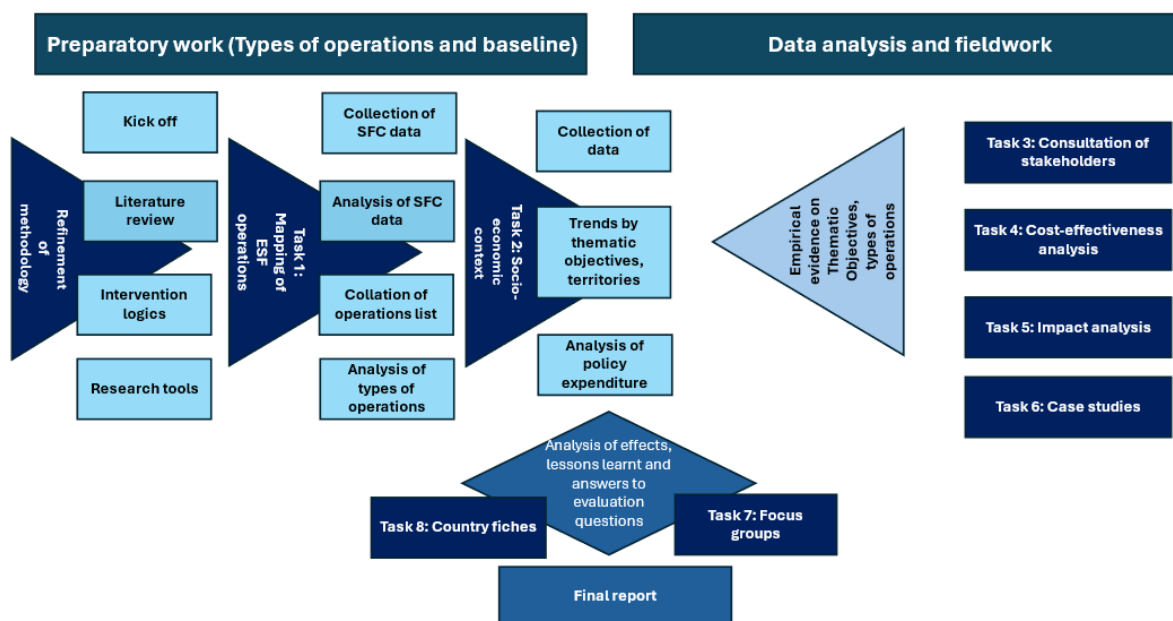
The external contractor followed a set of tasks to perform the analysis of the evidence in the supporting study to this evaluation. This annex presents the methodology followed for each of the tasks.

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<sup>210</sup> Available at: [Annexes](#).

<sup>211</sup> Casas, Pablo and Christou, Tryfonas and García Rodríguez, Abián and Lazarou, Nicholas Joseph and Salotti, Simone (2025): *The ex-post macroeconomic evaluation of the 2014-2020 European Social Fund, Youth Employment Initiative and REACT-EU labour market interventions*. Link to the publication: <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/123410/>

Figure A. 1: Overview of the methodology



Source: Ecorys/ Ismeri

## Mapping of ESF investments and operations

### SFC2014 data collection and analysis (Task 1.1)

Task 1.1 focused on identifying and mapping data on European Social Fund Operational Programmes' financial and physical (output and result) indicators to be utilized in Task 1. This involved sourcing monitoring data from openly available databases (<https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/>) and the SFC2014 platform. The monitoring data provides comprehensive information on the financial and physical implementation of ESF OPs, essential for analysing the distribution of funding across Investment Priorities, the demographics reached by ESF funds, and the outcomes achieved by the end of 2022 compared to planned targets. Monitoring data was extracted from the EC SFC2014 platform in September 2023.

As per Article 74(4) of Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013, SFC2014 is the designated electronic data exchange system for managing shared funds between Member States and the European Commission for the 2014-2020 programming period. Each Member State appoints a responsible authority to manage the system, including user verification, data protection, and notifying the Commission of any changes affecting responsibilities<sup>212</sup>.

SFC2014 is a vital tool for monitoring activities, offering features that streamline procedures. For instance, forms are either interactive or pre-filled based on previously recorded data, reducing the need for repetitive

<sup>212</sup> Commission implementing regulation (EU) 184/2014 of 25 February 2014, Art. 3.3 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32014R0184>

data entry; calculations are performed automatically to minimise user input and reduce encoding efforts; routine automatic controls ensure internal consistency of data and compliance with applicable rules, sending out alerts to inform users about permissible or prohibited actions. Finally, SFC2014 maintains and provides access to historical data for all information entered related to any operational programme<sup>213</sup>. The platform promotes efficiency and uniformity in data handling and introduces a consistent nomenclature system, enabling flexible analyses across different countries, programmes, priority axes, fields of intervention, and regions.

SFC2014 data is a cornerstone for EU evaluations and was extensively used in this study. It enabled detailed mapping of ESF financial resource allocation to various TOs and IPs, assessment of implementation progress, achieved outcomes, and target populations. This data was also critical for estimating the costs of ESF participants, feeding into the Cost-Effectiveness Analysis in Task 4.

Despite improvements since the 2007-2013 programming period, ESF monitoring data in SFC2014 used for the study still presented inconsistencies and errors, affecting data reliability and complicating aggregation. Notably, some submissions were incomplete or inconsistent, failing to adhere to established nomenclature rules. Additionally, the codification of data was not uniform; programme-specific indicators, which are individually negotiated between Member States and the European Commission, often remained non-comparable and were frequently defined in the native languages of the Member States. Furthermore, reporting procedures varied, with some programmes only reporting fully implemented operations, while others included partially implemented ones, leading to potential distortions in unit cost analysis. These differences were more pronounced during the programming period, but even in 2022 not all interventions were completed, in particular for REACT-EU. The above-mentioned issues could not be addressed because it would need a revision of the entire monitoring dataset and an interaction with all the MAs; however, we carried out a cross-check on the monitoring data summarised by the ESF Synthesis Report of 2022 AIRs<sup>214</sup> to be aligned with the better verified and screened information.

Specific datasets and cutoff dates were agreed upon with DG EMPL. In September 2023, an extraction of financial and physical monitoring data from SFC2014, reflecting the status as of the end of 2022, was provided. This extraction served as the definitive data collection threshold for the study. However, some additional data from one Member State up to the end of 2022 was accepted in November 2024 at the request of the Commission and incorporated into the final dataset. Subsequent data cleaning included translating indicators and priority axes from native languages, reformatting numbers for large data operability, reclassifying indicators to resolve code ambiguities, and updating NUTS2 region classifications to 2021 standards. These measures ensured data accuracy and consistency, facilitating reliable analysis of ESF financial allocations, programme progress, and participant outcomes, thereby supporting comprehensive and effective evaluation.

### Methodology for the mapping of ESF operations (Task 1.2)

The mapping of ESF operations under sub-task 1.2 ‘Collection list of operations and/or databases and analysis of ESF operations’ aimed at mapping the ESF types of operations financed under each TO and IP to analyse how ESF operations have been implemented over the evaluation period while identifying related financial resources. It encompassed the analysis and classification of the implemented operations reported in the lists published by MAs according to Regulation (EU) 1303/2013, Annex XII from the Supporting study.

The main methodological steps for the collection and classification of the lists were the following:

- Selecting the sources used to retrieve each country’s lists of operations and evaluating the implications of selecting a unified database (Kohesio<sup>215</sup>) or publicly disclosed lists from national MAs published on programmes’ websites.
- Retrieving each country’s most recent lists of operations with the support of national experts when needed (e.g., in the case of GR and HU).

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid. Art.4

<sup>214</sup>European Commission (2024) ESF Synthesis Report of 2022 AIRs. Available at: <https://european-social-fund-plus.ec.europa.eu/en/publications/esf-synthesis-report-2022-airs>

<sup>215</sup> The Kohesio database is freely accessible at: <https://kohesio.ec.europa.eu/data/>

- Assembling country lists, integrating operations financed by multiple OPs in a single layout to facilitate data aggregation and analysis in later stages.
- Preparing the lists by:
  - translating information into English through the European Commission E-translation system<sup>216</sup>;
  - converting, where necessary, national currency eligible costs in EUR by means of average ECB exchange rates<sup>217</sup>;
  - performing additional adjustments to variables and data cleaning, as well as the identification of COVID-19, REACT-EU, and CARE related operations;
  - Marking operations to support classification by selecting those with high relative financial weight and those financed through CRII/CRII+, REACT-EU, and CARE.
- Assigning categories to all selected operations in accordance with the type, purpose, scope, and target of the measure.
- Producing a structured database of the ESF operations (including information on priority axis and call for proposal/tender, where available).

In the following paragraphs, each stage is addressed following the chronological and operational sequence listed above, from the selection of sources to the complete classification of each list. We also highlight, where relevant, country-specific peculiarities in the management of EU funds that have emerged during the implementation of this complex and multifaceted sub-task. These observations have been integrated in this annex so as to characterise the different approaches adopted by national MAs, as well as underline some of the challenges that needed to be overcome during sub-task 1.2.

### **The selection of sources**

An assessment was made regarding the potential utilisation of the Kohesio database during the Inception phase. Under the management of DG REGIO, Kohesio serves as a single repository that assembles all lists of operations published by national MAs, with the objective of facilitating integration.

A comprehensive evaluation was conducted to determine the viability of drawing data from the Kohesio database. The assessment revealed a satisfactory coverage of operations in relation to those declared by Member States at the end of 2021 and reported in the SFC. However, several limitations emerged, namely:

- Underreporting of operations financed under the Youth Employment Initiative;
- Kohesio lists from the version available in early 2023 were not updated (the lists were updated between November 2020 – November 2021) and consequently information was not homogeneous;
- UK data was not included in Kohesio;
- Most importantly, the Kohesio database publishes the variables requested by EU Regulations within the lists of operations, whereas, in many cases, MAs include other important variables in the lists of operations published on their websites, including and not limited to priority axes, public calls for projects, links to specific measures or funds (CRII/CRII+, REACT-EU, or CARE), status of project, and implementing organisations. Moreover, REACT-EU operations are organised based on the same category of expenditures for ESF (for code 102 to 120, excluding the Technical Assistance – TA – operations); thus it is not possible to identify REACT-EU operations relying exclusively on the category of intervention.

Therefore, our approach mainly relied on the direct collection of the lists of operations published by the MAs on their websites to identify ESF types of operations. Despite the wide degree of heterogeneity in layout and published information, national lists frequently offered additional information on OPs, such as priority axes,

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<sup>216</sup> Further information on the European Commission's Machine Translation system is available at: [https://commission.europa.eu/resources-partners/etranslation\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/resources-partners/etranslation_en)

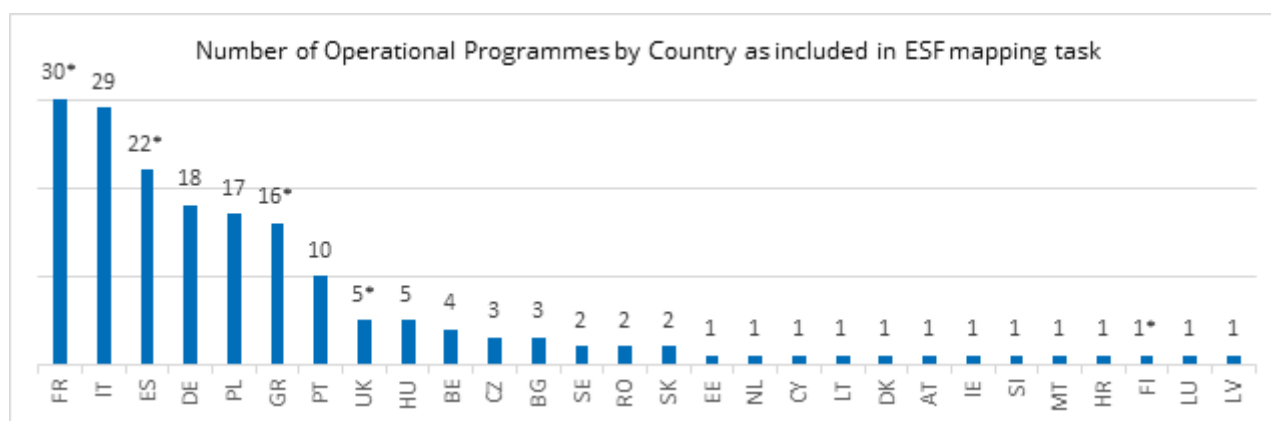
<sup>217</sup> See [https://www.ecb.europa.eu/stats/policy\\_and\\_exchange\\_rates/euro\\_reference\\_exchange\\_rates/html/index.en.html](https://www.ecb.europa.eu/stats/policy_and_exchange_rates/euro_reference_exchange_rates/html/index.en.html)

types of measures, calls, location identifiers, implementation details and official websites, among other variables not covered by Kohesio. However, when data was incomplete or the lists required adjustments or integrations, missing information was extracted from Kohesio; this information was used whenever national lists were unretrievable, outdated, or partial. Integrations of information from national lists and official documentation (AIRs and OPs) were performed to overcome data fragmentation (e.g., for BE, SI, MT, FI).

### The retrieval of country lists

This task was carried out at national level and required the compilation, for each country, of a single aggregated list of all operations under the relevant OPs (excluding technical assistance OPs). Highly regionalised Member States, such as France, Italy, Spain and Germany, have a relatively large number of OPs made up of both regional and national programmes, leading to fragmentation and heterogeneity in the way MAs organise and present the lists of operations on their websites.

**Figure A. 2: Number of Operational Programmes by country as included in ESF mapping task**



Source: our elaboration of SFC2014 data, up to end of 2022, extracted in September 2023

### The assembly of lists

Once all lists of operations of a Member State were gathered, a process of assembly and adjustment followed; lists of operations were first converted in a provisional format optimised for cross-referencing of information, triangulation of sources, and ease of handling in the process of classification, and later simplified to a database format to rationalise the process of data storage, transmission, and analysis.

The relevant variables reported for each list of operations are reported in the table that follows.

**Table A1. Relevant variables reported for each list of operations**

Provisional Format		Database Format	
<b>op_id</b>	Operation identification code	<b>op_id</b>	Operation identification code
<b>op_nameen</b>	English translation of operation name	<b>op_nameen</b>	English translation of operation name
<b>op_nameorig</b>	Original operation name	<b>op_nameorig</b>	Original operation name
<b>ms</b>	Full name of country	<b>ms2</b>	Acronym of country
<b>ms2</b>	Acronym of country	<b>eligibleexp</b>	Total eligible expenditure of operation in €
<b>op_startdate</b>	Start date of operation	<b>BeneficiaryLabel_en</b>	English translation of beneficiary
<b>op_enddate</b>	End date of operation	<b>categoryint2</b>	Adjusted intervention category
<b>cofrate</b>	EU co-financing rate	<b>to2</b>	Adjusted TO
<b>eligibleexp</b>	Total eligible expenditure of operation in €	<b>fund2</b>	Adjusted ESIF fund; 1=ESF, 2=YEI
<b>eubudget</b>	Eligible expenditure financed by EU	<b>opcci</b>	Code of operational programme

<b>benef_name</b>	Beneficiary identification code on Kohesio	<b>opname</b>	Name of operational programme
<b>BeneficiaryLabel</b>	Original beneficiary name	<b>region</b>	Name of region
<b>BeneficiaryLabel_en</b>	English translation of beneficiary	<b>region_category</b>	Region category, if available; 1=More developed, 2=In transition, 3=Less developed
<b>categoryint</b>	Intervention category as reported in list of operations	<b>op_summaryen</b>	English translation of project description
<b>categoryint2</b>	Intervention category as adjusted by compiler	<b>adjustmentsfields</b>	Descriptor of any adjustment performed on the operation
<b>to</b>	TO as reported in list of operations	<b>flag_react_eu</b>	Flag for operations related to COVID, CRII/CRII+, REACT-EU, or CARE
<b>to2</b>	TO as adjusted by compiler	<b>typeop_main</b>	Main type of assigned category
<b>fund</b>	ESIF fund as reported in list of operations	<b>typeop2</b>	Secondary type of assigned category
<b>fund2</b>	ESIF fund as adjusted by compiler	<b>typeop3</b>	Tertiary type of assigned category (mainly for TO 10 operations)
<b>opcci</b>	Code of operational programme	<b>notetpyeop</b>	Additional qualitative description of operation type
<b>opname</b>	Name of operational programme	<b>website</b>	URL of website of operation
<b>Region</b>	Name of region	<b>target1</b>	Primary operation target.
<b>nuts3_code</b>	NUTS3 code of region	<b>target2</b>	Secondary operation target.
<b>todrop</b>	Dummy variable for omission from list of operations (1)	<b>target3</b>	Tertiary operation target.
<b>todrop2</b>	Reason for omission	<b>target4</b>	Additional operation target.
<b>op_summaryen</b>	English translation of project description	<b>target5</b>	Additional operation target.
<b>op_summaryorig</b>	Original project description	<b>target6</b>	Additional operation target.
<b>adjustments</b>	Dummy variable for modification of operation variables (1)	<b>target7</b>	Additional operation target.
<b>adjustments2</b>	Applied modification	<b>target8</b>	Additional operation target.
<b>doublesindescription</b>	Dummy variable for recurring or repeated descriptions	<b>notetarget</b>	Additional qualitative descriptor of target.
<b>90percent</b>	Dummy variable for operations constituting 90% of total eligible expenditure	<b>notetarget</b>	Additional qualitative descriptor of target.
<b>flag_react_eu</b>	Flag for operations related to COVID, CRII/CRII+, REACT-EU, or CARE	<b>axis_ifavailable</b>	OP Priority Axis number/code pertinent to the operation, if available.
<b>website</b>	URL of website of operation	<b>call_ifavailable</b>	Public call number/code pertinent to the operation, if available.
<b>typeop_main</b>	Main type of assigned category	<b>year_start</b>	Starting year of operation
<b>typeop2</b>	Secondary type of assigned category	<b>year_start_COVID</b>	Pre- or post-COVID operation; 0=before 2020, 1=during or after 2020.
<b>notetpyeop</b>	Additional qualitative description of operation type	<b>COVID-CARE_flag</b>	1 if operation pertains to COVID initiatives; 2 if operation pertains to CARE initiatives.
<b>target1</b>	Primary operation target.	<b>REACT_flag</b>	1 if operation pertains to REACT initiatives.
<b>notetarget</b>	Secondary operation target.		
<b>additional fields</b>	Column to add Priority Axes, Calls, operation postcode, and other relevant information		

Source: Supporting study

Notably, the provisional format used for the classification of operations concerned individual countries and thus a total of 28 of such lists was produced; each of these lists were remodelled to the database format and consolidated in a single document. To prevent the inhibition of data analyses due to the sheer size of the consolidated list, many variables were removed or simplified in the conversion from provisional to database format. Only redundant or inconsequential variables in the context of this study were omitted from the database

format: national-language name of beneficiaries and summaries, unamended categories of interventions and TOs, variables to assist classifiers such as double descriptions or pertinence to the 90% of national expenditure represent some of the variables not included in the final format. Other variables were amended to streamline data elaboration; operations' start and end dates, for example, can be key elements for the identification and classification of an operation. However, since the only necessity was to confirm whether the operation started before or after COVID-19 pandemic's onset, a dummy variable supported the optimisation of elaboration procedures.

### **The adjustment of lists**

Once MAs' lists of operations for a given country were put together and unified in the provisional format, a series of actions were performed to guarantee readability in the classification process. When presented in Member States' native language, operation names, beneficiary names, and project descriptions were translated into English through the European Commission e-Translation service<sup>76</sup> and added to the pertinent columns. Due to occasional incompatibilities in the formatting or encoding of original lists of operation, additional translation services were employed.

The consolidation of currencies was essential for the elaboration of financial data: MAs from countries within the Eurozone reported all financial data of eligible expenditure in Euros; this was also the case for Croatia, which joined the Eurozone effectively on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023, and where the MAs have retroactively updated their lists of operations by converting the value of operations to the new currency. Conversely, other Member States reported expenditure values in national currency (BG, CZ, DK, HU, PL, RO, SE, UK). In this case, a conversion was applied using European Central Bank's data<sup>218</sup> as a reference point; the applied conversion rate equalled the average exchange rate reported by the ECB website between the dates of the earliest and latest operations reported in country lists.

Applying a single average exchange rate for operations distributed over a timespan of nearly 10 years has evident implications. First, currency volatility is smoothed out in the process of calculating average exchange rates, as fluctuations influenced by economic factors and geopolitical events are levelled and longitudinally distributed. By the same token, the varying impact of currency fluctuations across countries and projects can further skew representations. Second, the value of projects occurring in high-variation years does not fully reflect the true value at the time, possibly leading to over or underestimations of the real purchasing power of spent funds. Third, extraordinary exchange rate events such as the array of measures developed to contain the COVID-19 pandemic likely implied further distortions. Awareness of these aspects was crucial in ensuring the accurate interpretation of data.

Operations that lay outside of the scope of this study were removed from the list, such as Technical Assistance operations, operations without information of eligible expenditure, or operations with expenditure equal to zero.

To compensate for data omissions, outdatedness, or articulated expenditure allocations, adjustments for each list of operations were needed on a case-by-case basis. Adjustments were performed exclusively on essential variables to the purposes of the mapping, such as category of intervention, TO, fund, name, beneficiary and summary to ensure usage of the correct criteria in the classification. Whenever needed, we applied adjustments to eligible expenditure in order to account for shifts in the allocation of expenditure, the integration of missing operations for which funding was declared in the monitoring documentation, the balancing of the distribution of expenditure for individual operations that were later split to achieve contingent purposes, and other necessary recalibrations. In the database, the column *adjustments* outlined all such instances. An exemplary case is that of Hungary, where several pre-existing operations from different OPs and TOs were formally repurposed to address the pandemic crisis; as only a fraction of the allocated expenditure was redirected towards specific emergency efforts, new operations have been manually added to the list by drawing on the reported amount of eligible expenditure destined to the crisis effort from the original operations. The specific

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<sup>218</sup> See [https://www.ecb.europa.eu/stats/policy\\_and\\_exchange\\_rates/euro\\_reference\\_exchange\\_rates/html/index.en.html](https://www.ecb.europa.eu/stats/policy_and_exchange_rates/euro_reference_exchange_rates/html/index.en.html)

processes used for COVID-19, REACT-EU, and CARE operations are detailed at greater length in the dedicated section below.

The final step for the preparation of lists consisted of the selection of operations to classify. All the largest operations representing at least 90% of the total OP eligible expenditure were marked for classification. This was necessary because resources were not sufficient for classifying all the operations and, for some operations, information was not complete even after the integrations. Operations were sorted by value of expenditure, and the sequence of operations up to the first to exceed 90% of the total expenditure reported in SFC was marked for classification. We then controlled for categories of intervention, ensuring the selection of a minimum of 90% of total eligible expenditure of operations from every category of intervention presented in each country list. Finally, we attempted to identify all operations related to COVID-19, REACT-EU, and CARE through keywords in operations' titles and summaries, priority axes, project calls and cross referencing with OPs, AIRs, and the recent "Study supporting the preliminary evaluation of the support provided by ESF and FEAD under the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiatives (CRII and CRII+)"<sup>219</sup>. All COVID-19, REACT-EU, and CARE operations were marked for classification irrespectively of category of intervention or eligible expenditure.

### The categories of operations

For TO 8-TO 9-TO 10, the categories of ESF operations followed those already used in the previous three thematic studies<sup>220</sup>, with small adjustments. In practice, this involved categorising each operation mainly based on the type of instruments employed to carry out the measure (TO 8), the overarching social objective of the operation (TO 9), and the targeted educational level (TO 10). As far as TO 11 is concerned, the categories were established on the basis of the analysis carried out in the PAPA study<sup>221</sup> and were chiefly distinguished according to the domain of administrative capacity they acted upon.

With regard to the ESF operations financed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, those categories used in the recent "Study supporting the preliminary evaluation of the support provided by ESF and FEAD under the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiatives (CRII and CRII+)" were repropose for the ESF mapping.

Finally, in relation to REACT-EU we used the same categories of operations applied to the previous TOs (TO 8, 9, 10 and 11), since REACT-EU (TO 13) is linked to the same ESF categories of expenditure (from 102 to 120).

The categories used for the classification of the ESF operations are presented in the Table below.

**Table A2. Categories for the analysis of the types of operations**

TOs	Categories of types of operations
TO 8/YEI (Categories of expenditure 102-108)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Work-based learning:</b> this includes mainly operations concerning on-the-job training and other forms of work experience, such as traineeships, apprenticeships, internships, community work, etc. Principally targeted at several types of unemployed, but also to inactive. Sometimes, these operations can be combined with training (for example in the form of internships at the end of training courses).</li> </ul>

<sup>219</sup> European Commission: Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, Atkinson, I., Andriescu, M., Spyridopoulos, K., Broughton, A. et al., *Study supporting the preliminary evaluation of the support provided by ESF and FEAD under the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiatives (CRII and CRII+)* – Final report, Publications Office of the European Union, 2023, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/160531>

<sup>220</sup> FGB, Metis, Applica, Ockham, (2020), Study for the Evaluation of ESF Support to Employment and Labour Mobility, Brussels: European Commission. FGB, Metis, Applica, Ockham, (2020), Study for the Evaluation of ESF Support to Youth Employment, Brussels: European Commission. ICF, Cambridge Econometrics, Eurocentre (2020), Study supporting the 2020 evaluation of promoting social inclusion, combatting poverty and any discrimination by the European Social Fund (TO 9), Brussels: European Commission. Ecorys, Ismeri Europa (2020), Study for the Evaluation of ESF Support to Education and Training (TO 10), Brussels: European Commission.

<sup>221</sup> European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, Thijs, N., Nakrošis, V. (2020). Progress Assessment of ESF Support to Public Administration (PAPA): summary report, Publications Office. Available at: <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/03954>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Employment related Training:</b> training classes, individualised training, vocation training, vouchers for training. These operations are not usually related to general education, they are more related to improve professional and occupation (or basic) skills. These operations can be targeted to unemployed, inactive and employed people. Often, they are combined with some form of guidance and support.</li> <li>• <b>Guidance and support for employment:</b> career support, counselling, profiling, mentoring, skills assessment, personal development/support etc. Mainly covering the unemployed people. Often in combination with training.</li> <li>• <b>Financial incentives for employment:</b> incentives scheme and subsidies for jobs, wage incentives, etc. The main targets are the unemployed and employers.</li> <li>• <b>Support for entrepreneurs:</b> support for self-employment/start-up, entrepreneurship training, counselling for self-employment, promotion of entrepreneurial culture. This type of operations can reach different target groups. It is strongly related to the IP 8.iii (which is almost entirely dedicated to this type of operations).</li> <li>• <b>Support for the adaptation of workers and enterprises and for workers' well-being:</b> training, guidance, services, campaigns, health measures for older workers, etc. Mainly targeting employed and enterprises. Strongly related to IP 8.v and IP 8.vi.</li> <li>• <b>Services supporting women's employment:</b> measures for work-life balance, childcare services and other actions supporting women's employment. Mainly for women, but not only. These operations are strongly linked to the IP 8.iv. When interventions targeting women are in the form of training, incentives, work-based learning, etc. they were classified in the previous types of operations.</li> <li>• <b>Capacity of labour market institutions:</b> tools and instruments for PESs or other labour market institutions, human resources training, partnerships, studies and services. The main target are the labour market institutions. Strongly related to the IP 8.vii (which is almost entirely associated to this type of operation).</li> </ul>
<p>TO 9 (Categories of expenditure 109-114)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Support for entering employment:</b> operations aimed at reducing barriers to employment (guidance, training, internships, incentives). Similar to several types of operations of TO 8, but more focused on vulnerable target groups (Long-term unemployed, disabled, people at risk of social exclusion, migrants, NEETS, etc.). Employment is the focus of these operations, which however could be also aimed at favouring activation and inclusion of people. In principle, IP 9.i and 9.ii are the main contributors to these types of operations.</li> <li>• <b>Enhancement of basic skills of vulnerable people:</b> operations supporting vulnerable adults very far from the labour market. The main aim of these operations is not mainly related to the employment but to equipping people with basic and soft skills such as language, mathematical literacy, self-perception, self-efficacy, etc. In principle, IP 9.i, 9iii, and 9iv are the main contributors to these types of operations.</li> <li>• <b>Support for inclusive education in schools:</b> operations supporting students with educational needs and at risk of early school leaving, favouring an inclusive education, eliminating segregation or disparities in schools, engaging families in education, etc. IPs 9.i and 9.iv. tend to be the main contributors to these types of operations.</li> <li>• <b>Access to inclusive services and the empowerment of people:</b> operations favouring social inclusion of vulnerable people (or preventing social exclusion since the young age) by enhancing the quality and the inclusivity of services. These operations can support services of general interest (childcare, long-term care, elderly care, health...), health/services centres, integrated services, housing services. Furthermore, this category includes operations related to personal targeted services aimed at facilitating the activation and empowerment of people. These operations are targeted at individuals and entities. All IPs can contribute to this category, especially IPs 9.i and 9. iv.</li> <li>• <b>Support for social entrepreneurship:</b> operations aimed at encouraging the integration into the labour market of vulnerable people, through the support of social enterprises, and at favouring the growth of the social economy. The operations support both people and enterprises and are strongly connected to the IP 9.v (which almost entirely is dedicated to this type of operations).</li> <li>• <b>Operations influencing attitudes and systems:</b> information campaigns for raising awareness about social inclusion or existing services, development of tools supporting coordination of social services (guidelines, protocols, other tools, training to professionals, studies...), operations supporting communities (CLLD). These operations target mainly systems and entities, population in general, as well as territories. They can be found in all IPs.</li> </ul>
<p>TO 10 (Categories of expenditure 115-118)</p>	<p>Formal education and training</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Pre-primary education and training:</b> operations supporting pre-primary education, targeting different groups (families, children, teachers, and other staff).</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Primary education and training:</b> operations supporting primary education, targeting different groups (families, children, teachers, and other staff).</li> <li>• <b>General secondary and post-secondary education and training:</b> operations supporting schools and students' competences in secondary and post-secondary education (also in this case target groups are different: families, students, teachers, and other staff).</li> <li>• <b>Vocational education and training - secondary and post-secondary:</b> operations supporting vocational education and training, work-based learning. They involve mainly learners, teachers, trainers, and other staff, but also families.</li> <li>• <b>Tertiary education and training:</b> interventions and services supporting the higher education institutions; can include support for researchers and internationalisation of higher education institutions. Strongly related to IP 10.ii.</li> </ul> <p>Non formal education and training</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Job related (non-formal) education and training:</b> training courses, services, individual support related to job, targeting unemployed, employed, and inactive. This type can include system actions related to the employment (such as system for forecasting professions, assessing labour needs...).</li> <li>• <b>Non job related (non-formal) education and training:</b> basic education, interventions for life-long learning, etc. These operations target several types of groups, unemployed, employed and inactive.</li> </ul>
<p>TO 11 (Categories of expenditure 119-120)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Services to citizens and accessibility:</b> operations enhancing the provision of public administration services to citizens and accessibility of official information and documentation; operations related to transparency and accountability are included in this category.</li> <li>• <b>Civil servants and human resource management:</b> operations supporting the development of PA staff's technical skills, adaptation to innovative and/or reformed administrative procedures, and overall greater professionalization of civil servants. Dedicated training, education, competence appraisal frameworks all contribute to this category.</li> <li>• <b>Organization of government and policymaking:</b> operations aimed at enhancing horizontal and vertical coordination between levels of government, reorganizing competences, and improving global efficacy of policymaking also through support of evidence-based measures.</li> <li>• <b>Judicial System:</b> operations targeting the organization of courts, procedures, structure, and staff which aim is to streamline judicial system's operation, improve functioning and efficacy, and avoid backlogging.</li> </ul>
<p>ESF COVID-19 related operations (Horizontal to the categories of expenditures), under TO 8-TO 11</p>	<p><b>Employment area</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Actions to protect jobs</li> <li>• Actions to support workers</li> <li>• Actions to support employers and the self-employed</li> <li>• Actions to support NEET young people through the YEI</li> <li>• Other employment actions</li> </ul> <p><b>Social inclusion</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Actions to promote the social inclusion of vulnerable groups through providing direct targeted support</li> <li>• Actions to promote social inclusion through ensuring access to services</li> <li>• Other social inclusion actions</li> </ul> <p><b>Education and training</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Actions to ensure the continuity of education and training</li> <li>2. Equipment/other capital investment to ensure the continuity of education and training</li> <li>3. Actions to increase the medical and social care workforce through fast-tracking curricula or qualifications</li> <li>4. Other education training actions</li> </ol> <p><b>Healthcare</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Actions to support healthcare workers and patients</li> <li>• Actions to support healthcare systems</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Other healthcare actions</li> </ul>
<b>TO 13 – REACT-EU</b>	The same categories used as for TO 8-TO 11 (see above).

Source: Supporting study. Definition based on previous studies on TOs and on the “Study supporting the preliminary evaluation of the support provided by ESF and FEAD under the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiatives (CRII and CRII+)”.

### The classification of ESF operations

Overall, the typology described earlier was applied to map in detail the individual operations contained in the provisional format lists as created from the lists published by the MAs. From an operational point of view, the assignment of each operation to a group was based on the analysis of three main fields available in the lists of operations:

- titles of the operations,
- names of beneficiaries<sup>222</sup>, and
- summaries of the operations.

The method for classifying operations followed a semi-automatic procedure based on two main steps:

- first, a selection of keywords (see the table below) was used for an initial attribution of an operation to the appropriate type(s).
- second, the initial attribution was cross-checked by reading the summary of the operations and, where necessary, by consulting the relevant websites. Particular attention was devoted to the most relevant operations in financial terms and for all REACT-EU/CRII/CARE operations identified. Moreover, when the list of operations included information on the respective call for proposals (this is the case of Italy, Portugal, Croatia, Bulgaria, and Czech Republic), we consulted the call itself to better assign each operation to the relevant type.

**Table A3. Keywords used to assign operations to a certain type**

TOs	Keywords
<b>TO 8-YEI</b>	work experience, work-based learning, internships/traineeships/apprenticeships, public employment, training/vocational training course/classes, guidance support/assistance, mentoring, counselling, profiling, skills assessment, skills enhancement, career support, incentives schemes, wage subsidies, financial aids/support, self-employment/business creation support, entrepreneurship support/training, enterprises creation, continuing training, lifelong learning, health ageing, safety jobs, work life balance, childcare, gender pay gap, gender mainstreaming, institutional capacity, integrated services/support
<b>TO 9</b>	guidance support/assistance, counselling, basic skill, skills assessment/development, incentives/subsidies for job, training courses, internships/traineeships/apprenticeships/work experience, basic education, inclusive education, school completion/segregation, discrimination, parents/families engagement, health/social services, childcare, long-term care, elderly care, integrated services, social housing, social services, poverty, low-work intensity, social exclusion, material deprivation, deinstitutionalisation, social entrepreneurship/enterprises, social economy, corporate social responsibility, community-led local development, communities, disability/vulnerability, homeless support, Roma support, severe deprivation, addictions, labour market participation
<b>TO 10</b>	children/child care, early childhood education and care, kindergarten, infant, pre-primary, primary, elementary, secondary, high-school, basic skills, early school leaving, special education needs, digital skills, teachers, trainers, vocational education, vocational training, dual learning, apprenticeships, internships, traineeships, tertiary, pre-tertiary, university, bachelor/baccalaureate, Master, PhD, doctoral, STEM, graduation/degree, continuing training, employees/unemployed support, enterprises/business support, companies, lifelong learning, non-formal learning, competences recognition, skill development, skills intelligence, skills forecasting
<b>TO 11</b>	services to citizens, accessibility, public administration services, administrative capacity, institutional capacity, information systems, civil servants, administrative procedures, competences, judicial system

Source: our elaboration

<sup>222</sup> This was important mainly in the field of TO 10, to distinguish the types of schools which were beneficiaries of funds, when reported clearly.

As mentioned previously, each operation was assigned to a specific type according to the kind of instruments used by the measure (TO 8), the ultimate social purpose of the operation (TO 9), the educational level it addressed (TO 10), and the domain to which it applied (TO 11). Given the essentially interpretative component of this exercise, classifiers were instructed to categorise according to the predominant character of the operation. However, since operations often featured projects with multiple logics of intervention, a secondary field for the assignment of categories was added; Column *typeop2* was filled with the same criteria used for the primary type, and served as qualitative, ancillary labels for complex operations.

TO 10 operations occasionally included a third type, also inscribed in column *typeop2*, due to their classification hinging on the educational level they applied to; for instance, operations for the upskilling of kindergarten teachers that could also involve elementary and middle school teachers would receive three categories, the main type being *0.preprimary* with *1.primary* and *2.generaleducation* both reported as secondary type. For the purpose of this study, all the quantitative analyses and elaborations of operations' categories included in this report account exclusively for the main typology assigned, whereas secondary categories were useful descriptors to assist the qualitative interpretation of operations in other study processes.

Finally, it is worthy of mention that since no degree of estimation is involved in these calculations, a small error might only stem from the possible misclassification of individual operations. Nevertheless, the margin of error of this procedure is significantly smaller than those arising from estimation approaches that rely on samples of operations or on planned operations and consequently work on a smaller informative basis than this and run the same risks of misclassification.

### **Identification of ESF operations related to CRII/CRII+, REACT-EU and CARE: issues, difficulties and strategies to overcome them**

The identification of ESF operations related to CRII/CRII+, REACT-EU and to CARE within the lists of operations was problematic for several reasons:

- As far as REACT-EU is concerned, the lists of operations according to the EU regulations do not have to contain information on the priority axis or TO, which are elements useful to identify the operations funded by REACT-EU. To overcome this potential barrier, we applied different strategies for each specific case:
  - In most cases, the consultation of national lists of operations was preferred to the Kohesio database. MAs-published lists of operations usually contain more variables than the mandatory minimum requirements, which, in multiple instances, allowed the identification of REACT-EU operations<sup>223</sup>. Some notable examples are: the Italian lists of operations “Opencoesione” which clearly identified REACT-EU operations by including the “13.i” flag; in Portugal, the centralised web page hosting all list of operations presented a specific list for REACT-EU projects; the Slovenian, Croatian, Danish, Estonian, Latvian, Romanian, Swedish and Slovak lists reported information on the Priority Axis or TOs related to each operation; the Irish list contained a “REACT-EU flag”; in Belgium the list of Wallonie OP had a flag for REACT-EU operations, while in the case of the Flemish OP, there was a flag for REACT-EU on the projects' web repository; in Austria, the REACT-EU flag was contained in the code assigned to each operation and this was true also for some Spanish OPs (for example the Valenciana – ESF OP);
  - In the other cases, we searched for the keyword “REACT-EU” in the name or in the summary of the operations and then cross-checked this information with the Annual Implementation Reports (updated at the end of 2021), as well as the information available on the OP web pages.

Finally, considering that not all the available lists of operations are necessarily updated, we carried out a final check based on a triangulation with SFC financial data updated at the end of 2022<sup>224</sup>. This was done for all 28

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<sup>223</sup> Given that the Kohesio project has just the aim to make transparent the ESF projects, these variables are not taken into account in the preparation of the Kohesio database, which in fact does not allow to distinguish between ESF and ESF REACT-EU operations.

<sup>224</sup> “ESIF 2014-2020 categorisation ERDF-ESF-CF planned vs implemented” updated on 6 March, reporting financial data provided by the MAs in January 2023 and related to the end of 2022. Available at: <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/>

countries, including those with lists of operations which enabled us to identify REACT-EU through different flags (see above). When we identified some OPs not fully in line with the SFC financial data we checked other sources, such as AIRs and websites. For example: the Italian Opencoessione database, though reporting accurate data on REACT-EU for almost all programmes, was not fully updated in the case of the Governance and Institutional Capacity OP, in which there are EUR 509 million allocated to selected projects under REACT-EU in SFC, but not in Opencoessione. In this case, we identified the REACT-EU projects for this OP on the internet<sup>225</sup> and then added the information gathered to the Opencoessione list. France presented an analogous case through the allocation of EUR 314 million for the social and occupational integration of vulnerable jobseekers via REACT-EU; while not reported in the OP list, the matching difference in eligible expenditure between OP and SFC data and explicit references to the measure in the relevant AIR were sufficient evidence to justify the operation's manual addition to the country list. Such interventions were similarly performed for some Spanish OPs<sup>226</sup>, as well as for Cyprus, Germany, Hungary, Malta, Latvia, and Poland.

These approaches enabled the mapping of 97% of the EUR 14.6 billion of ESF REACT-EU (TO 13) allocated to selected projects at the end of 2022.

As regards the ESF operations financed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, we relied on the findings of the completed CRII+ study, which identified 354 ESF "operations"<sup>227</sup> financed in response to the COVID-19 under TO 8-TO 11. Starting from the CRII+ study's database, we searched for all the operations, identified in the context of this Study, in the ESF lists of operations. Different keywords were used to identify relevant operations (e.g., we searched for keywords such as "COVID", "CRII", "pandemic", "corona", "coronavirus" in the title and summary of the operation). We found almost 100% of all the operations already identified in the CRII+ study for nearly all the countries. In Italy, some operations were not identified, but this is probably due to the fact the CRII+ study mapped mostly the planned operations and not those actually implemented. In fact, it is worth noting that Opencoessione also contains a flag of ESF operations which were re-programmed in order to respond to the COVID-19 crisis on the basis of specific agreements between the MAs (national and regional) and the Ministry for the South and the Territorial Cohesion. The ESF amount related to COVID operations which we identified in Italy was fully consistent with the latest "Report on progress of the European Cohesion policy funds in Italy" (i.e., more than EUR 3 billion dedicated to CRII operations)<sup>228</sup> meaning that our mapping of actually implemented operations (up to October 2022) was complete. Also, for Portugal, some operations mentioned in the CRII+ study, especially for the Lisboa, Norte and the Algarve OPs, could not be identified. Nonetheless, our analysis was able to identify operations related to COVID-19 which were not mentioned in the CRII+ study. This applied also to Croatia and the UK under TO 8<sup>88</sup>.

Finally, with regards to the operations related to CARE, we knew from the financial data provided by the MAs<sup>89</sup> that only some of the OPs which adopted a specific axis (under REACT or not) for CARE operations had allocated resources to selected projects<sup>90</sup> at the end of 2022, while others just planned the interventions<sup>91</sup>. However, Member States could allocate resources to address the migratory challenges resulting from the Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine just by reallocating resources between the existing priorities. Therefore, to identify CARE operations we used several keywords (e.g., CARE, Ukrainian, War). This enabled, for instance, identification of relevant operations in Sweden or Italy. Overall, it is worth noting that this last analysis was not exhaustive, since the lists of operations did not yet contain information on the

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<sup>225</sup> List of REACT projects financed under the OP, available at: [http://www.pongovernance1420.gov.it/it/progetto\\_cat/react/](http://www.pongovernance1420.gov.it/it/progetto_cat/react/)

<sup>226</sup> Especially the Valenciana OP, Pais Vasco OP, Extremadura OP and the Madrid OP.

<sup>227</sup> It is worth noting that the term operation in the CRII+ study means not strictly a single operation, as defined in the EU Regulations, but can mean "measures", "calls", "specific objectives", etc. It is also worth noting that the mapping of CRII+ study was made mostly on the base of operations programmes, therefore examining the planned action and not the real implemented operations at that moment.

<sup>228</sup> Il Ministro per gli Affari Europei, il Sud, le Politiche di Coesione e il PNRR, 2023, Relazione sullo stato di attuazione della politica di coesione europea e nazionali Programmazione 2014-2020, pages 23-27. <https://www.agenziacoesione.gov.it/download/relazione-sullo-stato-di-attuazione-della-politica-di-coesione-europea-e-nazionale-2014-2020/>

operations implemented in relation to CARE<sup>92</sup>; moreover, we could not rely on final implementation reports published within the evaluation timeframe to integrate or triangulate the analysis.

### Concluding Remarks

This annex sought to detail the essential steps required for the mapping of ESF-YEI operations in the 2014-2022 evaluation period. The intent was to describe the approach adopted for each stage of the process, from selection of sources to the assembly of lists and, finally, the classification of operations itself.

Some noteworthy country-specific specificities have been highlighted to capture the multitude of dissimilar management approaches carried out by MAs; while by no means exhaustive, the selection presented ought to suggest the operational flexibility needed to uniform and process a vastly heterogeneous dataset.

The scale of this task was unprecedented; the process of manually analysing each operation and assigning it to a certain group had to be simultaneously performed across all TOs in all Member States and the UK and required the massive effort of a dedicated team of classifiers that completed the task over the span of six months.

Overall, 1 025 234 operations were classified, covering 96.3% of total ESF-YEI expenditure and 83.7% of all operations for the 2014-2022 evaluation period. The broad coverage of operations and the depth of analysis of each project constituted an invaluable resource that provided significant added value to the evaluation in terms of detailed information on the distribution and specific features of actual ESF investments in the 2014-2022 evaluation period.

## Analysis of the evolution of the socio-economic context (Task 2)

The purpose of the analysis carried out was twofold: to give an account of the relevant socio-economic context at the beginning of the evaluation period and to describe its evolution over the years, highlighting the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine; and, to analyse the public expenditures in the labour, social and education area, at EU and national level, in order to identify general trends and to assess the added value of ESF funded interventions.

The results of this analysis made it possible to identify the main trends, challenges and needs related to the Thematic Objectives, in order to assess the relevance of ESF support. The results also served accountability purposes, as they fed into the country fiches (Task 8), showing the role played by the ESF in each Member State. Furthermore, by analysing the evolution of the socio-economic context and by borrowing from the results of the mapping activity (Task 1) and insights from the case studies (Task 6), the flexibility of the ESF and its capacity to adapt was also investigated.

The analysis also considered the role of external factors affecting the effectiveness and efficiency of the ESF. At the beginning of the 2014-2020 programming period the EU was still dealing with the long-term effects of the great recession of 2007/2008. After some years in which figures concerning employment and poverty had improved, in 2020 the COVID19 pandemic crisis was a watershed moment causing structural changes in social conditions of European people and deeply affecting the implementation of the ESF. The same is true for the Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and its consequences on the global economy. EU countries and regions were differently affected by the above-mentioned external factors<sup>229</sup>, due to specific contextual elements, which in some territories can positively influence and magnify the effectiveness of the ESF, while in others they can constitute an obstacle to ESF implementation despite the efforts of policy makers. The financial crisis, the pandemic, the Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the associated rise in energy prices are the most relevant factors that have challenged the implementation of the ESF.

For this reason, we considered as the socio-economic context developed over the programming period in particular pre- and post- the onset of the pandemic.

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<sup>229</sup> As underlined for example in the Eighth Report on Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion. See: [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/sources/docoffic/official/reports/cohesion8/8cr.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docoffic/official/reports/cohesion8/8cr.pdf)

The socio-economic context was analysed according to the following points:

- 2013 was defined as a starting date for the analysis in agreement with DG EMPL<sup>230</sup> to identify overarching change dynamics and the relative progress or regression of Member States (in the dimensions of GDP and productivity, employment, youth employment, education and training, social inclusion, governance indicators);
- The analysis was contextualised considering external factors affecting the effectiveness and efficiency of EU support, e.g., the COVID-19 crisis and, to the extent possible, the Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the response through the Cohesion's Action for Refugees in Europe. As regards the consequences of COVID-19, the analysis of the relevant indicators was done through comparison points, before and after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, in order to identify the most relevant changes. Furthermore, some specific indicators capturing the effects of the pandemic, as well as the Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, have been considered.
- A cross-country analysis was conducted per TO, to be able to assess, afterwards, the impact of context on effectiveness and efficiency of the ESF;
- The differences across Member States were taken into account and the main features of national socio-economic contexts and, where possible, regional contexts were identified;
- To be able to assess the role of the ESF in national policy frameworks, an analysis of expenditure levels of public policy related to employment, health, social inclusion and education was undertaken;
- The Country-specific recommendations from 2012 to 2020 (due to the COVID-19 crisis and the adjustments that occurred in the European Semester, 2021 CSRs focused mainly on fiscal policies) were mapped. The analysis mapped the relevant CSRs for ESF and their potential relevance for IPs covered in the evaluation, showing the differences among countries in terms of ESF policy areas most covered by the CSRs. The role of ESF in relation to the CSRs was then examined in other tasks such as Task 3 (consultation) and, especially, as part of the case studies (task 6).

### **Socio-economic context data identification and collection**

The table below sets out a list of relevant indicators that were used, drawing from the socio-economic analyses carried out in the context of the previous preparatory studies commissioned by the Commission to support the ex-post evaluation<sup>231</sup>. Many of these indicators refer to the EU2020 strategy (e.g., Employment rate 20-64

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<sup>230</sup> When relevant indicators to be used in the analysis are not available for 2013, we will consider the nearest year available (for example, 2011/2012 or 2014/2015).

<sup>231</sup> For example: Fondazione G. Brodolini, Metis GmbH, Applica, Ockham IPS (2020) Study for the Evaluation of ESF Support to employment and Labour Mobility, for the European Commission, Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8330&furtherPubs=yes>  
European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, Donlevy, V., Sennett, J., Georgallis, M. et al., Study for the evaluation of ESF support to education and training (Thematic Objective 10) – Final report, Publications Office, 2020, available at: <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/301732>  
Metis GmbH, Fondazione G. Brodolini, Applica, Ockham IPS (2020) Study for the Evaluation of ESF Support to Youth Employment, for the European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. p.141 Available at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/d063ca61-bcd8-11ea-811c-01aa75ed71a1>  
ICF, Cambridge Econometrics and Eurocentre (2020) Study supporting the 2020 evaluation of promoting social inclusion, combatting poverty and any discrimination by the European Social Fund (Thematic Objective 09). p.120. Available at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/8788ec85-2308-11eb-b57e-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>  
Atkinson, I. et al (2023) Study supporting the preliminary evaluation of the support provided by ESF and FEAD under the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiatives (CRII and CRII+). Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8542&furtherPubs=yes>

years-old) as well as to other policy frameworks – the European Pillar of Social Rights in particular –, such as the indicator referred to people At Risk of Poverty and/or Exclusion (AROEPE<sup>232</sup>).

Most indicators are relevant for more than a single TO: the unemployment rate, for instance, when broken down to account for specific target groups (young people, women, etc.) was also relevant for inclusion and equal opportunities, and non-discrimination (horizontal principle). Following the suggestions made by DG Employment, we also considered persons with disabilities and migrants when looking at TO 8 and TO 9 indicators.

**Table A4. List of indicators on socio-economic context**

Indicator	Source	Level of analysis	TO involved
1. Employment rate (20-64), by sex and educational attainment (lfsa_ergan)	Eurostat	National/Regional	TO 8, TO 9
2. Activity rate by sex, age, education attainment (fsa_argan)	Eurostat	National/Regional	TO 8
3. Unemployment rate, by age, sex, education (lfsa_urgan)	Eurostat	National/Regional	TO 8, YEI, TO 9
4. Long-term unemployment, 25-64 (une_ltu_a)	Eurostat	National/Regional	TO 8, TO 9
5. Employment rate gap (in pp) between migrants and nationals (lfsa_ergacob)	Eurostat	National	TO 8, TO 9
6. Self-employed as share (%) of total employment, 25-64 (lfsa_esgan and lfsa_egan)	Eurostat	National	TO 8
7. NEET rate, by sex, age, labour market status (edat_lfse_20)	Eurostat	National/Regional	TO 8, YEI, TO 9
8. Gender equality index	European Institute for Gender Equality	National	TO 8
9. Gender employment gap (Women employment rates, % of total population, and difference with men, 25-64) (lfsa_ergaed)	Eurostat	National	TO 8, TO 9
10. Part-time employment as percentage of the total employment by sex (lfsa_eppgan)	Eurostat	National	TO 8
11. Gender pay gap in unadjusted form (earn_gr_gpgr2)	Eurostat	National	TO 8
12. Active ageing index by country	DG EMPL and the Population Unit of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)	National	TO 8
13. Proportion of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion rate (AROEPE) (ilc_peps01 and ilc_peps01n)	Eurostat	National/Regional*	TO 9, YEI

<sup>232</sup> The AROPE indicator is measured as the sum of persons who are either at risk of poverty, or severely materially and socially deprived or living in a household with a very low work intensity. The AROPE rate is the share of the total population which is at risk of poverty or social exclusion. In 2021, the AROPE indicator was modified according to the new EU 2030 target (“the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion should be reduced by at least 15 million by 2030). The modifications concern the severe material deprivation component of the indicator and the definition of the (quasi)-jobless household sub-indicator. The new version of the indicator measures the social exclusion situation of those in the working age instead of 18 to 59. The new indicator is published by Eurostat with the code [ilc\\_peps01n](#) and the time series starts from 2015.

Indicator	Source	Level of analysis	TO involved
14. Material and social deprivation rate (ilc_mdmsd07)	Eurostat	National/Regional	TO 9
15. Severe housing deprivation rate (ilc_mdho06a)	Eurostat	National	TO 9
16. Self-perceived health (hlth_silc_01)	Eurostat	National	TO 9
17. In-work at risk (of poverty) rate (ilc_iw01)	Eurostat	National	TO 9
18. Self-reported unmet for medical examinations (hlth_silc_08)	Eurostat	National	TO 9
19. Children receiving formal childcare services (silc_ats01)	Eurostat	National	TO 9
20. Population by educational attainment level (lfsa_pgaed)	Eurostat	National	TO 10, TO 8
21. Early school leavers by sex (% 18-24 years old population) – (edat_lfse_14)	Eurostat	National/Regional	TO 10, TO 9, YEI
22. Pupils aged between 4 years old and the starting age of compulsory education, by sex (as % of the population of the corresponding age group)	Eurostat	National	TO 10
23. Underachieving 15-year-old students (%) by field: mathematics, reading, science	OECD	National	TO 10
24. PISA average scores for 15 years old in mathematics, reading, science	OECD	National	TO 10
25. Population aged 30 to 34 having completed tertiary or equivalent education, by sex (edat_lfse_03)	Eurostat	National/Regional	TO 10
26. Students in tertiary education as % of 20-24 years old population (educ_uae_enrt08)	Eurostat	National	TO 10
27. Participation rate (%) in education and training of 25-64 years old people by sex and level of education attainment (trng_lfs_02)	Eurostat	National	TO 10, TO 8
28. Participation rate in education and training, by employment status (% of 25-64 years old population) (trng_lfs_01) and by degree of urbanisation (trng_lfs_14).	Eurostat	National/Regional	TO 10, TO 8
29. Employment rate of recent graduates by sex and level of education (levels 3-4, general and vocational; levels 5-8) – (edat_lfse_24)	Eurostat	National/Regional	TO 10
30. Distribution of pupils and students in general and vocational programmes by education level (duc_uae_enra13) and Exposure of VET graduates to work-based learning (only for 2021 – edat_lfs_9919)	Eurostat	National	TO 10
31. Disability employment gap by level of activity limitation and sex (hlth_dlm200)	Eurostat	National	TO 9
32. Excess mortality by month (demo_mexrt)**	Eurostat	National	All

Indicator	Source	Level of analysis	TO involved
33. Health personnel employed in hospital (hlth_rs_prshp1)**.	Eurostat	National (not for all countries available)	TO 8, TO 9
34. Children cared only by their parents by age group (ilc_caparents)**.	Eurostat	National	TO 8, TO 9, TO 10
35. Index of total actual hours worked in the main job by sex and age group (2021 = 100) – quarterly data (lfsi_ahw_q)**.	Eurostat	National	TO 8
36. Decisions granting temporary protection by citizenship, age and sex – monthly data (migr_asytpfm)***.	Eurostat	National	TO 9
37. Decisions granting temporary protection to unaccompanied minors by citizenship, age and sex – monthly data (migr_asyumpfm)***.	Eurostat	National	TO 9, TO 10

Note: \*Some Regions (NUTS 2) missing. \*\*=Indicator specifically related to COVID-19. \*\*\*=Indicator specifically related to the Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

As far as institutional capacity (TO 11) is concerned, the available indicators from World Bank (Regulatory quality and Government effectiveness) and from University of Gothenburg (the European Quality of Government Index) were used. Data from the European Quality of Government Index by University of Gothenburg also enabled a specific focus on a regional level (NUTS2).

**Table A5. Indicators on administrative capacity (TO 11)**

Index/indicator	Source	Level of analysis
Regulatory quality	World Bank	National
Government effectiveness	World Bank	National
European Quality of Government Index	University of Gothenburg	National/Regional

Data on policy expenditures completed the set of information needed for the context analysis. This information enabled an analysis of the role played by the ESF in each country, through a comparison between ESF expenditure and total public expenditure in employment, education, health and social inclusion at country level.

The table below summarises the data produced by Eurostat regarding expenditure, based on European policy taxonomies:

- Labour market policy database: for TO 8 and YEI we relied on the European Commission database on expenditure and participants of labour market policies. The policies are classified in nine categories regarding employment service (cat. 1), active policies (measures, from cat. 2 to cat. 7) and passive policies (support, cat. 8 and 9)<sup>233</sup>. Data were available concerning the evaluation period 2014-2022. For the comparison with YEI, the policies addressing young people were identified by looking at the age of participants<sup>234</sup>, as these are divided between under and over 25 years old.
- Database on General government expenditure by functions: statistics on General government expenditure by functions (COFOG)<sup>235</sup> feature data at EU level. Education (GF08) and social protection (GF10) are two of the ten functions making up general government. By applying national account indicators, it was possible to isolate the types of expenditures that were similar to ESF expenditure, for instance by taking out the compensations of the employees from the total.

**Table A6. Indicators on policy context**

<sup>233</sup> See [https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/empl/redisstat/databrowser/view/lmp\\_expsumm/default/table](https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/empl/redisstat/databrowser/view/lmp_expsumm/default/table).

<sup>234</sup> See [https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/empl/redisstat/databrowser/view/lmp\\_partsumm/default/table](https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/empl/redisstat/databrowser/view/lmp_partsumm/default/table).

<sup>235</sup> See [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/gov\\_10a\\_exp/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/gov_10a_exp/default/table?lang=en)

Type of data	Source	Level of analysis	TO involved
Labour market active and passive policies expenditure and participants by type of action	DG EMPL	National	TO 8, YEI
General government expenditure by functions	Eurostat	National	TO 9, TO 10

## Consultation activities (Task 3)

The aim of Task 3 was to undertake a set of interlinked targeted consultation activities to help gather the views and opinions of a wide range of relevant stakeholders of ESF and YEI programmes. The task had three strands: stakeholder consultations, a survey among Management Authorities and a public consultation exercise. Below is a summary of the activities completed.

### Stakeholder consultations

In total, **stakeholder consultations** were completed with 150 stakeholders at EU and national levels. Seventeen **EU-level stakeholder interviews** were completed over February and March 2023. The interviews included:

- Seven interviews with **European Commission representatives** involved in the management of OPs.
- Three interviews with **EU social and economic partners**.
- Six interviews with different **civil society organisations and networks representing groups relevant to ESF and YEI support**.
- One interview with a representative of a **research/academic organisation focusing on employment, training, education and labour market policy**.

In addition, 124 interview sessions, involving 133 individuals were completed with **national level stakeholders** between April and June 2023, covering specifically:

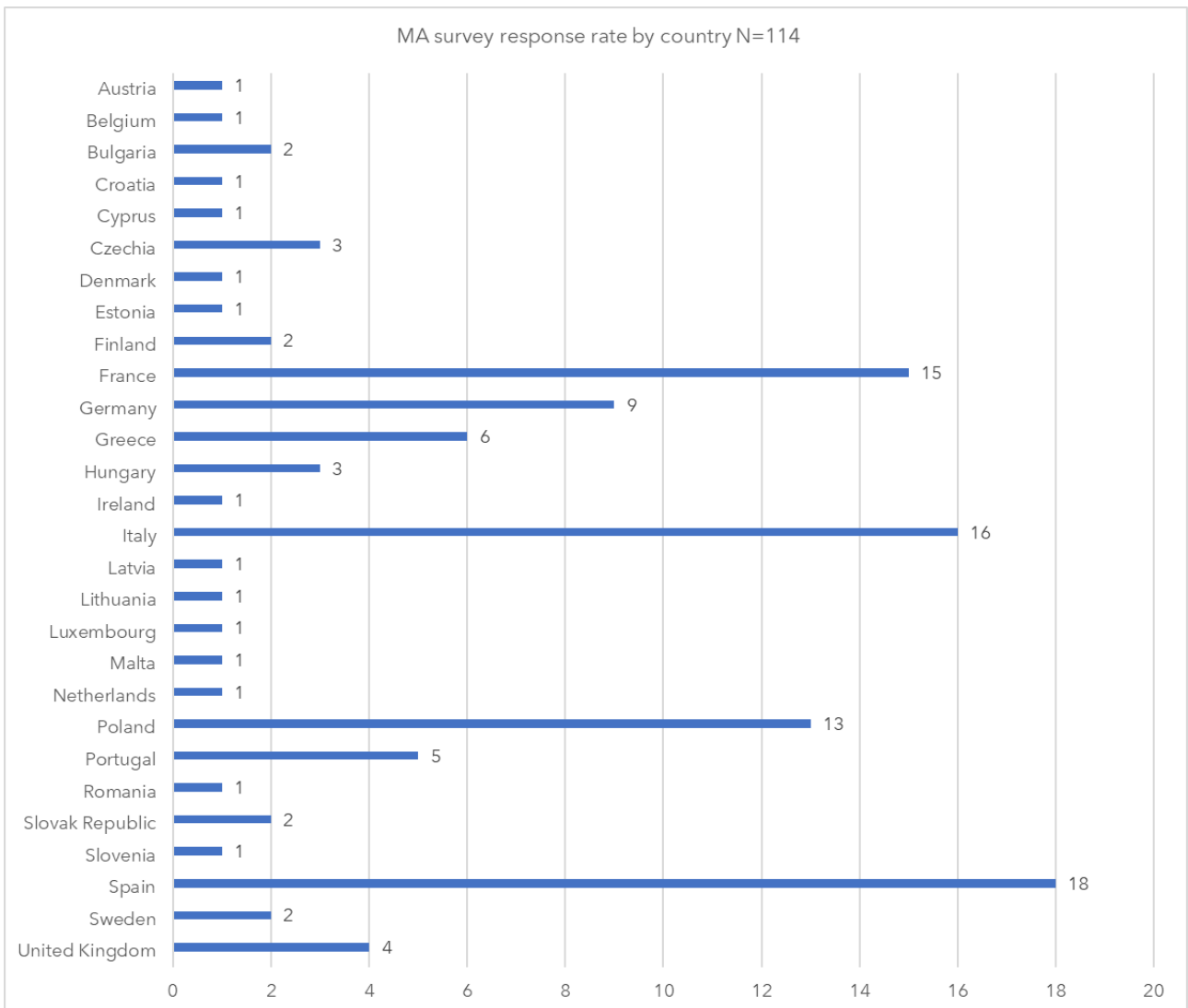
- 30 national and regional authorities involved in the **management of the ESF operational programmes**, including ESF Managing Authorities and ESF Committee Members at national level (governmental representatives).
- 70 national and regional ministries and other public institutions **responsible for employment, training, education and labour market policy** as well as ESF monitoring and implementation, including Ministries of employment and social affairs, finance and education, Public Employment Services, regional and/or local government bodies involved in the implementation of ESF OPs, Youth Guarantee coordinators, ESF national monitoring committees, and national ESF partner organisations.
- 10 stakeholders involved in **labour market policies**, including trade unions, employer organisations and chambers of commerce.
- 14 national, regional and local level **civil society organisations** and networks representing groups relevant to ESF and YEI support.

Additional national stakeholders were also consulted as part of the case study data gathering; this is outlined in the case study section below.

### MA Survey

An email invitation to complete the survey was sent directly to MAs using contact lists provided by the European Commission. After a fieldwork period of 10 weeks, the MA survey closed on the 2nd June 2023 with 114 responses received in total. The survey achieved a 61% response rate, covering all EU27 Member States and the UK as shown in the Figure below.

**Figure A. 3: MA Survey response rate by country**



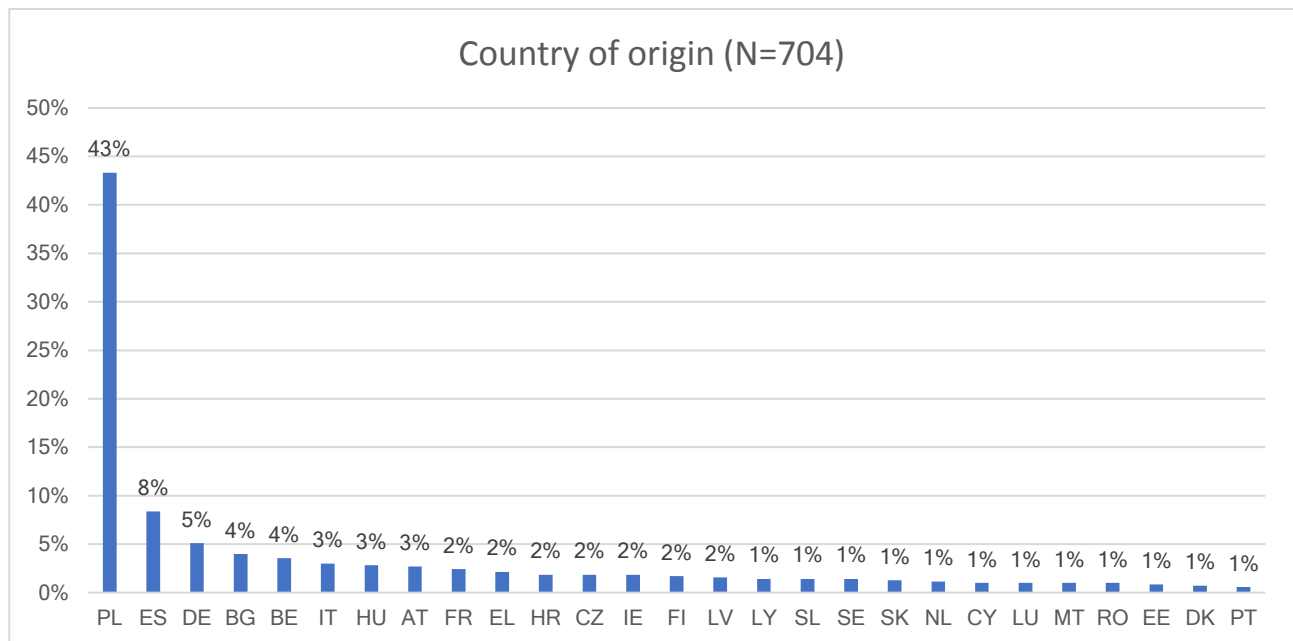
Source: MA survey data

**Public consultation**

A total of **704 respondents** took part in the public consultation which was open between 16 October 2023 and 23 January 2024. The vast majority of responses (99%; n=697) came from within the EU (see Figure below), with **all 27 Member States and the United Kingdom being represented**. The highest number of responses

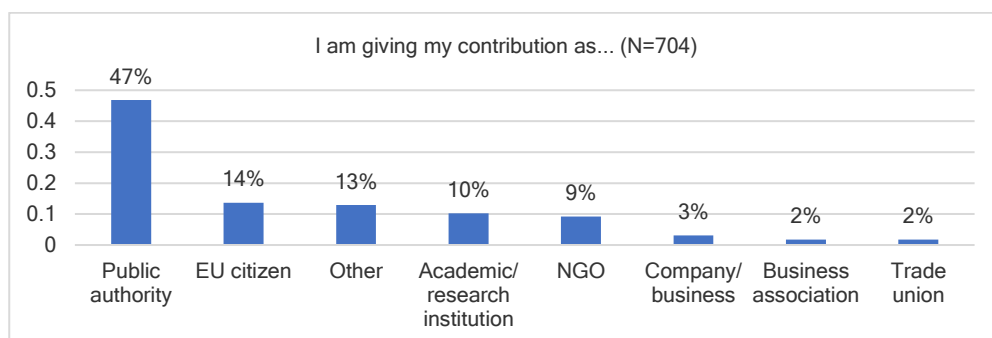
came from **Poland** (43%; n=305), **Spain** (8%; n=59) and **Germany** (5%; n=36). Responses were also received from four non-EU countries,<sup>236</sup> accounting for 1% of all responses combined (n=7). There was no evidence of a coordinated campaign in the responses received from Poland. However, the preponderance of Polish respondents within the achieved sample distribution required careful triangulation with other sources when developing study findings, along with appropriate caveats being added when drawing on the results of the public consultation.

**Figure A. 4: Distribution of responses by country of origin**



Responses were received both from **organisations** (86%; n=607) and **individuals** (14%; n=97). Among different stakeholders, the highest number of responses (47%; n=330) came from **public authorities**. The second largest group was EU citizens (14%; n=96). Academic/research institutions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) respectively accounted for 10% (n=72) and 9% (n=65) of respondents. Companies/businesses, business associations and trade unions together represented 6.5% of total respondents (n=46). The remaining 95 respondents included other categories of organisations and one non-EU citizen.

**Figure A. 5: Distribution of responses by type of respondent**



<sup>236</sup> The non-EU countries represented are the UK, Zimbabwe, Russia and Serbia.

In line with the Better Regulation requirements for public consultation, a full report and a factual summary detailing the process and findings from the public consultation were produced. Initial drafts of these were provided to the Commission on 5<sup>th</sup> March 2024. Following comments from the client team and Steering Group, a final version of the Factual Summary was produced and published on 19<sup>th</sup> March 2024, to meet the requirement to publish this within eight weeks of the closure of the public consultation.

## Cost effectiveness analysis (Task4)

Cost-benefit analysis of ESF interventions was based on monitoring data on common output, result indicators and financial data. Where Programme Specific Indicator (PSI) output values were much higher than common indicator output values, PSIs were used. A limitation of the monitoring data was that finances, outputs and results are not reported at the level of individual interventions. Hence, where relevant, assumptions were made about the types of interventions within an Investment Priority based on characteristics of participants, because different interventions may achieve different results with different benefits. Based on those assumptions, the different operations are schematised into an IP-level intervention logic with aggregated benefits and costs.

The analysis also used external data on, for example, wage levels and tax rates, as well as assumptions, for example about career breaks, following the Better Regulation Guidelines where relevant to calculate the so-called discount rate. Costs and benefits were estimated at the level of Investment Priorities and Member States, and only at the country level. The various results of interventions generated public benefits to the government and private benefits to the participant, and in some cases additional private benefits to businesses. Certain benefits and costs could not be monetised (e.g., benefits to employers with the exception of employee training, indirect costs, macroeconomic knock-on effects, benefits for TO 11 on good governance and capacity building and for TO13 on REACT-EU) and therefore were only considered qualitatively. As a result, the monetary return calculations were affected by this limitation and the CBA calculations did not include them.

The cost effectiveness of ESF is analysed per country and per Investment Priority in four steps, as technically summarised below.

### *Step 1: estimating annually recurring benefits per successful participant*

What makes the exit from an ESF intervention successful depends on the type of intervention. Many interventions aim at increasing employment and/or earnings, either directly or indirectly through education or training. The associated annual private benefit per participant is the increase in employment likelihood multiplied by the increase in annual earnings:

Annual private benefit =  $\Delta$  employment likelihood x  $\Delta$  net household income

The change in net household income for unemployed and inactive participants is calculated as the difference between the net wages after the ESF intervention and the average social assistance level, assuming due to lack of data that the partner is also unemployed or inactive, because otherwise inactivity may be a choice. For employed participants employee training, the change in net household income is estimated as the change in net wage assuming a partner who is also employed, because this is the most frequent household situation. In the case of education, the benefits are further multiplied by the likelihood of successfully completing education.

The main annual public benefits from employed workers considered in the analysis are:

- Higher income tax revenue
- Higher VAT revenue
- Reduced benefit expenditures

In most EU countries, the income tax rate increases with the income level and assumptions will be needed about the average income of successful participants, and from there the applicable average income tax rate. VAT revenue increases with income from work because people with higher income have higher consumer expenditures. The share of household income spent on consumer goods and services can be calculated with (Eurostat or national) Household Budget Survey data. Although VAT rates vary between different types of goods, as an approximation the “standard” VAT rate could be assumed, which ranges from 17% in Luxembourg to 27% in Hungary. For participants who are

unemployed, inactive or threatened with job loss, the reduced benefit expenditures can be approximated with the average social assistance benefit. In formula:

Annual public benefit = (income tax rate + VAT rate \* consumption share) \* annual private benefit +  $\Delta$  employment likelihood \* average social assistance benefit level

For employed participants not threatened with job loss,  $\Delta$  employment likelihood is simply zero.

### *Step 2: multiplying annually recurring benefits with a present-value factor*

The present-value factor is just one number to multiply annual benefits with to obtain a weighted sum of all future benefits, where benefits further in the future are weighted less as follows:

Discounted benefit  $t$  years in the future = annual benefit /  $(1+r)^t$

The larger the discount rate “ $r$ ” or the further in the future “ $t$ ” is, the smaller the discounted benefit is. Shortly before the retirement age, the number of future benefits is limited but the benefits are not discounted much. At a young age of participants, there is a large number of future benefits but benefits far in the future are discounted more heavily. In the yearly Education at a Glance reports, OECD uses a discount rate of 2% per year for formal education, perhaps reflecting that future benefits are considered to be quite certain. If future benefits are more uncertain, one may want to discount those more and assume for example a discount rate of 4% per year.

In ESF monitoring data, the number of participants is broken down into three age groups: below age 25, between age 25 and 55, and above age 55. For a participant exiting to employment, one career break is assumed as follows:

- For participants < age 25 (on average 22 years old): a career break between age 35 and 45
- For participants aged 25-55 (on average 40 years old): a career break between age 50 and 55
- For participants aged 55+ (on average 58 years old): no career break

The present value of future benefits per successful participant can then be calculated as:

Present value = ([% <25] \* [PV <25] + [% 25-55] \* [PV 25-55] + [% 55+] \* [PV 55+]) \* annual benefit

### *Step 3: multiplying with net effectiveness rate*

A change in employment or income can generally be attributed to many factors. In a meta-study, JRC estimated the contribution of ESF to the employment likelihood, at the EU level and for different types of interventions (across all IPs), in the form of so-called net effectiveness rates. The introduction to Section 4.1.2.1 describes these in more detail. The private and public benefits are multiplied with these net effectiveness rates to estimate the ESF contribution to these benefits.

### *Step 4 Comparing benefits and costs*

Some costs of the ESF interventions are borne by ESF, but especially for education and training some costs are borne by participants, employers and/or the State, such as foregone income while in education, lost productivity during employee training and the funding of formal education by the State. The non-ESF costs are subtracted from the benefits.

The result (benefits minus non-ESF costs) is then compared to ESF costs in two ways:

- By also subtracting the ESF costs, giving the so-called return of ESF
- By dividing the benefits minus non-ESF costs by ESF costs, giving the benefit-cost ratio

The downside of the return is that it does not show at what amount of costs the benefits were achieved. The downside of the ratio is that it will always be low-cost interventions that jump out with high ratios, and that the magnitude of negative ratios (if benefits are negative) is difficult to interpret.

## Impact analysis (Task 5)

Task 5 collected and analysed evidence on the impacts of ESF interventions at both a macro and micro level.

With regard to the macro level, the task firstly provided the appropriate support to the JRC team working on the macroeconomic general equilibrium model RHOMOLO to produce estimates of the macroeconomic impacts of ESF interventions financed by the ESF and Youth Employment Initiative TOs 8, 9, 10 and 11. Concretely this involved providing annual and regionalised data – NUTS2 level – separately for each TO. Secondly, under this task the findings from RHOMOLO were analysed and used to answer to the evaluation questions related to the impacts of ESF.

With regard to the micro level, the task first synthesised the findings of the study “Meta-analysis of the ESF counterfactual impact evaluations” and the later updated results<sup>237</sup> on the effectiveness of the ESF and YEI operations on employment. Furthermore, in order to complement the quantitative findings of the meta-analysis, the task analysed in-depth the counterfactual impact evaluations (CIEs) on the ESF interventions implemented in the 2014-2020 programming period, which were available up to mid-2024 in the Evaluation Library produced by the Helpdesk project. The analysis focused on the impact for individuals participating in ESF interventions and linked, as far as possible, the findings of the CIEs to the type of operations identified in Task 1.

Task 5 is articulated into two sub tasks: sub-task 5.1, focussing on the macro impacts (RHOMOLO model) and the sub-task 5.2, relating to micro impacts emerging from the ESF CIEs.

### Methodological note on the regionalisation of expenditure and common output indicators (Task 5.1)

The regionalisation of expenditure and output indicators under Task 5.1 set out to circumscribe the resources allocated to and the population involved in ESF/YEI interventions by investment priority (IP) in each NUTS2 region of the 27 Member States and the United Kingdom.

#### Regionalisation of ESF expenditure

In the regionalisation of the ESF expenditure, we analysed the latest SFC2014 extractions which contained data on expenditure by the IPs (Interventions fields from 102 to 120), the year of implementation, the category of region and the related NUTS2 data for all the ESF OPs. With regard to location dimension (namely the pertinent NUTS2 region), the level of available data was often limited to NUTS1, or even at national level. As such, the regionalisation process required estimating representatively resources and participants to locations lacking NUTS2 data.

We checked and adjusted data where possible to return NUTS0 and NUTS1 figures to the correct NUTS2. Several dissimilar occurrences were encountered:

- Data was not regionalised, but the Member State was a single NUTS2 Member State; this was the case for CY, EE, MT, LU, LT and LV.
- A regional OP covered only one NUTS2 location, but the MA assigned the amount to a NUTS code of a higher level (1 or 0). The data was easily corrected by applying the pertinent NUTS2 classification.

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<sup>237</sup> The initial analysis used original findings from the study: Ismeri (2022), ‘Meta analysis of the ESF counterfactual impact evaluations’ (VT/2020/052) custom-made by the European Commission – DG EMPL. Available at <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8512&furtherPubs=yes>. It should be noted that updated analysis was then published using an alternative calculation method for average impacts: Haepf, T. and Serrano Alarcon, M., Meta-analysis of the European Social Fund counterfactual impact evaluations: Brief update with alternative measures, European Commission, Ispra, 2024, JRC137571, Available at: <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC137571>

- In several cases, only one NUTS2 location was eligible for funding as “less developed”, “transition” or “more developed” regions, even if the information on NUTS2 was missing in the SFC dataset. When this was the case, the incomplete information was simply replaced by the correct NUTS2 code.

Such adjustments allowed us to reliably assign non-regionalised expenditure at NUTS2 level. This was necessary to minimise the application of estimation techniques to monitoring indicators, as these techniques always imply a margin of error. However, whenever the disambiguation of non-regionalised indicators at NUTS2 level was not possible through analytical procedures and assignments, we proceeded to an estimation procedure based on a double approach:

- For the programme (and IPs) for which more than 90% of funds were already regionalised, the non-regionalised share was broken down at NUTS2 level, using the NUTS2 distribution of regionalised funds. This was done controlling for the type of region as well as the Investment Priority
- For the other OPs (and IPs), for which there was less than 90% of the total available NUTS2 distribution, regionalisation was done using several indicators showing the distribution of the population at regional level. The estimation was conducted by applying the weights taken from the indicators related to the population for each OP, year and controlling also for the type of region. Several checks were then carried out to assess the internal validity of the estimation (for example expenditures by country and year, type of regions, OPs, comparing actual and estimated values).
- Indicators were regionalised according to the reference population for each IP, matched by logic and thematic proximity, as presented in the table below.

**Table A7. Reference population and associated IP/FOI for NUTS2 regionalisation of common and financial indicators**

	PI	Field of intervention	Variable used to regionalise
8.1	102		total unemployed and inactive 15-64
8.2	103		total unemployed <b>15-24</b> , (or total unemployed and inactive people 15-64 when 15-24 figures are not available)
8.3	104		total unemployed and inactive 15-64
8.4	105		women unemployed and inactive 15-64
8.5	106		total employed population
8.6	107		total unemployed and inactive 15-64
8.7	108		total unemployed and inactive 15-64
9.1	109		people at risk of poverty or social exclusion
9.2	110		Foreign citizens (or Population 15-64 when foreign citizens are not available)
9.3	111		Population 15-64
9.4	112		People at risk of poverty or social exclusion
9.5	113		Population 15-64
9.6	114		Population 15-64
10.1	115		Population 0-19
10.2	116		Population 20-29
10.3	117		Population 15-64
10.4	118		Population 15-64
11.1	119		Total public Employment
11.2	120		Total public Employment
TA	121		Population 15-64
TA	122		Population 15-64
TA	123		Population 15-64

*Note: given that the same ESF categories (from 102 to 120) were used for the financial resources under TO 13, we applied the same indicators seen above for the IPs from 8.i to 11.ii, since the IPs correspond to the categories of expenditures.*

*Source: Supporting Study*

### **Regionalisation of common output indicators**

The approach used for the distribution of non-regionalised output indicators on participants hinged on the same procedures as above:

- assigned a single NUTS2 region to the Member States with a single NUT2 region (CY, LU, MT, EE, LV, LT)
- assigned a single NUTS2 region to the ESF regional OPs covering only one NUTS2 region
- assigned a single NUTS2 when, in a country or within a NUTS1 region, only one NUTS2 region which is a less developed, more developed or a transition region exists.

The output indicators that could not be regionalised through the previous methods were distributed according to the quota of the regional expenditure, calculated as explained above.

The following additional steps were performed:

- The inconsistencies between expenditure and output indicators datasets were adjusted with ad hoc verification, including mismatched investment priorities, categories of region, NUTS2 region, and REACT-EU interventions (these inconsistencies interested 51 OPs in 16 Member States).
- Verification of the overall coherence of figures and results with source materials, identifying and addressing the remaining incongruities (2 OPs in France and Spain respectively).

Overall, anytime OPs presented a degree of over or underestimation of indicators following the regionalisation process, Operational Programmes and Annual Implementation Reports (AIRs) were consulted. The presented configurations of allocated funds on priority axes and selected IPs allowed, in line with the assumptions above, the estimation of the regional concentration of indicators based on the relative financial weights of specific IPs in pertinent NUTS2 regions of the same category.

REACT-EU monitoring indicators faced two key issues for regionalisation. Firstly, all indicators were assigned to investment priority 13i, hindering their attribution to specific intervention fields and local dimensions. Secondly, the region categories flagged for REACT-EU measures posed geographic challenges for output indicators. Addressing these issues was essential to inform the regional concentration of outputs. The consultation of Operational Programmes and Annual Implementation Reports (AIRs) allowed these gaps to be filled. The primary asset in this regard concerned the distinction of allocations by funds and priority axes, marking a first distinction between ordinary and REACT-EU indicators; indications about investment priorities, categories of region, and location dimensions, in most cases, were reported following the ordinary procedures, which limited the degree of uncertainty to the specific weight of distribution within clusters of regions in the same category. Drawing from the financial configuration of expenditure in approximate NUTS2 according to investment priority or categories of region, distribution was calculated and assigned to output indicators lacking location. Notably, incongruities between financial and output indicators datasets also implied common indicators under IPs which had no certified expenditure allocation. In these instances, provided that no additional information could be surmised from OPs or AIRs, regionalisation criteria observed the concentration of the population with selected characteristics in the affected NUTS2 regions.

## Impact analysis (Task 5.2)

Task 5.2 analysed the impact of ESF interventions on participants, based on reliable impact assessments carried out by Managing Authorities during the evaluation period, using either a counterfactual, theory-based or qualitative/quantitative approach. The analysis also considered a sample of implementation evaluations with the aim of covering those interventions or countries not tackled by reliable impact evaluations.

### Overall approach

Task 5.2 was undertaken through a qualitative and narrative approach based on a literature review of ESF and YEI impact and implementation evaluations. The review of relevant evaluations - either counterfactual, theory-based and/or qualitative/quantitative – addressed the following evaluation questions in a narrative way:

- How and to what extent does the ESF contribute to the achievement of the objectives of YEI, TO 8, TO 9 and TO 10, in terms of a positive evolution of the employment situation, the quality of jobs created, labour mobility, self-employment, the competences of people, early school leaving, social inclusion, etc.?
- Which types of operations were the most effective and most sustainable?
- For which groups and in which contexts (e.g., more developed, less developed and transition regions) are the ESF interventions more effective?
- (partly) What main factors (geographical, socioeconomic, organizational, etc.) contribute to explaining the impacts of the ESF operations?

The analysis was based on secondary information sources, namely evaluation reports drafted during the 2014-2022 period and collected in the Evaluation Library produced by the Evaluation Helpdesk project.

The analysis was not limited to counterfactual evaluations, but also included findings from other types of impact and implementation evaluations, thereby including evidence from mixed-method approaches. This enabled coverage of all evaluation criteria and task 5.2-related questions foreseen for the study.

### Selection of evaluations through the Evaluation Helpdesk database

The main information source is the Evaluation Helpdesk database<sup>238</sup>, which collects and categorises all evaluation reports published by MAs across EU Member States and the United Kingdom. Since 2015, the database has collated published evaluation reports relating to Operational Programmes implemented in Member States.

Each month, new reports are analysed by the Helpdesk team, summarised, and assessed based on five main criteria:

- Clarity and suitability of the evaluation design.
- Appropriateness and correctness of the techniques applied.
- Data quality.
- Validity of findings.
- Validity of policy implications.

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<sup>238</sup> This library contains the evaluations carried out by Member States on interventions supported by cohesion policy in the 2021-2027 and 2014-2020 periods and the evaluations assessing the impact of investments from the 2007-2013 period, published since 2015. See: [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/policy/evaluations/member-states\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/policy/evaluations/member-states_en)

These five criteria are given a score, ranging from 0 (when a specific element is missing) to 4, when the report is well detailed and relied on thorough analysis. The average score was then used to categorise evaluations as “reliable” (when the average score is above 3) or “not reliable” (average score below 2.75). This assessment by the Evaluation Helpdesk’s experts is not available to the wider public and it was only used by the European Commission for analytical purposes. To ensure the robustness and reliability of the evidence used for this report, only evaluations assessed as reliable by the Evaluation Helpdesk were considered.

As of September 2023, the Helpdesk database included 362 impact evaluations covering 2014-2020 ESF/YEI programming, as well as multi-funded programmes (ESF and ERDF and/or CF). Among them, 66 evaluations were not reliable (scoring from 1.25 to 2), while 205 were categorised as “partly reliable” (between 2.25 and 2.75), as they feature some deficiency in the methodology adopted, or in relation to the quality and reliability of data used. The remaining 91 evaluations were those considered as reliable by the expert reviewers (average score 3-4). Nevertheless, only 79 out of the 91 impact evaluations identified could effectively contribute to this analysis, as some multi-funded impact evaluations do not report any relevant findings on ESF/YEI interventions.

Given the above, our team identified 12 additional reliable implementation evaluations (ongoing, mid-term, in-depth analysis on specific topics, etc.) to gather further evidence on the results of ESF/YEI-funded interventions analysed through different evaluation methods. This approach enabled a wider range of evaluations to be analysed, including some Member States not covered by impact evaluations (Denmark, Finland, Greece, Hungary and the Netherlands). Overall, 91 evaluations (both impact and implementation evaluations) were reviewed.

The selected evaluations covered 18 countries (17 EU Member States and the UK), guaranteeing a balanced representation at geographical level (Northern, Southern, Eastern and Western Europe). They also included all types of regions (more developed, less developed and in transition) and a range of OPs (at national and regional levels).

The available evaluations mainly focused on TO 8 (54% of selected evaluations), followed by TO 9 (22%) and TO 10 (21%). Since the sample included only a few evaluations addressing TO 11, which were not statistically relevant and whose findings were limited, not allowing for comparisons, TO 11 was not part of the exercise. Further details on the evaluations’ featured are given in Annex IV, Appendix 5.

### **Additional methodological considerations**

It is important to note that, unlike the meta-analysis of CIEs undertaken previously by Ismeri<sup>239</sup>, the present report was based on findings from reliable impact and implementation evaluations carried out through different methodologies, thus privileging qualitative information, while quantitative results were analysed primarily through updated monitoring data (result indicators).

As highlighted in previous sections, selected evaluations involved 18 countries (17 EU Member States and the UK) covering all categories of regions, alongside OPs implemented at both national and regional levels. Nonetheless, some countries (Italy, Poland, Germany) were more represented than others because of their higher number of reliable evaluations.

Generally, selected evaluations covered TOs 8, 9 and 10 and all the evaluation criteria. Nevertheless, in most cases findings were focused on specific topics following evaluations’ specific objectives. While effectiveness is tackled in all reports, other themes such as sustainability, visibility and communication were addressed much less frequently. Therefore, findings on these criteria were limited, context-specific, and could not be generalised to the programme level. In addition, EU added value was inferred to the extent possible by considering information related to other evaluation criteria, while not generally

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<sup>239</sup> Ismeri (2022), ‘Meta analysis of the ESF counterfactual impact evaluations’ (VT/2020/052) custom-made by the European Commission – DG EMPL. Available at <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8512&furtherPubs=yes>

being directly tackled in the analysed evaluations. Moreover, since it was decided to omit evaluations also tackling the 2007-2013 period, this report focused on the 2014-2020 period, not providing comparisons between the two programming cycles.

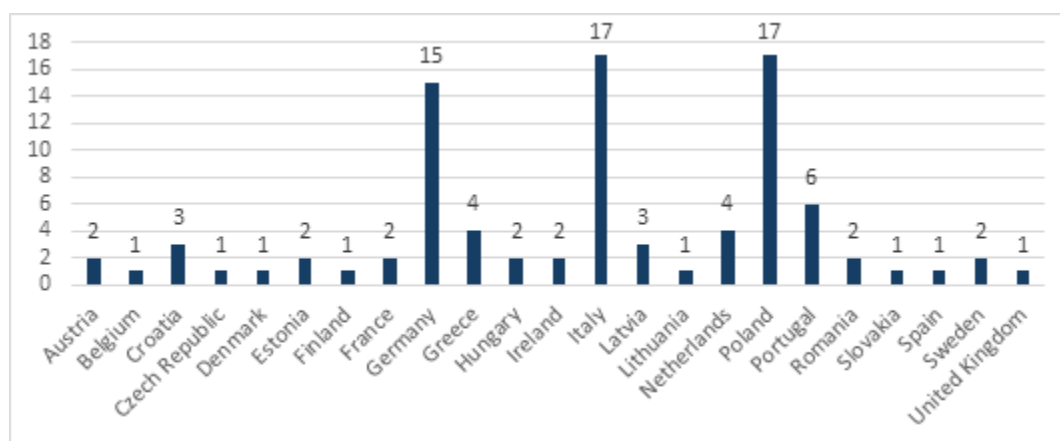
Although 68% of the selected evaluations were published after 2020, most findings relate to interventions implemented before that year (thus not considering the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, nor the Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine). For the same reason, the evaluations typically covered operations that were still being implemented and/or refer to closed operations whose durable effects could not be comprehensively assessed. Therefore, evidence was triangulated with findings from other relevant tasks to ensure a more comprehensive response to the evaluation questions.

## Overview of selected evaluations

### Main characteristics

The following figure shows the number of selected impact and implementation evaluations per country included in the Helpdesk database. Among these countries, Italy (17 evaluations), Poland (17 evaluations), Germany (15), and Portugal (6 evaluations) are the mostly represented.

**Figure A. 6: Number of impact and implementation evaluations selected by MS**



Source:

Evaluation Helpdesk database, September 2023

Around 52,7% evaluations (48 out of 91) covered measures financed by regional OPs, while the remaining 47,25% of analysed evaluations related to measures financed by national OPs.

As for the distribution of regional OPs impact and implementation evaluations, 47,9% of them were referred to more developed regions (23 evaluations), followed by evaluations referring to in transition regions (11 evaluations), and evaluations referring to less developed regions (14 evaluations).

The sample mostly included ESF evaluations (68%) followed by evaluations considering ERDF/ESF evaluations (11%), and ESF/YEI evaluations (10%), as shown in the figure below.

Impact and implementation evaluations were referred to measures that can cover one or more TOs. Most evaluations covered TO 8 (47%, namely 37 evaluations), followed by TO 9 (30,7%, with 24 evaluations) TO 10 (19,23%, with 15 evaluations), and, at last, TO 11 (covering 2,5% of the evaluations).

The selected evaluations were divided into two groups based on the type of measure they focused on (i.e., from which funds the measures analysed are covered):

- evaluations covering measures financed by ESF, CF and ERDF,
- evaluations covering measures financed by ESF, CF and ERDF + YEI.

It is worth noting that the Helpdesk evaluation database categorises evaluations according to the type of evaluation, namely: impact evaluations (I), process evaluation (P), and monitoring evaluation (M).

The following analysis on impact and implementation evaluations by type of measure/Fund addresses three main aspects: type of evaluation, adopted evaluation method(s) and used data.

### **ESF/YEI evaluations**

There were 72 ESF Impact and implementation evaluations (not including YEI which is analysed in the following paragraph). The analysis presented herein focused on mixed types of evaluations. The joint use of impact and monitoring evaluations was the most frequent case (I+M), representing 29% of evaluations. This case was followed the combination of impact, monitoring and process evaluations (I+P+M), covering 22% of evaluations (16 evaluations), and impact evaluations (I), corresponding to the 21% of the total sample of evaluations (15 evaluations). At last, the less frequent cases were represented by the joint use of impact (I) and process (P) evaluations (13%, namely 9 evaluations), the joint use of process and monitoring evaluation (P+M), corresponding to 10%, monitoring evaluations (M, namely 4%), and process evaluation (P, 1% evaluations).

The methods used for the selected impact evaluations were counterfactual approach (counterfactual impact evaluation - CIE), qualitative methods (QUAL), quantitative methods (QUAN), cost-benefit analysis (CBA), theory-based evaluation (TBE) and macro modelling (MOD). The most frequent methods used, either alone or combined, were the following:

- joint use of qualitative quantitative methods and counterfactual approach (QUAL+QUAN+CIE), adopted in 17 evaluations.
- joint use of qualitative and quantitative methods (QUAL+QUAN), adopted in 13 evaluations.
- and joint use of theory-based evaluation, qualitative and quantitative methods (TBE+QUAL+QUAN), adopted in 12 evaluations.
- joint use of theory-based evaluation, counterfactual approach, qualitative and quantitative methods (TBE+QUAL+QUAN+CIE), for a total of 8 evaluations.
- counterfactual approach (CIE), 6 evaluations.

There were 19 Impact and implementation evaluations covering measures financed by YEI, alongside other funds. The most frequent case was represented by impact evaluations (I), covering the 32% of the evaluations (namely 6 evaluations), followed by impact and monitoring evaluations (I+M), covering the 26% of the evaluations (5 evaluations), and by impact, monitoring and process evaluations (I+P+M), in total 4 evaluations (21%), and lastly, impact and process evaluations (16%), namely 3 evaluations.

As for the methods adopted, the most frequent case in the sample under analysis was the combination of counterfactual impact evaluation and quantitative methods (CIE+QUAN), with 6 evaluations. All other combinations of evaluation methods were generally less frequent (1 or 2 impact evaluations).

As previously discussed, implementation evaluations were taken into account for some of those Member States for which reliable impact evaluations were not identified, in order to still provide reliable hints on the main results of the ESF and YEI measures. Implementation evaluations covered 5 Member States: Denmark, Finland, Greece, Hungary and the Netherlands.

Most implementation evaluations (8 out of 12) covered measures financed by national OPs, and 4 implementation evaluations cover measures financed by regional OPs.

## Integration of the meta-analysis of ESF CIEs findings

The analysis also took into consideration the original findings of the meta-analysis of the ESF counterfactual impact evaluations<sup>240</sup> and its update implemented in 2024<sup>241</sup>. It is worth recalling that, unlike the present analysis based on impact and implementation evaluations carried out through a variety of methods during the 2014-2020 programming period, the meta-analysis focused only on CIEs realised in the 27 EU Member States and the UK covering both the 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 programming periods.

The meta-analysis aimed at finding systematic evidence of the effectiveness and sustainability of ESF and YEI operations, covering TO 8 (Employment), TO 9 (Social inclusion), and TO 10 (Education and training) and analysing effects in terms of employment and education outcomes, while it did not tackle social inclusion outcomes. Moreover, most of the evaluations analysed in the meta-analysis report were related to interventions implemented before 2020, thus assessing interventions not yet impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic nor by the Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

For this reason, the European Commission – DG EMPL entrusted the JRC to provide an update on the descriptive statistics presented in the 2022 meta-analysis by adding 16 CIE reports published in the Helpdesk database between January 2022 and November 2023 to the previously collected 94 CIE reports on employment outcomes. This informed an update of the previously calculated average effect on employment rates based on all available studies. The updated analysis provided figures based on both the previous methodology (which considered all coefficients provided in the reports that estimated effects, allowing for a large variation in the number of coefficients provided by each report leading to a higher role of certain reports in the calculation of the general overall statistics for the ESF), as well as on a balanced methodology that gave an equal weight to each intervention irrespective of the number of coefficients provided in the report that fit the three pre-specified categories of the meta database (whole sample, gender subsamples, age group subsamples).

The analysis considered data on the average effects on employment probability by intervention type (not broken down by gender and age group) provided by the updating of the initial study made by JRC in January 2024, while outcomes on target groups and on the dynamics related to programme duration and the time horizon were derived from the 2022 meta-analysis.

Finally, to ensure continuity in the evaluation of ESF/YEI outcomes and coherence with the overall methodology adopted, the analysis considered updated figures based on the previously adopted methodology only for the 2014-2020 programming period. The following table summarises the main findings from the meta-analysis adopted for this report, which includes the updating by JRC in 2024 and original findings of the original meta-analysis carried out in the 2022.

**Table A8. Main findings from the meta-analysis on CIEs**

Findings of CIEs on employment outcomes	
Overall effect on employment probability (2024)	Average programme effect is a 5.9 percentage points increase in the employment probability of treated individuals
Most effective types of operations (average effect)	11.9 percentage points for employment subsidies/financial aid 9.5 percentage points for traineeships

<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

<sup>241</sup> Haepf, T. and Serrano Alarcon, M., Meta-analysis of the European Social Fund counterfactual impact evaluations: Brief update with alternative measures, European Commission, Ispra, 2024, JRC137571, available at: <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC137571>

(2024)	6.9 percentage points for vocational training
Most effective types of operations (balanced average effect) (2024)	15.1 percentage points for employment subsidies/financial aid 6.7 percentage points for traineeships 5.2 percentage points for vocational training
Least effective types of operations (average effect) (2024)	5.7 percentage points for other training 3.8 percentage points for mentoring/social support 0.1 percentage points for public employment
Least effective types of operations (balanced average effect) (2024)	4.9 percentage points for other training 2.2 percentage points for mentoring/social support -10.2 percentage points for public employment
Highly affected target groups (2022)	Unemployed: 55% of the reported estimates are positive significant, and 21% are negative significant Long-term unemployed: 51.9% of the estimates are positive significant and 21.1% negative significant Atypical workers: 44.9% of estimates are positive significant, and 20.2% are negative significant
Less affected target groups (2022)	Youths (up to 25 years old), with only 42% of the estimates being positive significant and 29% negative significant (but effect sizes increase over time following the programme, making the investment worthwhile for youths due to the extended payoff period).
Effects by gender (2022)	Women, 46% of the reported estimates are positive significant, while 21.4% are negative significant Men, 50% of the reported estimates are positive significant, while 22.2% are negative significant
Dynamics related to programme duration and the time horizon (2022)	The longer the intervention's duration (25-48 months), the smaller the effects. Shorter interventions (up to 24 months) seem more effective
Findings of CIEs on education outcomes	
Main target groups (2022)	Unemployed NEETs
Impacts of the interventions assessed (2022)	Mixed effects (negative and positive): no type of support, more positive than others, emerged from the analysis. For instance, several evaluations found positive effects for interventions targeting the unemployed and the NEETs (i.e., vocational training). Still, this same typology had negative impacts in some other CIEs analysed. High shares of not statistically significant estimates on the short or medium period suggesting that interventions are likely to produce any real effect only in the longer run.

## Case studies (Task 6)

The aim of the case studies was to add considerable depth to the overall study's understanding of the delivery and results of the ESF by Thematic Objective and Investment Priority. They also sought to offer a specific, detailed, assessment of the implementation and results of the CRII, REACT-EU, and CARE, alongside exploring the effects of social innovation and the horizontal principles in the ESF context.

27 case study reports were produced as follows:

- 20 IP level case studies
- 3 case studies evaluating the key crisis response instruments (CRII/ CRII+, REACT-EU and CARE)

- 1 case study focused on social innovation, and
- 3 case studies focused on horizontal principles (partnership and multilevel governance, equality between men and women and non-discrimination, and sustainable development).

A sampling exercise identified 5-6 countries that would be the focus of country level research that fed into each case study. In total, 380 country level stakeholder interviews were completed across the case studies. Alongside interviews, country experts conducted desk-based research, including reviewing the relevant data from this current study and identifying and reviewing Member State level secondary evidence. The latter included Member State-level ESF and YEI evaluations, any relevant academic research conducted at the Member State level, and any additional and relevant background documentary sources at national level that could inform the context presented within the case studies. This country level evidence was collated by country experts into key findings notes. In total 224 key findings notes were completed, compiling this country level information for each IP/initiative (e.g. CRII)/cross-cutting theme (e.g. social innovation) and quality assured by the core research team.

The key findings notes were one of the principal sources of evidence used by case study leads to produce each **case study report**. In addition, case study leads had access to IP level/crisis response data collected and analysed in other strands of the study, such as financial implementation and types of operations data. It should be noted that the case study reports were produced between November – January 2024 and as such drew on wider data and findings available at this point of the study. The case study reports were intended to be a data source in themselves, rather than a specific reporting output; as such the data presented in the case study reports has fed into analysis and triangulation rather than being updated with new findings from other evaluation activities.

## Focus groups (Task 7)

After the submission of the draft final report, six thematic focus groups were carried out between June 4<sup>th</sup> and June 13<sup>th</sup> 2024, four covering TO 8-11, one for YEI, and one addressing the reaction to the crises (REACT-EU/CRII/CARE). All of them involved relevant stakeholders to fill remaining knowledge gaps and their findings were integrated into the final report. In total, 62 attendants participated across the six focus groups. Focus groups were run online as a cost-effective and accessible approach to engaging participants.

### Identifying and securing participants

Each focus group brought together between 6 to 10 representatives from stakeholders active in and knowledgeable about ESF and YEI, and of the changes brought by the REACT/CRII/ CARE to their implementation including:

- National Managing Authorities of the programmes
- Representatives of national ministries or national ministries of education, employment and social affairs
- Regional and local government bodies in charge of employment and social policies and/ or involved in ESF design or implementation
- Representatives of organisations involved in the delivery of operations as beneficiaries or project partners
- National public employment services
- EU-level civil society organisations and networks representing groups relevant to ESF
- Academics or independent experts
- Representatives of Commission services

Potential participants were proactively identified during the delivery of the research and a longlist of participants developed in close consultation with DG EMPL. This approach aimed to ensure a balanced representation across the EU and a diversity of views; while making sure the overall number and selection of participants encourages effective discussions where everyone is given the opportunity to actively participate.

### **Developing the focus group, concept note, agenda and discussion note**

A **concept note**, including the overall agenda of the focus groups, was discussed and agreed with the Commission. The concept note outlined the overarching approach and agenda as well as any specificities for the different focus groups, including an assessment of priority topics and findings for consideration by focus groups based on the research results and input from the Commission.

Focus groups were broken down into two main sessions: the first part helped test the study's emerging findings and conclusions, including identifying information to fill gaps or areas for development; and the second aimed to discuss learning points and policy implications for the future. The draft agenda was updated based on the findings from the research and adapted to reflect the specificities of each of the focus groups.

Before the focus groups, the core study team sent participants a short discussion note outlining the key objectives and expected results of this event, an overview of the key findings, the draft conclusions and recommendations of the study, of specific relevance to the topic of each workshop as well as transversal themes. The discussion paper also signposted key questions and issues for discussion with the participants. A GDPR compliant **privacy statement** was also provided to participants.

### **Organisation and delivery of the focus groups**

Focus groups were held in English, without interpretation. Workshops were supported by a moderating team, including technical support to ensure active participant engagement. Microsoft Teams was used to run the focus groups as it provides certain interactive features that allowed for smooth running and interactive facilitation of sessions. The contributions of each participant were noted for reporting. With the explicit permission of the participants, the focus groups were audio-recorded to allow checking of notetaking accuracy and/or to facilitate the production of anonymised quotes.

### **Focus group reports**

The findings from the focus groups were used to sense-check, fine-tune and fill gaps in the findings and conclusions as well as inform the key learning points included in the Final Report. Findings and participation details from all the focus groups were compiled into the consultation synopsis report included in the Annex IV.

## **Key figures and evidence (Task 8)**

The aim of Task 8 was to prepare individual country factsheets for each of the 27 EU Member States and the UK, providing a clear overview of the results of ESF and YEI support achieved in the evaluation period 2014-2022. The individual factsheets contain both quantitative and qualitative information presenting key figures and evidence in an easily readable format.

### **Developing the structure, format and design of country factsheets**

The country factsheets were produced in two separate phases and formats: a first phase using Microsoft Word and a second phase producing a full designed version resulting in PDF versions of the factsheet. Most of the work was carried out during the first phase using Microsoft Word as it was easier for country experts, DG EMPL staff members, members of the ISG and translators to make comments and edits on the content of the draft factsheets in Word. Once the content of the factsheets had been agreed on the Word versions, final designed/PDF versions of the factsheets were produced.

This evaluation builds on the intervention logics of the ESF and YEI as a whole, as well as for each Thematic Objectives (TO 8, 9, 10, 11, 13). The ILs include a complex set of operational, specific and general objectives. These objectives are mirrored, respectively, by activities/outputs, results, and impacts, which are the main reference for the present assessment. This section clarifies the Intervention Logics for each Thematic Objective.

**Thematic Objective 8** has the objective of “**promoting sustainable and quality employment and supporting labour mobility**” and is operationalised through seven Investment Priorities (IPs) that can be clustered into three broad categories: i) investment priorities directly supporting access to employment (8i - access for job seekers and the economically inactive; 8ii - Sustainable integration into the labour market of young people; 8iv - equality between men and women; and 8vi - active ageing); ii) IPs supporting businesses (8iii - self-employment, entrepreneurship and business creation; and 8v - adaptation of workers, enterprises and entrepreneurs to change.); iii) and an n IP supporting institutions (8vii - modernisation of labour market institutions).

**Thematic Objective 9** aims to “**promote social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination**” through six IPs that tend to focus either on a specific target group (9ii - marginalised communities) or an issue (9iii - discrimination and equal opportunities; 9iv - access to services; and 9v - and the social economy). IP 9vi supports a specific instrument chosen to deliver policy (community-led local development strategies) while IP 9i (active inclusion) is very broadly defined.

**Thematic Objective 10** has the goal of “**investing in education, training and vocational training for skills and lifelong learning**”, through the implementation of four IPs covering all phases of education and targeting multiple groups: 10i - reducing and preventing early school leaving and promoting equal access to education, including formal, non-formal and informal learning pathways for reintegrating into education and training; 10ii - improving the quality and efficiency of, and access to, tertiary and equivalent education and training; 10iii - enhancing equal access to lifelong learning for all age groups in formal, non-formal and informal settings; and 10iv - improving the labour market relevance of education and training systems.

**Thematic Objective 11** focuses on “**enhancing institutional capacity of public authorities and stakeholders and efficient public administration**”; ESF support to TO 11 is delivered through two investment priorities: 11i - investment in institutional capacity and in the efficiency of public administrations and public services at the national, regional and local levels with a view to reforms, better regulation and good governance; and 11ii - capacity building for all stakeholders delivering education, lifelong learning, training and employment and social policies, including through sectoral and territorial pacts to mobilise for reform at the national, regional and local levels.

Thematic Objective 13 and its unique IP 13.1 has the objective of “**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”**. To this aim investments under TO 13 could also pursue priorities relating to the other ESF Thematic Objectives.

***TO 8: promoting sustainable and quality employment and supporting labour mobility***

Needs: The lingering effects of the 2008 and 2012 crises on employment, which resulted in substantial job losses and slow recovery, needed to be addressed. In 2013, employment rate stood at 66.8% of the EU population. High and uneven unemployment levels across Member States and regions had to be tackled to foster economic growth and social cohesion. Additionally, there was a need to bridge the skills gap and provide adequate skills to the workforce, enabling them to adapt to changing labour market needs. Vulnerable groups, such as young people, low-skilled workers, and migrants, required support to enhance their employability. The impact of an ageing workforce on the labour market also needed to be mitigated, including promoting longer working lives, higher productivity, and sustainability of social protection systems. Furthermore, entities, such as businesses and public organizations, needed support to adapt to changing circumstances and embrace innovation and technological progress. Finally, labour mobility, which was limited, needed to be promoted to facilitate the free movement of workers across the EU, addressing skills shortages and surpluses, and enhancing economic growth and competitiveness.

Objectives: In view of the needs, the Thematic Objective 8 promoted sustainable and quality employment and supports labour mobility. It included seven operational objectives (described under the Investment Priorities) that articulated its strategy, targeting particular groups (jobseekers, young people, entrepreneurs, women, workers, older workers), covering individuals in various employment conditions (unemployed, long-term unemployed, employed, and inactive), and supporting employment and self-employment. TO 8 also included support for national services and institutions dedicated to the development of the labour market.

Inputs: By the end of 2022, the planned resources for TO8 included 8 included EUR 27.3 billion from the ESF and EUR 11.8 billion from national co-financing. At the same date, the declared expenditure of EU resources in TO 8 was around EUR 33 billion of ESF and national resources. The major expenditures were devoted to promoting access to employment (43% of the total for TO8), supporting young people entering the labour market (18%), and adapting workers and enterprises to technological changes (21%). Significant expenditure was also directed towards self-employment and entrepreneurship, which accounted for around 9% of the total.

Activities: The inputs are intended to support activities that contribute to achieving the objectives. Member States implement the funds through Operational Programmes. The classification and analysis of the operations highlighted several prevailing categories and social mechanisms pursued. Interventions to support unemployed people in finding a job were based on three main types of activities: a) improving their skills to make them more employable (training); b) reducing labour costs for enterprises (employment subsidies); and c) facilitating the matching between workers and firms (internships, apprenticeships, guidance). These types of interventions were often combined and represent key mechanisms through which the ESF sought to use available resources to generate intended outputs, results and impacts. To promote

self-employment and business creation, services to support new entrepreneurs were typically provided, sometimes integrated with small grants to provide initial capital. In-house training was the main activity/mechanism designed to strengthen the adaptation of employees and adults to new technologies and organisational changes. Other operations, generally defined as capacity-building activities, focused on labour market institutions. Finally, a significant amount of resources (more than 1% of the total for TO 8) was reprogrammed to support the income of employed and unemployed people during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Outputs: Under ESF only, operations that promote sustainable and quality employment (TO8) supported 18.5 million participations from 2014 to 2022. More than half of participants were unemployed, over one third were employed and around one in ten were economically inactive. Unemployed people formed 54% of participants, while operations under Investment Priority 8.i (Access to employment for jobseekers and inactive people) supported 45% of participants.

Results: By the end of 2022, 3.9 million participants were in employment after participating in an ESF-supported intervention, and 2.9 million participants were in employment 6 months after leaving. Other more qualitative results achieved concerned the empowerment of participants in terms of their ability to participate in the labour market, the strengthening of the accessibility and capacity of employment services, and enhanced adaptability of enterprises to technological change

Impacts: Impacts of TO 8 concerned increased participation and employment in the labour market, improvements in the quality and productivity of work, and support to economic growth. TO 8 contributed to employment resilience during the COVID-19 crisis as well as to an increase in employment rates compared to the initial years of the period. In quantitative terms, a contribution to long-term European growth is confirmed by the RHOMOLO model analysis<sup>242</sup>. The return on investment in terms of GDP of 1 euro spent on the TO 8 (considering in this case ESF and YEI) in 2030 is 1.256 euro. A positive net impact of the activities carried out under the TO 8 is evidenced by a meta-analysis of more than 100 counterfactual evaluations<sup>243</sup>.

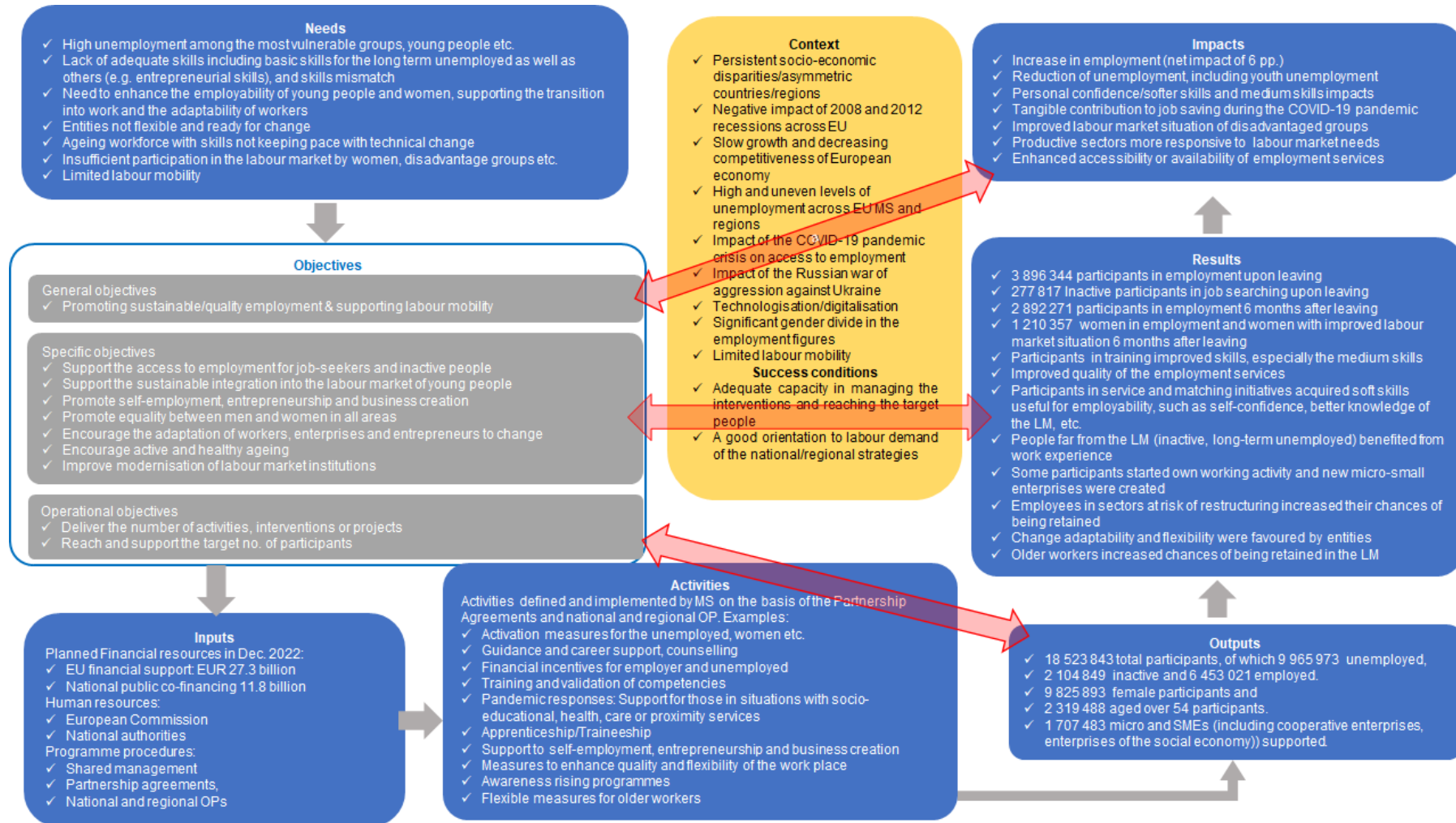
Unintended effects: Unintended effects mainly concerned the "creaming" effect in some instances, involving a tendency to focus support on groups with less complex needs and which, according to the following analysis, sometimes occurred but did not significantly affect the functioning of TO 8 operations and the intervention logic presented.

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<sup>242</sup> Casas, Pablo and Christou, Tryfonas and García Rodríguez, Abián and Lazarou, Nicholas Joseph and Salotti, Simone (2025): *The ex-post macroeconomic evaluation of the 2014-2020 European Social Fund, Youth Employment Initiative and REACT-EU labour market interventions*.

<sup>243</sup> Haepf, T. and Serrano Alarcon, M., Meta-analysis of the European Social Fund counterfactual impact evaluations: Brief update with alternative measures, European Commission, Ispra, 2024, JRC137571, available at: <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC137571>

**Figure A. 7: Intervention Logic of Thematic Objective 8 (only ESF)**



Source: Supporting study

### ***Thematic Objective 9 “promote social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination”***

Needs: TO 9 aimed to tackle pressing social issues, including a large population at risk of social exclusion, challenges faced by disadvantaged groups in integrating into society and the workforce, regional disparities in poverty levels, increasing in-work poverty and high number of people excluded from adequate healthcare, social and educational services. The economic crises of 2009 and 2012 exacerbated these problems, which persisted as significant concerns beyond 2014. Additionally, TO 9 concentrates on the needs of vulnerable populations, such as marginalised communities, people with disabilities, and migrants, who were not adequately supported by existing national policies.

Objectives: TO 9 aimed to promote social inclusion, fight poverty, and combat discrimination. It pursues five sub-objectives focused on specific positive actions: i) promoting active inclusion in the labour market; ii) supporting integration of marginalised communities such as the Roma; iii) combating all forms of discrimination and promoting equal opportunities; iv) enhancing access to sustainable and high-quality social services; v) promoting social entrepreneurship and vocational integration in social enterprises and vi) supporting innovation in social inclusion approaches via community-led local development strategies. The sub-objectives targeted different components of social inclusion (labour market participation, anti-discrimination etc.) with a focus on marginalised groups and the strengthening of policy instruments (social services, community mobilisation, and social enterprises).

These strategic objectives were integrated with operational objectives to ensure outreach to the most disadvantaged groups and the activation and participation of organisations such as co-operatives and social economy enterprises and stakeholders close to the target groups in policy implementation.

Inputs: The total budget allocated to TO 9 was EUR 35.9 billion, comprising EUR 24.9 billion from the European Social Fund and EUR 11 billion in national co-financing. Moreover, EC and national authorities contributed providing human resources. Promoting the active inclusion of disadvantaged people into the labour market absorbed 64% of the total declared expenditure of TO 9 by the end of 2022 and enhancing access to sustainable and high-quality social services around 26%, which confirms the general effort to strengthen social policy instruments. In contrast, the remaining four priorities received relatively limited funding, targeting more specific territorial or social issues and playing a lesser role in the overall allocation of resources.

Activities: TO 9 aimed to address the needs and meet the objectives outlined above via implementing a wide range of operations. Operation types most frequently used in TO 9 to support labour inclusion (training, guidance, work mediation) were similar to the TO 8 interventions, but were typically adapted to the needs of disadvantaged groups (including, for instance, support for confidence building and activities to reduce social isolation alongside, or prior to, more work-focused activity). They likewise often involved a higher intensity or duration in terms of time and resources dedicated to participants. The reinforcement of social services included the increase in the quality and quantity of personnel (for example, via training), which was often viewed as a precondition for increasing both the number and

diversity of participants able to more easily and effectively access services. These interventions were, in some cases, linked to reform of the national social assistance and instruments and consequently assumed a more systemic and general scope. Other activities were aimed at supporting education for disadvantaged groups and promoting local development actions for social inclusion. Support for new entrepreneurship was also a significant tool activated by TO 9, promoting both self-employment and social entrepreneurship (such as cooperative and social enterprises).

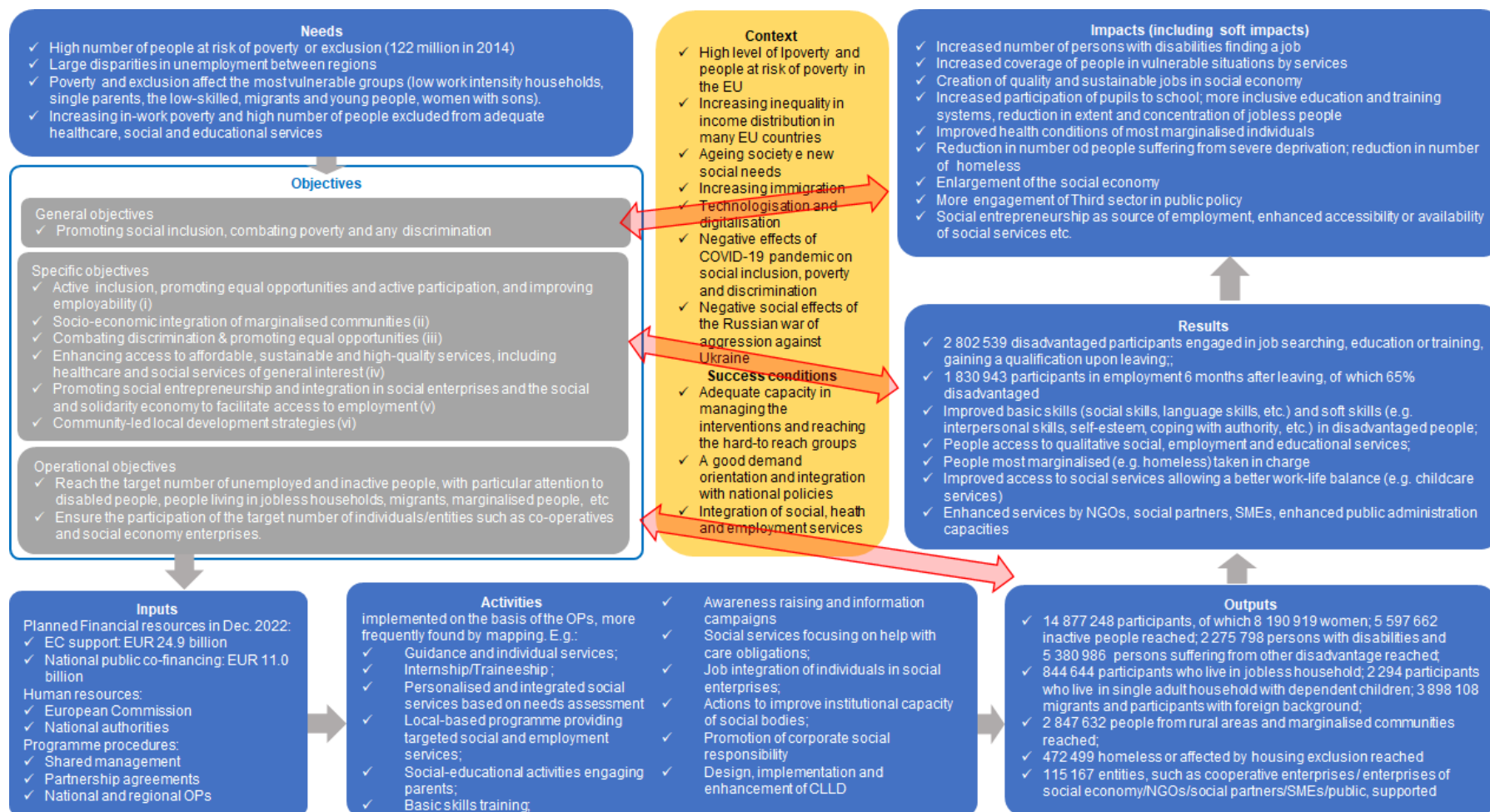
Outputs: TO 9 involved more than 14.8 million people, of which 55% were women. Moreover, the ESF faced significant challenges in involving disadvantaged people in active social inclusion measures, as well as reducing the risk of leaving these people without tangible assistance. In this respect, TO 9 involved a large number of participants from marginalised groups and promoted a more systemic approach to their social inclusion (people with disabilities were the 15% of total participants, migrants 26%, and people with primary or lower secondary education 49%). ESF activity, which was largely based on outreach projects, rather than simply services expected to be accessed by individuals in need, as in national policies, enabled a more flexible and targeted approach to these groups. For instance, the large number of migrants involved in ESF operations highlights the capacity of TO 9 to address new and emerging problems in many countries and regions.

Results: TO 9 activities produced significant results, such as 2.8 million disadvantaged participants engaged in job searching, in education / training, gaining a qualification or in employment, including self-employment, upon leaving ESF activity, 1.7 million participants in employment upon leaving and 1.8 million participants in employment 6 months after leaving. . Other qualitative outcomes included the increased employability and self-empowerment of participants, with these aspects being key factors in facilitating a progressive and sustainable integration of the most disadvantaged participants into the labour market. In addition, in many countries there was a general strengthening of social services, often accompanied by significant social policy reforms.

Impacts: The expected impact of TO 9 was to improve the conditions and activation of the most vulnerable groups in the labour market and to increase the capacity of national institutions and services to address social problems. The results identified, alongside complementary interventions such as the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived, should help to reduce the number of people at risk of poverty and suffering from severe deprivation, as well as having contributed to an improvement in the efficiency and effectiveness of social services. Outcome indicators show a significant success rate in getting people into the labour market, but official statistics show a deterioration in overall social conditions at EU level, indicating a significant but still insufficient impact of ESF and national policies, which account for the bulk of expenditure in this area. More detailed impacts on individual empowerment or estimations of net impacts were not systematically measured under this thematic objective, but case studies showed important impacts on the modernisation and strengthening of social services in many Member States, especially where these services were weaker.

Context: Contextual conditions generally worsened or became very serious during the period (COVID-19 pandemic, increase in income inequalities, new and reinforced migration flows from many different countries), requiring the ESF to respond rapidly and significantly. The increasingly older populations in Member States also increased risks of marginalisation and the demand for social services. In addition, structural trends and polarisation in the labour market in many Member States created new forms of poverty and made social mobility more difficult. These two conditions may have weakened the effects of the ESF or limited them to more “defensive” support.

**Figure A. 8: Intervention Logic of Thematic Objective 9**



Source: Supporting study

### ***TO 10: Investing in education, training and vocational training for skills and life-long learning***

Needs: In 2013, the early school leaving rate stood at almost 12% of the population aged 18 to 24 in the EU 27 and the tertiary educational attainment rate was just below 36% of the population aged 30-34, remaining short of meeting the Europe 2020 targets (less than 10% and at least 40%, respectively). In addition, skill shortages and gaps persisted in large parts of Europe, also linked to the heightened need for digital literacy. At the same time, adult participation in formal, non-formal and informal education and training just reached 10% in 2014<sup>244</sup>. Among the overall needs to be addressed in the 2014-2020 programming period, TO 10 focused on the needs to facilitate access to and reduce dropout rates from education and training and to improve the quality of education systems as well as to align them with social and productive needs where needed. These needs were also reflected in the significant number of CSRs related to the focus of TO 10 investments, accounting for around 25% of the total ESF-related CSRs. These related to the adaptation of education to labour market needs, measures to reduce school dropout rates, the improvement of the quality of education, and fostering of skills development. During this period, additional needs arose due to increasing problems in access to education by migrants and disadvantaged segments of the population, as well as increasing inequality in education provoked by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Objectives: In view of these needs, Thematic Objective 10 promotes a high level of education and training for all, supports the transition between education and employment for young people, enhances social inclusion, and equal opportunities. It includes 4 operational objectives (described under the Investment Priorities) that articulate its strategy, targeting all levels of the education and training systems (including tertiary education and life-long learning), various characteristics thereof (access, efficiency, quality, and labour market relevance) as well as specific groups (young, disadvantaged, workers).

Inputs: By the end of 2022, around EUR 36.3 billion of the ESF and YEI funds had been spent on TO 10 (24.1% of the budget for ESF and YEI), including REACT-EU. The major expenditures were devoted to preventing early school leaving, enhancing life-long learning and improving the education system. Significant expenditure was also directed to support for tertiary education, which accounted for around 15% of the total.

Activities: The classification and analysis of the operations highlighted two main types of activities. Interventions to reduce school drop-out consisted mainly of support for less academically able pupils, for example by promoting alternative dual channels with a strong vocational focus or by reinforcing education and training activities or a combination thereof. Given the needs of this target group, operations also provided highly targeted support, using pathways providing training, qualification, counselling and job placement. To support vocational education and training operations included traditional training activities as well as the promotion of various types of training (formal, informal, and non-formal) and life-long

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<sup>244</sup> This indicator is based on the EU-Labour Force Survey and considers participation in training activities in the last 4 weeks before the interview.

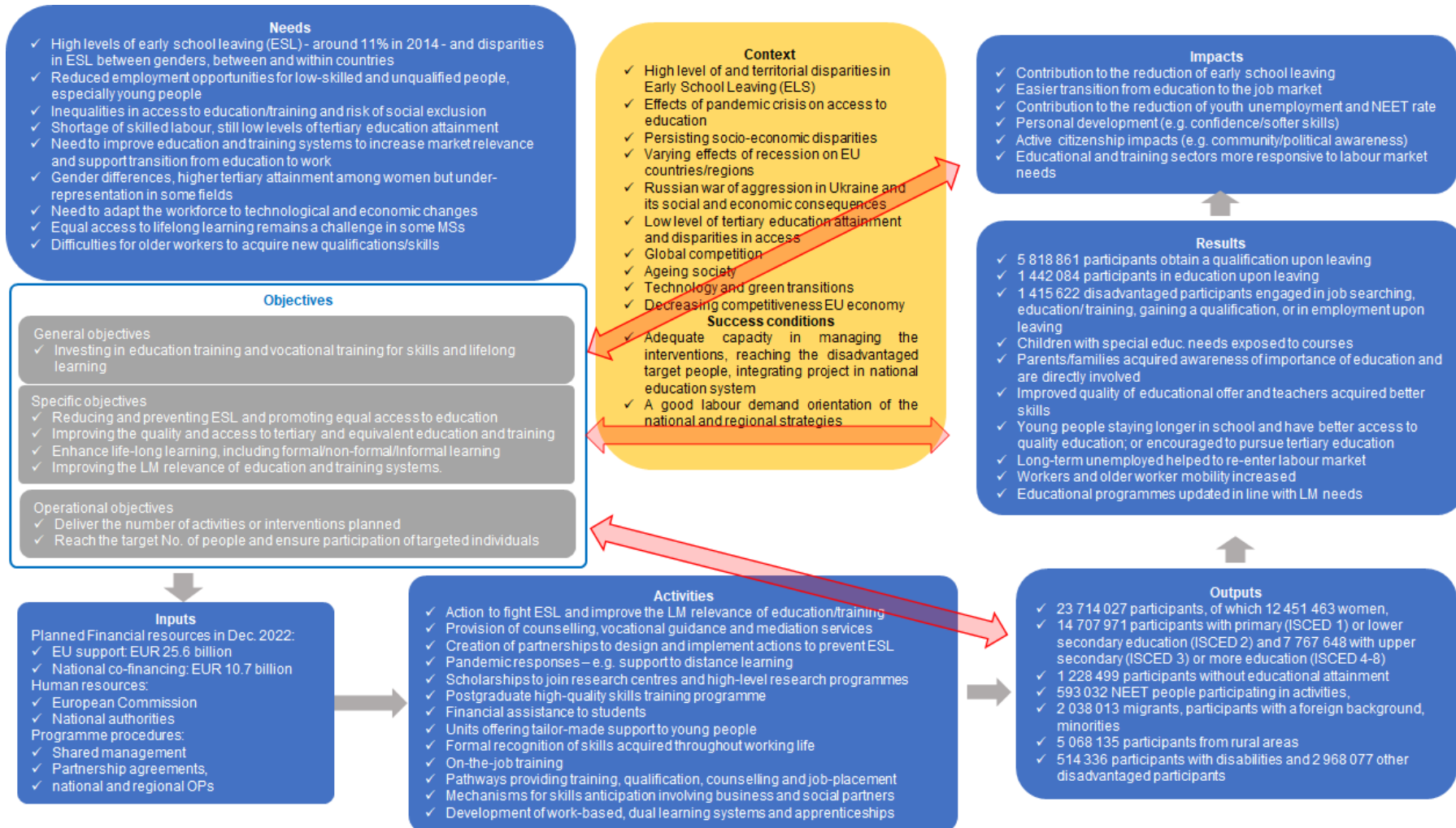
learning. In addition to this, interventions to support tertiary education included the provision of scholarships and post-graduate high-quality skills programmes and operations to increase the labour market relevance of education and training systems were implemented, for example developing mechanisms for skills anticipation. In reaction to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, interventions to accelerate the adoption of e-learning and distance interactions aimed at reducing the resulting increasing inequality in education.

Outputs: Under ESF and YEI, operations under TO 10 supported more almost 24 million participations from 2014 to 2022. Given that this TO mainly involved young persons still in the process of completing their education, 67% of participants were inactive and 62% had primary or secondary education levels. Activities also reached a significant number of persons without any educational attainment record (more than 1 million), NEETs (almost 600 000), persons with disabilities (more than 500 000) as well as migrants, minorities and persons with a foreign background (more than 2 million).

Results: Operations under this TO led to 5.8 million participants gaining a qualification after participating in an ESF-supported intervention, 1.4 million continuing in education or training and over 391 thousand participants engaging in job searching upon leaving. Among the disadvantaged participants, 1.4 million engaged in job searching, were in further education and training or employment, or gained a qualification upon leaving the intervention. In addition, ESF support helped to improve teacher's skills and the quality of education as well as its alignment with labour market needs.

Impacts: Impacts of TO 10 concerned reduced early school leaving, youth unemployment and the NEET rate. It also facilitated the transition from education to the labour market and increased the labour market relevance of education and training programs. Further impacts include the personal development of participants, social inclusion through education and active citizenship effects.

**Figure A. 9: Intervention Logic of Thematic Objective 10**



Source: Supporting study

## ***TO 11 – Enhancing the capability of public authorities and stakeholders and efficient public administration***

Needs: Public administrations play a key role in delivering on common policy objectives and on the EU2020 targets, yet administrative and institutional capacities differ significantly between Member States and are often weak, which can have an adverse impact on the delivery of public services and public and private investments as well as on the implementation of EU funds. In view of technological developments, public administrations are confronted with the need to fundamentally transform their procedures, services and governance models, triggering a need to support reform and restructuring processes and to provide learning and development opportunities for staff. Moreover, stakeholders are important actors in the implementation of ESF interventions, while they often lack the capacity to participate in their design and implementation.

Objectives: Consequently, TO 11 is dedicated to enhancing the institutional capacity of public authorities and of stakeholders and fostering efficient public administrations. To reach this general objective, activities supported under this TO were expected to contribute to building institutional capacity and efficiency of public administrations and public services at the national, regional and local levels to promote reforms for better regulation and good governance (IP11i), and to capacity-building of stakeholders in education, lifelong learning, training and employment and social policies, empowering them to contribute to employment and social policymaking (IP11i), by reaching public administrations and relevant entities directly and by providing relevant (digital) solutions. Both the ESF and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) provided support to activities under TO 11.

Inputs: The total budget allocated to TO 11 amounts to EUR 4.1 billion (EUR 3.2 billion of Union contribution and EUR 0.9 billion represent the national share), representing the lowest budget allocation of all thematic objectives, with 4% of the ESF budget dedicated to supporting capacity building of public authorities and of stakeholders. The large majority of the Union funding is allocated to IP 11i (EUR 3 135 million, which represents 97% of the budget allocated to TO 11), whereas EUR 103 million (3% of the Union budget allocated to TO 11) of the programmed funding supports investments under IP 11ii. More than half of the Member States programmed activities under this TO (in total 18 Member States<sup>245</sup>), and thereby in most cases (for 13 Member States<sup>246</sup>) also addressed relevant CSRs that were directed at them<sup>247</sup>.

Activities: The operations supported under TO 11 reflect an overall focus on skills, the quality of public services and institutional and governance change and largely consist of training

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<sup>245</sup> These were Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, France, Greece, Croatia, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Latvia, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and the United Kingdom.

<sup>246</sup> Of the Member States having programmed activities under TO 11, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Malta, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia received CSRs in the 2012-2014 period aimed at improving the capacity of the public sector.

<sup>247</sup> To note that funding under TO 11 was only available in Member States eligible for the Cohesion Fund or that have at least one less developed region. Consequently, Member States not implementing TO 11 are AT, BE, DE, DK, ES, FI, IE, LU, NL, SE.

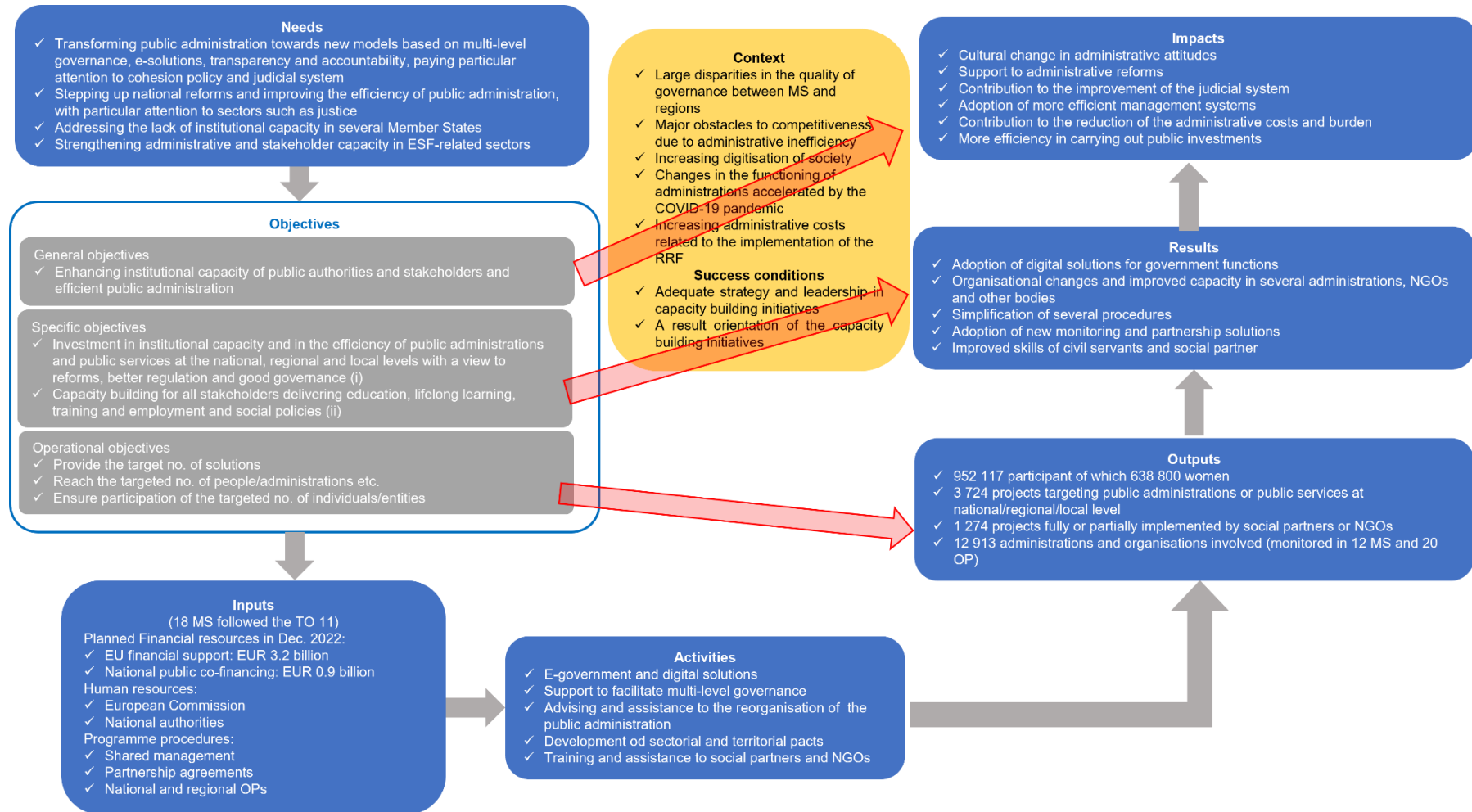
measures, targeting different levels of government as well as social partners and other stakeholders, incl. NGOs. Accordingly, examples of activities implemented include upskilling and training activities, organisational advice (e.g., to support reorganisation processes), technical assistance, the hiring of specialised personnel, and improving the quality and accessibility of public services incl. via digital solutions and e-government services. Notably, activities under TO 11 also contributed to supporting public administrations in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, and activities were also often targeted at the judicial system.

*Outputs:* Under this TO, outputs typically correspond to the number of public officials participating in training and upskilling measures and the number of supported projects to e.g., revise processes in public administrations, in line with the supported activities which primarily focused on the (staff of) institutions and on procedures. Overall, almost 13 000 public administrations and organisations were reached, and in total **952 117** participations were recorded. Support was provided to 3 724 projects targeting public administrations at national, regional or local level, and more than 1 200 projects involved NGOs and social partners.

*Results:* The main results under TO 11 were expected to reflect the enhanced skills and capacities of public officials as well as of social partners and other stakeholders, to enable public administrations to strengthen good governance, and to ensure efficient procedures and public service delivery. Nonetheless, the most telling results under TO 11 were often procedural, such as reductions in the time required for certain administrative procedures, e.g., via revised and/or simplified procedures, the adoption of digital solutions, or the implementation of new IT systems.

*Impacts:* Interventions under TO 11 were expected to contribute to the overall strengthening of public administrations, the judiciary, and civil society organisations, to improve public services, and to support (administrative) reform processes. At the same time, impacts in terms of reduced administrative costs due to a more efficient delivery of public services and investments were also expected.

**Figure A. 10: Intervention Logic of Thematic Objective 11**



Source: Supporting study

***TO 13: 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***

Needs: TO 13 includes all the interventions funded by the Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe (REACT-EU)<sup>248</sup>. The needs to be addressed by TO 13 were the health emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent need for economic recovery that, to a different extent, concerned all Member States.

Inputs: The Recovery assistance for cohesion and the territories of Europe extended the crisis-response and crisis-repair measures delivered through the coronavirus response investment initiative and the coronavirus response investment initiative plus and constitutes a bridge to the long-term recovery plan. The programme supported investment projects that foster crisis-repair capacities and contribute to a green, digital and resilient recovery of the economy, including support for maintaining jobs (by short-time work schemes and support for the self-employed). As part of Next Generation EU, REACT-EU was unique among all anti-crisis initiatives in that it provided additional funding to cohesion policy. Consequently, the funding was programmed in a new thematic objective with a view to structural investments serving longer-term recovery.

In 2022, REACT-EU's scope was expanded to address the needs arising due to people fleeing Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The CARE+ regulation, adopted in April 2022, built upon the earlier CARE framework by providing additional pre-financing to Member States through REACT-EU. This funding aimed to ease the financial strain on Member States receiving the high number of Ukrainians fleeing Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. The regulation also introduced flexible measures, including unit costs for basic needs and support for individuals granted temporary protection. Out of the 187 ESF programmes, 89 used REACT-EU, with a total allocation of 20 billion euro (with almost 100% EU co-financing, national co-financing amounted to EUR 0.2 billion). The 40% ESF share among all REACT-EU funding is significantly higher than the proportions in the whole of cohesion policy (26%).

Activities: In ESF programmes, REACT-EU focussed primarily on

- adaptation of workers, enterprises and entrepreneurs to change (in particular job maintenance through short-time work schemes) and
- reducing and preventing early school-leaving and promoting equal access to good quality early-childhood, primary and secondary education (in particular provision of equipment and facilities to prevent dropouts and reduce inequality due to the pandemic).

The remaining half of ESF REACT-EU included notably support for health system personnel and adaptation of civil servants to new challenges. The common thread of logic in the interventions was the primary aim of longer-term recovery through crisis response. For example, educational equipment and training for personnel and pupils addresses both immediate learning needs in the changed circumstances due to the pandemic, as well as educational inequalities and may serve the digital transition.

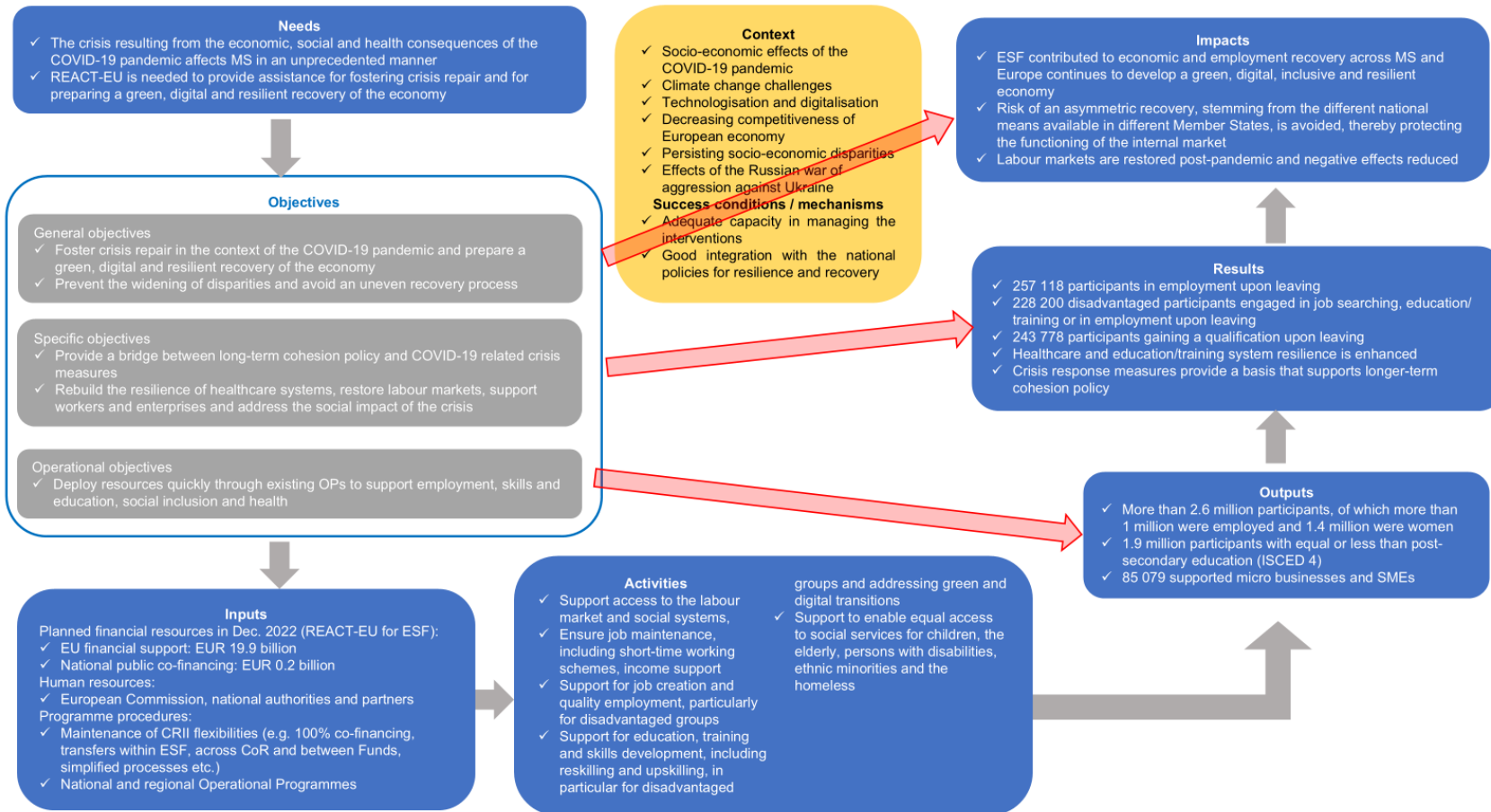
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<sup>248</sup> REACT-EU was adopted in December 2020 as part of the COVID-19 crisis response. REACT-EU is financed by the EU Recovery Plan, Next Generation EU, and serves as a supplement to the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund (ESF) rather than as a new funding instrument

*Outputs:* In 2022, TO 13 recorded around 2.6 million participations, with 43% of participants being employed. The comparatively high share of employed persons reflects the fact that actions to avoid job-losses as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, for example through short time working schemes, were important in the period following REACT-EU's introduction. Of the remaining participants, 28% were inactive, and 29% unemployed. Participants were primarily aged between 25-54 (55%) and had education levels below tertiary education (73%).

*Results:* The common results reflect those specific objectives that aimed at maintaining jobs and adapting personnel in public services: 250 thousand found employment and another 250 thousand gained a qualification. However, the impact on the healthcare system and the twin transitions (green and digital) is less evident from quantitative data.

**Figure A. 11: Intervention Logic of Thematic Objective 13**



Source: Supporting study

## ***The Intervention Logic of YEI***

Needs - The high level of youth unemployment in many countries and regions created a need for specific support, especially after the economic crisis that hit the EU before 2014. The YEI was a specific initiative included in the action of the ESF and provided support to young people living in Member States and regions where youth unemployment was higher than 25%. In particular, the YEI was aimed at supporting NEET young people who face greater difficulties in entering the labour market and are at risk of social exclusion<sup>249</sup>.

Objectives - The YEI's main objective was to support the fight against youth unemployment in the worst-affected EU regions. It targeted all people between the ages of 15 and 24 years old and paid a particular attention to people not in employment, education or training, with Member States given the freedom to decide to extend support to include young people under the age of 30 through the YEI's implementation. YEI only had one specific objective, namely ensuring that all young people under the age of 25 years receive a good-quality offer of employment, continued education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship.

Inputs - The YEI mobilised around EUR 9 billion of EU funding and its interventions were programmed under ESF IP 8ii – YEI (Sustainable integration of young people into the labour market).

Activities - The most frequently funded activities were vocational training, traineeships, apprenticeships, guidance, and support for self-employment. The important focus on young NEET people required development of new strategies and tools to engage this target group.

Outputs - The YEI engaged 3.9 million young people, of whom 49% were young women and 34% were young people with primary or lower secondary education.

Results - 6 months after leaving, some 35% of YEI participants were in employment or self-employment and 11% were in continued education or training programmes leading to a qualification. In general, the expected results on young participants included increased employability through improved skills and active participation in the labour market. In addition, the YEI demonstrated a high capacity to focus EU and national policies on the needs of young people and highlighted the risks of labour market marginality among young people, creating a new awareness of structural bottlenecks to labour market access.

Impacts - YEI resulted in positive impacts on young people's participation in the labour market and on young people's self-empowerment. In the meta-analysis of the counterfactual impact

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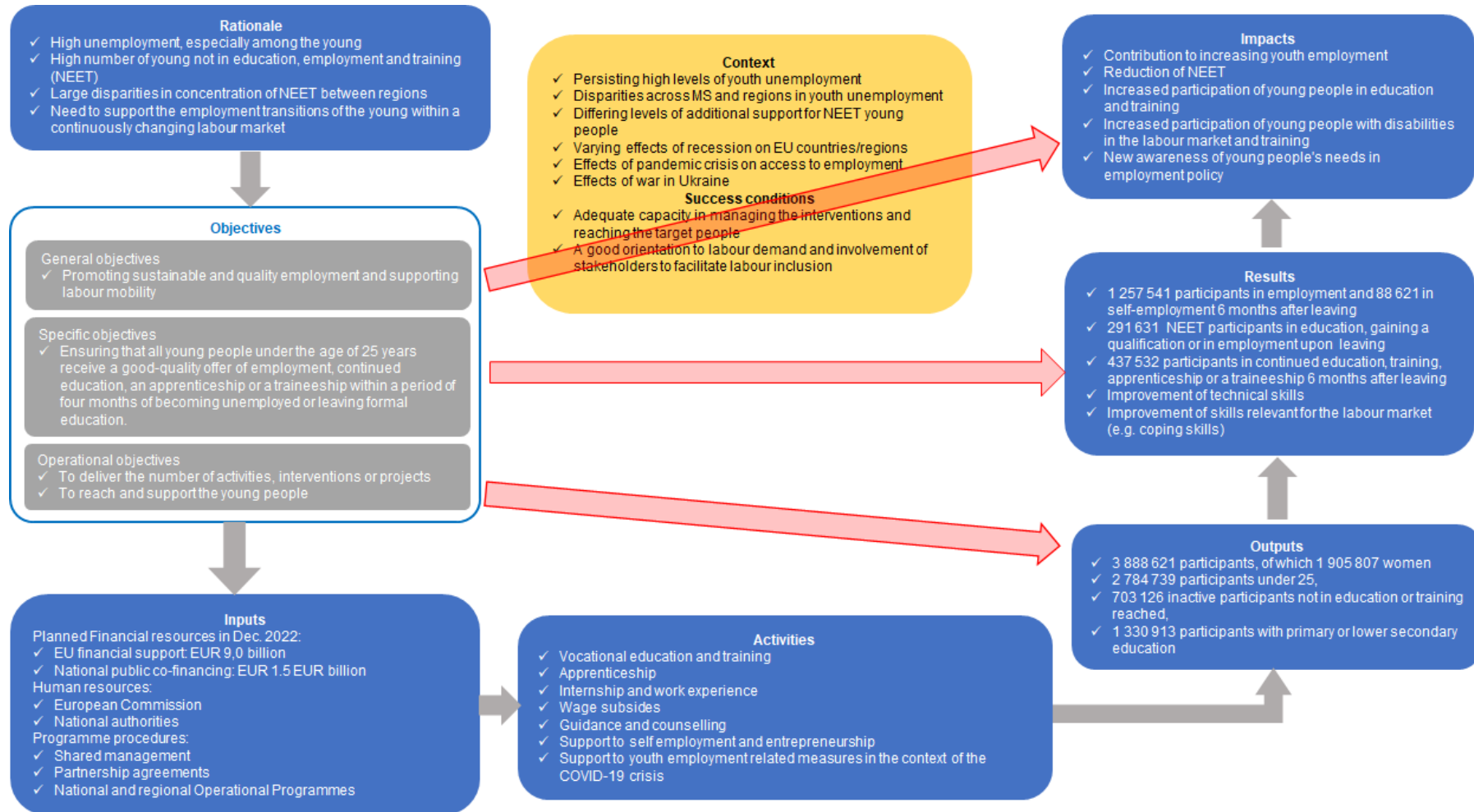
<sup>249</sup> During the programme preparation years, 20 Member States had received a CSR on the need to increase the participation of young people in the labour market.

evaluations<sup>250</sup>, the net impacts for young people were not particularly high in the medium term, but their importance increased in the long term, confirming the benefits on participants' attitudes and behaviour. Finally, it is important to highlight the impact on the design of labour policies, where the youth dimension has gained increasing attention in all Member States, in part via the introduction of a Youth Guarantee supported in many countries implementing the YEI.

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<sup>250</sup> Haepf, T. and Serrano Alarcon, M., Meta-analysis of the European Social Fund counterfactual impact evaluations: Brief update with alternative measures, European Commission, Ispra, 2024, JRC137571, Available at: <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC137571>.

**Figure A. 12: Intervention Logic of YEI**



Source: Supporting Study

## ANNEX II.C: EVALUATION MATRIX

Criteria	Evaluation questions	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Tasks and sources
	<b>To what extent was the EU support successful – or not – and why?</b>			
	1. To what extent have the programme milestones and targets been achieved? What were the main factors involved? How do the achievements relate to the values reported for the common indicators? (To what extent are the achievements indicated by common and programme-specific indicators coherent?)	1. Extent to which milestones and targets have been achieved per TO/IP/fund (including REACT-EU and CARE which will be analysed separately) 2. Relevance and appropriateness of set targets to values reported for common and programme specific indicators 3. Comparison point: ESF and YEI before and after the COVID-19 pandemic/ Targets set in original Operational Programmes	4. Level of achievement of set targets (output and result including soft outcomes) per TO/IP/fund (including REACT-EU and CARE which will be analysed separately) 5. Level of achievement of the performance framework targets 6. Number and type of targets not achieved per MS, OP, TO (including TO 13) and IP 7. Achieved/not achieved targets of common and specific indicators and difference in the performance between TOs, IPs, MS and OPs	T1 Mapping <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Monitoring data (SFC data, Open data platform, Launchpad)</li> </ul> T6 Case studies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interviews</li> <li>Desk analysis of national evaluations/documents (including AIRs as relevant)</li> </ul> T3 Consultation activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stakeholder interviews</li> <li>MAs survey</li> </ul>
<b>Effectiveness</b>	2. How and to what extent did EU support contribute to the achievement of the thematic objectives set in the CPR and the wider EU policies including the Europe 2020 Strategy and the European Pillar of Social Rights as well as more specific EU policies, such as on education and training?	8. Extent to which labour market, education and social inclusion improved during 2014-2020 programming period, also considering the pandemic impact 9. Extent to which the ESF contributed to labour policy, social policy and education policy in terms of: 10. Financial resources 11. Addressed needs 12. Participation (e.g., in LM, education etc.) 13. Actions delivered 14. Comparison point: ESF and YEI before and after the COVID-19 pandemic/ Socio-economic context indicators from 2013 as a baseline before the 2014-2020 programme	15. Average values of socio-economic indicators per country/region, including target indicators of the European 2020 Strategy and of the European Pillar of Social Rights (taking into account the changes before and after the pandemic and, to the extent possible, the war). 16. Relative weight of the ESF expenditure with respect to national policies expenditure 17. Number of participants (people and entities) in ESF interventions in different policy fields (as absolute values and with respect to the relevant context e.g., LM features, tertiary education etc.) 18. Type of operations implemented under each TO/IP	T1 Mapping <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Monitoring data (SFC data, Open data platform, Launchpad) Data on operations (lists of operations and Kohesio)</li> </ul> T2 Context <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Socio-economic data (e.g., Eurostat, OECD, World Bank)</li> <li>Policy expenditure data (e.g., Eurostat, European Commission)</li> </ul>

Criteria	Evaluation questions	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Tasks and sources
3.	To what extent was the EU support used to implement the Country Specific Recommendations?	19. Extent to which the operations supported by ESF met the objectives set out in relevant Country Specific Recommendations	20. Evaluative judgement on the contribution to CSRs according to national Authorities (in the context of case studies, the extent to which ESF contributed to implement CSRs will be assessed). 21. Resources spent for operations being relevant for the CSRs 22. Participants (people and entities) in operations relevant for the CSRs	T2 Context <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mapping of CSRs (also based on previous thematic studies) to reconstruct and understand the needs for structural reforms in the MSs as part of the context</li> </ul>
4.	To what extent were the target groups reached (also geographically) by the operations including disadvantaged persons, especially those from marginalized communities including Roma and those leaving education without qualifications, long-term unemployed, older workers? Factors influencing the reach of the target groups should be explained. How effective was the requirement to allocate a minimum percentage of the budget to social inclusion in reaching the social inclusion target groups?	23. Extent to which disadvantaged persons have been reached by ESF 24. Degree of differentiation of the interventions according to different needs of the target groups 25. Observed relations between the reach of the target groups and the ways of delivering the ESF support, especially for those disadvantaged. 26. Innovation, experimented by MS/Regions, in dealing with disadvantaged groups through the ESF 27. Comparison point: ESF and YEI before and after the COVID-19 pandemic/ Targets set in original Operational Programmes/ ESF and YEI during the previous programming period between 2007-2013	28. Number and characteristics of people who improved their situation upon leaving the ESF intervention in terms of participation in the labour market, self-employment, skills, participation in education and training, qualification attainment, access to services for more disadvantaged, etc. by TO/IP 29. Coverage rate of target groups such as unemployed women, NEETs, unemployed, low-educated persons, Roma, long terms unemployed and older workers, etc. by TO/IP 30. Characteristics of the interventions delivered for different target groups, also considering the type of actors involved 31. Factors emerged from the field work influencing the reach of the target groups (taking into account, to the extent possible, the changes before and after the pandemic and the war). 32. Whether and to what extent, according to key stakeholders, the minimum budget allocated to social inclusion had a critical mass effect compared to the past (2007-13)	T6 Case studies on IPs of TO 8, 9, 10 and YEI T1 Mapping <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Monitoring data (SFC data, Open data platform, Launchpad)</li> </ul> T2 Context <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Socio-economic data (e.g., Eurostat, OECD, World Bank)</li> <li>Policy expenditure data (e.g., Eurostat, European Commission)</li> </ul> T3 Consultation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stakeholder interviews</li> <li>MAs survey</li> </ul> T6 Case studies on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>IPs of TO 8, 9, 10 and YEI</li> <li>CRII, REACT-EU and CARE</li> </ul> T7 Focus groups <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Managing Authorities and stakeholders</li> </ul>

Criteria	Evaluation questions	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Tasks and sources
5.	Which changes (intended and unintended) did the EU support bring to the target groups (both individuals and entities)? How were these changes, including soft outcomes, assessed and used? Which types of operation are or were the most/least effective, for which groups and gender and in which contexts?	<p>33. Identified effects (intended and unintended) are aligned with the objectives of the ESF</p> <p>34. Changes concerning the condition of participants, including soft outcomes (e.g., personal and interpersonal, organisational, analytical skills) are explained/not explained by the relevant theory of change</p> <p>35. Changes occurred have/have not influenced the implementation of the OPs</p> <p>36. Results achieved by ESF depend on the type of operation financed or/and the target group or/and the context</p>	<p>37. Level of achievement of the targets, broken down by gender</p> <p>38. Evaluative judgment based on evidence from specific indicators/evaluations/case studies/participant survey on participant changes achieved, including soft outcomes (e.g., using scoring systems and scales aimed at measuring outcomes systematically and numerically).</p> <p>39. Evaluative judgement based on level of effectiveness at IP level, as resulting from indicators, case studies and participant survey, in different national and, where necessary, regional contexts (taking into account, to the extent possible, the changes before and after the pandemic and the war).</p> <p>40. Changes in output/outcome/result indicators by IP, intervention and across target groups identified and explained by available evaluations</p> <p>41. Number and value of interventions defined or modified drawing on findings of the evaluations</p>	<p>T1 Mapping</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Monitoring data (SFC data, Open data platform, Launchpad)</li> </ul> <p>T3 Consultation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Public consultation</li> </ul> <p>T5 Impact analysis</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>CIEs</li> </ul> <p>T6 Case studies on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>IPs of TO 8, 9, 10 and YEI</li> <li>Desk analysis of EU and national evaluations/documents (including AIRs as relevant)</li> </ul> <p>T7 Focus groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Managing Authorities and stakeholders</li> </ul>
6.	Which factors facilitate or hinder the effectiveness of ESF operations? Rank these factors by order of importance and justify your ranking. In particular, how does the implementation framework in Member States/regions encourage/discourage the participation of beneficiaries?	<p>42. Evaluative judgement on the basis of evidence collected as to potential barriers/success factors underlying outputs and results, distinguished by target group, especially those further away from labour market and at risk of exclusion or discrimination</p>	<p>43. Factors more frequently reported by MAs, stakeholders, evaluations, studies on TOs to explain success/unsuccess of operations and supported by clear justifications and robust evidence</p> <p>44. Ranking of facilitating/hindering factors by various dimensions (e.g., geographical, TO, IP, type of operation, features of implementation framework etc.)</p> <p>45. Evaluative judgement on IPs or/and OPs which have mostly encountered difficulties and challenges in the reach of target groups</p>	<p>T3 Consultation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>MAs survey</li> </ul> <p>T6 Case studies on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>IPs of TO 8, 9, 10 and YEI</li> <li>Desk analysis of EU and national evaluations/documents (including AIRs as relevant)</li> </ul> <p>T7 Focus groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Managing Authorities and stakeholders</li> </ul>

Criteria	Evaluation questions	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Tasks and sources
7.	To what extent did the EU support contribute to structural changes in employment, social inclusion and education policies and systems in the EU and UK as a whole and in Member States and regions in particular?	46. Evaluative judgement on the basis of all evidence collated as to the contribution to structural change in EU, in MS and at regional level. 47. Comparison point: ESF and YEI before and after the COVID-19 pandemic/ Targets set in original Operational Programmes/ ESF and YEI during the previous programming period between 2007-2013	48. Findings of the contribution analysis about the role of the ESF in: 49. reducing disparities/promoting structural changes in employment, education/training (e.g., in terms of improving education outcomes, improving quality of education, reducing early school leaving, increasing tertiary education attainment, improving digital skills, enhancing participation in ECEC), social inclusion at regional level, 50. fostering positive changes – or limiting negative ones – in relation to objectives of the wider European policies, 51. countering effects of the pandemic crisis. 52. Findings from the assessment of the contribution to the implementation of the CSRs	T2 Context <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Analysis of CSRs</li> </ul> T3 Consultation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stakeholder interviews</li> </ul> T6 Case studies on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>IPs of TO 8, 9, 10 and YEI</li> <li>CRII, REACT-EU and CARE</li> <li>Horizontal principles and Social Innovation</li> </ul> T7 Focus groups <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Managing Authorities and stakeholders</li> </ul>
8.	What was the concrete contribution of EU support to the implementation of the horizontal principles and social innovation?	53. Extent to which horizontal principles influenced the design of intervention, the selection of the operations and the evaluation process 54. Extent to which ESF contributed concretely to implementation of horizontal principles and social innovation 55. Comparison point: ESF and YEI during the previous programming period between 2007-2013	56. Number and types of actors representing gender, environment and civil society involved in delivery ESF support 57. Specific needs of women and discriminated groups addressed by ESF 58. Number and value of operations/projects which experimented social innovation	T3 Consultation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stakeholder interview</li> <li>MAs survey</li> </ul> T6 Case studies on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Horizontal principles and Social Innovation</li> </ul>
9.	What other socio-economic impacts can be identified from EU support, both at micro and macro levels?	59. Extent to which it is estimated that ESF impacted on GDP and other macroeconomic variables (e.g., employment), and brought about further effects on individuals	60. Evidence on micro and macro impacts based on CIEs and the RHOMOLO model.	T5 Impact analysis <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>CIEs including the meta-analysis</li> <li>Macro impacts (RHOMOLO)</li> </ul>
10.	To what extent did the operations introduced by CRII and CRII+, REACT EU and CARE manage to address the negative social effects of the crises?	61. Extent to which the ESF has met the needs brought about the pandemic outbreak and promptness of the support	64. Value of resources spent scope and type of financed operations	T1 Mapping <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>SFC data</li> <li>Data on lists of operations</li> </ul>

Criteria	Evaluation questions	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Tasks and sources
<b>Efficiency</b>		<p>62. Extent to which the ESF has met the needs brought about by the consequences of the Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine</p> <p>63. Comparison point: ESF and YEI before and after the COVID-19 pandemic</p>	<p>65. Number of additional responses using flexibilities without formal OP amendments</p> <p>66. Number of MSs and no. of amendments using simplified OP amendment process</p> <p>67. Number of participants and entities supported in combating or counteracting the effects of COVID-19</p> <p>68. Number of participants who benefited from support in short-time work arrangements</p> <p>69. Number of participants maintaining their jobs 6 months after the end of support; and gaining a qualification upon leaving, supported in actions combating the effects of COVID-19</p> <p>70. Number of health care personnel who benefitted from ESF support</p> <p>71. Number of people vaccinated with EU support</p> <p>72. Value of COVID-19 relevant items purchased (e.g., medical equipment, medicines, IT equipment)</p> <p>73. Value of all vaccination costs</p> <p>74. Evaluative judgement: stakeholders' opinion about alternative scenarios with no ESF investments faced the socio-economic effects of the pandemic and the war</p>	<p>T6 Case studies on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CRII, REACT-EU and CARE</li> </ul>
	11. To what extent were operations cost-effective? What types of operation were the most/least cost-effective? Why?	<p>75. Extent to which the invested resources were appropriate (benefits greater than costs) with respect to achievements</p> <p>76. Differences between IPs regarding the cost/benefits ratio were relevant</p>	<p>77. Unit costs per output and results (for each TO and for each IP at EU level)</p> <p>78. Direct and indirect costs of interventions and IPs</p> <p>79. Direct and indirect benefits of interventions and IPs</p>	<p>T1 Mapping</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitoring data (SFC data, Open data platform, Launchpad) Data on lists of operations</li> </ul> <p>T4 Cost-Effectiveness</p>

Criteria	Evaluation questions	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Tasks and sources
	12. Are there significant cost differences between Member States/Regions in the implementation of the operations? Why?	80. Extent to which the costs disproportionately differ across Member States/Regions 81. Influence of contextual factors and administrative frameworks on costs/benefits ratio	82. Comparison of costs/benefits, in terms of type and scope, per OP and comparison of results for a sample of OPs 83. Comparison of the components articulating the costs (direct and indirect) between MS/Regions in order to identify and explain any difference resulted from the analysis of cost-effectiveness	T4 Cost-Effectiveness T6 Case studies
	13. Was there unnecessary administrative burden, in particular gold plating? To what extent did simplifications proposed by the Commission, such as the simplified cost options and joint action plans, improve the efficiency of the operations? Which other good practices to reduce unnecessary administrative burden can be identified?	84. Differences in delivery mechanisms and relative variation in the administrative burden among MS/OPs. 85. Whether the procedures adopted by MAs exceeded what the ESIF's regulation requested or required more input (e.g., human resources) to comply with the additional national obligations. 86. Extent to which MS/Regions have adopted simplification solutions, for what IP and, if/where feasible, operations	87. Administrative burden stemming from legal obligations 88. Relevant differences in timing implementation of interventions reported by actors 89. Tentative identification of OPs and, if feasible, of operations which applied simplification options and/or experimented further solutions 90. Key features of good practices implemented to reduce unnecessary administrative burden	T4 Cost-Effectiveness T6 Case studies
	14. To what extent did the monitoring and reporting systems of Member States provide quality data on a regular basis? Has this occurred at a reasonable cost? Under which conditions could the costs have been lower?	91. Extent to which monitoring data reflected/was up to date to what was happening on the ground 92. Extent to which the indicators have been regularly quantified 93. Extent to which the benefits are greater than the costs 94. Administrative burden linked to the monitoring/reporting	95. Degree of digitalisation of the monitoring, reported by actors (e.g., measured by the use of a comprehensive IT system for data collection and reporting, real-time data transfer into the ESF national system etc.) 96. Monitoring data provided by MS during the period and missing values 97. Good practices of data collection, validation and transfer 98. Difference between benefits and costs of monitoring/reporting	T1 Mapping • Monitoring data (SFC data, Open data platform, Launchpad) T4 Cost-Effectiveness T6 Case studies
<b>Coherence</b>	15. To what extent was the dedicated EU support internally coherent?	99. Whether the interventions were aligned with the IP under which they were financed 100. Whether interventions were or were not duplicated	102. Number and value of interventions implemented under different OPs and/or different IPs being similar as to eligible area, target group, type and intensity of the support	T1 Mapping • Monitoring data (SFC data, Open data platform, Launchpad) T3 Consultation • Stakeholder interview

Criteria	Evaluation questions	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Tasks and sources
16.	To what extent was the dedicated EU support coherent with other EU funds?	101. Comparison point: ESF and YEI before and after the COVID-19 pandemic/ Findings of interim thematic evaluation reports completed/ESF and YEI during the previous programming period between 2007-2013/Findings from other related research or evaluations at EU or national level	103. Evaluative judgement on linkages, synergies and/or complementarities within the OPs and between NOPs and ROPs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>MAs survey</li> </ul> T6 Case studies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interviews with Managing Authorities</li> </ul>
		104. Extent to which ESF complements or integrates other EU funds	106. Number and value of ESF interventions linked with other interventions co-financed by FEAD or EGF or AMIF or - where appropriate - other EU funds such as ERDF.	T6 Case studies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interviews with national policy makers (e.g., minister representatives and MAs)</li> <li>Analysis of National strategic documents</li> </ul>
		105. Comparison point: ESF and YEI before and after the COVID-19 pandemic/ Findings of interim thematic evaluation reports completed/ESF and YEI during the previous programming period between 2007-2013/Findings from other related research or evaluations at EU or national level	107. Number of local strategies, partnerships, etc. using ESF and other EU funds in a complementary manner	
17.	To what extent was the dedicated EU support coherent with other EU policies?	108. Whether the ESF operations were aligned or contributed to other EU policies per TO	110. Number and value of ESF interventions clearly referred to other EU policy	T1 Mapping <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Data on lists of operations</li> </ul>
		109. Comparison point: ESF and YEI before and after the COVID-19 pandemic/ Findings of interim thematic evaluation reports completed/ESF and YEI during the previous programming period between 2007-2013/Findings from other related research or evaluations at EU or national level	111. Value of resources allocated for type of actions aligned to or contributing to other EU policies	T6 Case studies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Analysis of National Strategic documents</li> </ul>
18.	To what extent was the dedicated support coherent with other national/regional level activities?	112. Extent to which ESF interventions were planned to make a reference to other national/regional strategies and plans	114. Evaluative judgement based on documentary evidence	T6 Case studies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strategic documents (es. National Reform Programmes)</li> <li>Programme's documents</li> <li>Desk analysis of national evaluations/documents (including AIRs as relevant)</li> </ul>
		113. Comparison point: ESF and YEI before and after the COVID-19 pandemic/ Findings of interim thematic	115. Number of national/regional plans for employment, inclusion, education, administrative capacity which envisaged interventions financed under ESF	

Criteria	Evaluation questions	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Tasks and sources
		evaluation reports completed/ESF and YEI during the previous programming period between 2007-2013/Findings from other related research or evaluations at EU or national level		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interviews with Managing Authorities</li> </ul>
<b>116.</b>	<b>Is the intervention still relevant?</b>			
	19. To what extent were the objectives and the operations funded by the EU support relevant to the needs of the target groups?	<p>117. The degree to which the ESF funded objectives and operations focused on the needs of the target groups identified in the programming documents</p> <p>118. Comparison point: ESF and YEI before and after the COVID-19 pandemic/ Findings of interim thematic evaluation reports/ESF and YEI during the previous programming period between 2007-2013/Findings from other related research or evaluations at EU or national level</p>	<p>119. Number of participants (people and entities) supported by ESF belonging to the target groups (taking into account, to the extent possible, the changes before and after the pandemic and the war).</p> <p>120. Evaluative judgement based on contents and scope of the operations financed to address the target groups</p>	<p>T1 Mapping</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Monitoring data (SFC data, Open data platform, Launchpad)</li> </ul> <p>T2 Context</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Socio-economic data (e.g., Eurostat, OECD, World Bank)</li> <li>Policy expenditure data (e.g., Eurostat, European Commission)</li> </ul> <p>T6 Case studies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Data and other secondary resources at MS level</li> <li>Desk analysis of national evaluations/documents (including AIRs as relevant)</li> <li>MAs survey</li> </ul>
<b>Relevance</b>	20. Were the most relevant groups in the different socio-economic contexts adequately prioritised and targeted, starting from the design stage? Which target groups were not reached and why?	<p>121. The extent to which the target groups were clearly identified, and reached, in the different stages:</p> <p>122. needs assessment,</p> <p>123. programming,</p> <p>124. design,</p> <p>125. implementation,</p> <p>126. monitoring.</p> <p>127. Comparison point: ESF and YEI before and after the COVID-19 pandemic</p>	<p>128. Characteristics of the ESF participants (people and entities)</p> <p>129. Number and types of groups mainly supported by the ESF under each IP in various Member States (taking into account, to the extent possible, the changes before and after the pandemic).</p> <p>130. Evaluation judgement, successfully addressed challenges concerning target groups</p> <p>131. Barriers which hampered the reach of the target groups</p>	<p>T1 Mapping</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Monitoring data (SFC data, Open data platform, Launchpad)</li> </ul> <p>T2 Context</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Socio-economic data (e.g., Eurostat, OECD, World Bank)</li> <li>Policy expenditure data (e.g., Eurostat, European Commission)</li> </ul> <p>T6 Case studies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Data and other secondary resources at MS level</li> </ul>

Criteria	Evaluation questions	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Tasks and sources
				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Desk analysis of national evaluations/documents (including AIRs as relevant)</li> <li>Interviews with Managing Authorities and other stakeholders</li> </ul>
21.	How and to what extent was partnership and multi-level governance implemented? To what extent have the stakeholders closest to the needs of the target groups (such as non-governmental organisations, social partners, training providers) been involved? Were these stakeholders encouraged to be involved, and by whom (e.g., EU/national level, regional level etc) and how?	<p>132. Extent to which the stakeholders have been involved in different stages</p> <p>133. Whether and how the Authorities put in place adequate actions to engage stakeholders</p> <p>134. Extent to which the involvement of the stakeholders allowed an enhancement of the ESF programming</p> <p>135. Comparison point: ESF and YEI before and after the COVID-19 pandemic/ Findings of interim thematic evaluation reports/ESF and YEI during the previous programming period between 2007-2013/Findings from other related research or evaluations at EU or national level</p>	<p>136. Number and value of actions aimed at involving the stakeholders during the whole programming (taking into account, to the extent possible, the changes before and after the pandemic).</p> <p>137. Number and type of stakeholders involved in designing, selecting operations and monitoring</p> <p>138. Evaluative judgement on contributions given by the stakeholders to the ESF programming and implementation</p>	<p>T3 Consultation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>National stakeholder targeted survey</li> </ul> <p>T6 Case studies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Case study on partnerships and social innovation</li> <li>Desk analysis of national evaluations/documents (including AIRs as relevant)</li> </ul> <p>T7 Focus groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Managing Authorities and stakeholders</li> </ul>
22.	To what extent were OPs flexible and able to adapt to changes in the implementation context or political priorities at EU and country level, in particular the crisis linked to the pandemic or the Ukrainian crisis?	<p>139. Extent to which the OPs have proved a continuity relevance to needs during the period.</p> <p>140. Whether the OPs have supported actions to face the immediate needs and/or the socio-economic effects of the pandemic and of the war against Ukraine.</p>	<p>141. Changes in (evolution of) needs addressed by OPs (taking into account, to the extent possible, the changes before and after the pandemic).</p> <p>142. Number of new target groups addressed and/or target groups having benefited from stronger support by ESF</p> <p>143. Amount of financial resources allocated for new type of operations</p>	<p>T1 Mapping</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Monitoring data (SFC data, Open data platform, Launchpad)</li> </ul> <p>T3 Consultation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>National stakeholder targeted survey</li> <li>Stakeholder interviews</li> </ul> <p>T6 Case studies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Data and other secondary resources at MS level</li> <li>Case study on partnerships and social innovation</li> </ul>

Criteria	Evaluation questions	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Tasks and sources
				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Case studies on CRII, REACT-EU and CARE</li> <li>Interviews with Managing Authorities</li> </ul>
				T7 Focus groups <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Managing Authorities and stakeholders</li> </ul>
23.	Were the changes and measures introduced by CRII and CRII+, REACT-EU and CARE relevant to MS needs in order to react to crises? Which changes and measures were the most appropriate? Which other changes and measures would have been useful (if any)?	144. Extent to which the OPs were re-programmed to deal with the crisis. 145. Degree to which the ESF pursued objectives and financed operations focused on new needs due to the crisis 146. Extent to which the introduced measures have contributed to contain the pandemic and alleviate its socio-economic effects 147. Extent to which the introduced measures have contributed to address the consequences of the war against Ukraine 148. Evaluative judgement on the basis of evidence collated on the degree to which the needs of target groups were met or not in practice and why 149. Comparison point: ESF and YEI before and after the COVID-19 pandemic	150. Evaluative judgement based on evidence from programming documents 151. Number and types of groups mostly hit by the crisis which have not been supported (es. unemployed previously in employment, medical staff, independent workers, students, etc.) 152. Number of new groups benefiting from introduced measures and type of support provided to them 153. Number and types of needs due to the pandemic effects according to the stakeholder' opinion not addressed by the ESF 154. Any needs due to the effects of the war according to the stakeholder' opinion not addressed by the ESF	T1 Mapping <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Monitoring data (SFC data, Open data platform, Launchpad)</li> </ul> T3 Consultation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>National stakeholder targeted survey</li> </ul> T6 Case studies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Case study on partnerships and social innovation</li> <li>Case studies on CRII, REACT-EU and CARE</li> <li>Interviews with Managing Authorities and other stakeholders</li> <li>Desk analysis of national evaluations/documents (including AIRs as relevant)</li> </ul> T7 Focus groups <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Managing Authorities and stakeholders</li> </ul>
24.	Are there any future trends including megatrends (such as demographic change, migration etc.) that could affect the future relevance of the ESF programmes and how?	155. Whether future trends could bring about structural changes in the context, making, for example, more relevant to the ESF objectives targets such as older migrants, older workers and so on	156. Statistics and evaluative judgement based on socio-economic demographic trends, based on available studies 157. Statistics and evaluative judgement based on evidence on global trends triggered by the pandemic and Ukrainian crisis	T2 Context <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Socio-economic data (e.g., Eurostat, OECD, World Bank)</li> <li>Policy expenditure data (e.g., Eurostat, European Commission)</li> </ul> T3 Consultation:

Criteria	Evaluation questions	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Tasks and sources
158.	<p><b>How did the EU intervention make a difference and to whom?</b></p> <p>25. To what extent did EU support produce effects at national and regional levels that would otherwise not have taken place without it?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>Volume effects:</b> Have the operations added to existing actions or directly produced beneficial effects that can be measured in terms of volume?</li> <li>○ <b>Scope effects:</b> Have the operations broadened existing actions by addressing groups, systems or policy areas that would otherwise not have been addressed?</li> <li>○ <b>Role effects:</b> Have the operations supported innovation and the transfer of ideas that have been subsequently rolled out in different contexts? To what extent has the EU support contributed to structural changes in national systems promoting employment, social inclusion and education and training?</li> <li>○ <b>Process effects:</b> Have Member State administrations and participating organisations derived benefits from being involved in the operations? To what extent are the effects of EU support likely to continue after the end of the funding, both at</li> </ul>	<p>159. Volume effects: The ESF has increased the number of participants (people and entities) to national/regional policies and/or the geographical coverage of the policies.</p> <p>160. Scope effects: compared to existing actions, the degree to which ESF has reached new groups or harder-to-reach groups, provided more opportunities of support, supported systems with specific actions, developed/extended policy areas.</p> <p>161. Role effects: the extent to which the ESF operations have supported the transfer of new ideas and innovation or/and contributed to structural changes.</p> <p>162. Process effects: the extent to which the ESF has brought about sustainable changes in the cooperation between administrations and other entities, integration between policy systems (e.g., social assistance and employment services, education and training, etc.) and empowerment of the actors involved in the operations.</p> <p>163. Comparison point: ESF and YEI before and after the COVID-19 pandemic/ Findings of interim thematic evaluation reports/ESF and YEI during the previous programming period</p>	<p>VOLUME</p> <p>164. 'Gross' volume effects in terms of scale of output and results data (taking into account, to the extent possible, the changes before and after the pandemic and the war).</p> <p>165. CIE evidence from MS evaluations on 'net' volume effects (analysis to be carried out at IP level to the extent possible)</p> <p>SCOPE</p> <p>166. Proportion of specific groups reached by the ESF (or groups that would not have been supported otherwise)</p> <p>167. Extension in access to services (or services that would not have been offered otherwise)</p> <p>168. New types of activities and services provided by the ESF, in particular for hard-to-reach groups</p> <p>ROLE</p> <p>169. Number and value of ESF actions mainstreamed into national/regional policies, activities or interventions</p> <p>170. Number and value of new policy instruments and services</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• National stakeholder targeted survey</li> </ul> <p>T7 Focus groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managing Authorities and stakeholders</li> </ul> <p>T1 Mapping:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitoring data (SFC data, Open data platform, Launchpad)</li> </ul> <p>T3 Consultation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• National stakeholder</li> <li>• Targeted survey</li> </ul> <p>T5 Impact analysis</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CIEs</li> <li>• RHOMOLO estimations</li> </ul> <p>T6 Case studies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EU strategic documents</li> <li>• Desk analysis of national evaluations/documents (including AIRs, National Partnerships agreements, National Social Strategies, CSR and relevant literature as relevant)</li> </ul> <p>T7 Focus group</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managing Authorities and stakeholders</li> </ul>
				<p><b>EU added value</b></p>

Criteria	Evaluation questions	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Tasks and sources
	individual, institutional and policy levels?	between 2007-2013/Findings from other related research or evaluations at EU or national level	171. Evaluative judgement based on evidence of structural changes in national systems promoting TO 8, TO 9, TO 10 or TO 11  PROCESS  172. Evaluative judgement on enhanced capacity of the administrations 173. Number and value of actions developed integrating services and activities 174. Number of new strategies and partnerships established	
26.	What are the key results and impacts of the ESF programme that made a difference in comparison with the previous programming period?	175. Extent to which the ESF made a difference in 2014-2020 assuming as comparison point key results of the previous programming period.  176. Comparison point: ESF and YEI during the previous programming period between 2007-2013	177. Variation in the values of results and output indicators (including soft outcomes, where available, measured using scoring systems and scales) in 2007-2013 and 2014-2020. 178. Variation in micro and macro impacts between 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 179. Qualitative evidence based on the perception of the stakeholders	T3 Consultation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>National stakeholder</li> </ul> T6 Case studies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Desk analysis of national evaluations/documents (including AIRs, National Partnerships agreements, National Social Strategies, CSR and relevant literature as relevant)</li> </ul> T7 Focus group <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Managing Authorities and stakeholders</li> </ul>
27.	To which group(s) of stakeholders did the ESF programme make a tangible difference in comparison with the previous programming period?	180. More involvement of stakeholders belonging to civil society, ONGs, etc. or public administration which were little or not involved in the previous programming period.  181. Comparison point: ESF and YEI during the previous programming period between 2007-2013	182. Number and type of stakeholder involved 183. Evaluative judgement based on the role of the different stakeholders in design, implementing and monitoring/assessing the ESF measures	T3 Consultation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stakeholders</li> </ul> T6 Case studies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interviews</li> <li>Desk analysis of national evaluations/documents (including AIRs as relevant)</li> </ul>
28.	To what extent are the effects of the EU support likely to continue after the end of the funding, at participant,	184. Scope of long-term effects from CIEs (micro-level) and macro	186. Net effects at micro level of the ESF measures 187. Macro effects of the ESF	T5 Impact analysis <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Counterfactual evaluations</li> <li>RHOMOLO estimations</li> </ul>

Criteria	Evaluation questions	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Tasks and sources
<b>Sustainability, visibility and simplification</b>	organizational and/or policy levels? Is there a trend of transfer towards new funds such as the JTF and RRF?	impacts of the ESF RHOMOLO results (macro-level). 185. Extent to which the changes occurred at organisational and policy levels are enduring	188. Number of practices and solutions transferred to new funds	T3 Consultation: • Targeted survey  T6 Case studies • Interviews • Desk analysis of national evaluations/documents
	29. To what extent has the EU support contributed to sustainable structural changes in national systems supporting employment, social inclusion and education and training?	189. Extent to which systems supporting employment, social inclusion, education and training have implemented new organisational solutions and addressed new objectives and new targets	190. Number of (and qualitative evidence on) systemic changes brought about by the ESF at the level of: 191. organisation 192. type of services 193. approach, methods and tools 194. skills 195. administrative capacity 196. policy (e.g., structural reforms supported for instance in terms of curricular reforms, funding scheme of schools, organisation of teacher education and training quality development of ECEC)	T3 Consultation: • National stakeholder  T6 Case studies (in this context of case studies, the extent to which ESF contributed to implement reforms will be assessed) • Interviews • Desk analysis of national evaluations/documents T7 Focus groups • Managing Authorities and stakeholders
	30. How visible to the public (in general and per MS/region/stakeholder group in particular) are ESF funded operations and YEI?	198. Visibility of the ESF among national/regional institutions and different groups of stakeholders	197. 199. Evaluative judgement on the visibility and external knowledge of the ESF in terms of: 200. Role and objective of the ESF 201. Scope and volume of the support provided 202. Results achieved 203. Extent to which supported individuals/organizations are aware that the support received is co-financed by the EU via ESF	T3 Consultation: • Participant survey • National stakeholder • Targeted survey  T6 Case studies • Interviews • Desk analysis of national evaluations/documents
	31. To what extent were processes in MS (e.g., selection processes, governance	204. Extent to which the simplification solutions have been utilised	206. Share of resources unspent	T6 Case studies • Interviews

Criteria	Evaluation questions	Judgement criteria	Indicators	Tasks and sources
	processes etc.) be simplified? (to complement questions on efficiency)	205. Extent to which the ESF entailed administrative burden exceeding the capacity of both administrations and stakeholders	207. Number and types of problems encountered by the Managing Authorities 208. Number and types of problems encountered by the beneficiaries in reporting the expenditures and in monitoring the intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Desk analysis of national evaluations/documents (including AIRs as relevant)</li> <li>T7 Focus groups</li> <li>Managing Authorities and stakeholders</li> </ul>

Source: Supporting study

## ANNEX II.D: ADMINISTRATIVE COSTS

Administrative costs were calculated on the basis of a 2018 study<sup>251</sup> on ESIF administrative costs and burden. The data was obtained from the survey of programme authorities and beneficiaries. In total, 114 ESF programme authorities were surveyed including 17 authorities involved in programme preparation, 35 managing authorities, 25 certifying authorities and paying agencies and 38 audit authorities and certification bodies. The data gaps (data on the administrative costs of authorities who did not reply) were filled with data from similar respondents<sup>252</sup>.

The sample used to estimate the administrative burden for beneficiaries was relatively small. Only 66 ESF beneficiaries responded to the survey, and the variance was high. No YEI beneficiaries were included among the respondents; therefore, it was assumed that the cost per million euros spent was the same for YEI beneficiaries as for ESF beneficiaries. The sample nevertheless covered most EU Member States and all thematic objectives.

The study's underlying dataset was used to calculate the total administrative costs associated with implementing the ESF and YEI. The total costs for the entire period for programme authorities were obtained by multiplying the average cost estimates per million euros spent (from the 2018 study) by the total eligible spending up to the end of 2023. Since the calculation of total costs here is based on eligible spending, whereas the 2018 study relied on allocations, the updated figures presented in this Staff Working Document differ from those in the published study.

For beneficiaries, the cost range was constructed by applying the estimated average and median costs per million euros spent (from the 2018 study) to the total eligible spending up to the end of 2023. For beneficiaries, two types of costs were considered: the costs of preparing a funding application (application costs) and project management costs. The project management costs consist of costs related to gathering information, submitting payment claims, fulfilling information and publicity requirements, keeping records, preparation and submission of data, preparing information required for project evaluation and other tasks. However, not all of these costs stem from cohesion policy regulatory requirements, and it was not possible to distinguish them from those arising under the national regulatory framework.

However, the administrative cost estimates should be treated with caution. They are based on a 2018 study, which does not take into account the regulatory changes introduced thereafter or the post-2020 crisis context. In addition, the estimates are not derived from actual costs incurred by the end of the period. Instead, the 2018 cost estimates per million euros spent were extrapolated to obtain the total costs for the whole period. Finally, the sample size for the beneficiary survey is small and highly variable.

The 2018 study also compared the administrative costs of the 2014–2020 programming period with those of the previous period, using the administrative cost data from the 2012 study<sup>253</sup>. The comparison was possible only for the administrative costs of programme authorities. The 2012 study survey covered the programme authorities of 12 programmes in seven Member States. Due to the low response rate from beneficiaries in the 2012 study (covering only four operational programmes out of 130), a comparison of beneficiary costs was not feasible. Both the 2018 and 2012 studies applied the same definition of administrative costs; however, their approaches to data collection and analysis differed slightly<sup>254</sup>.

<sup>251</sup> European Commission: Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy, Spatial Foresight and t33, *New assessment of ESIF administrative costs and burden*, 2018. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2776/36663>

<sup>252</sup> For more details see section 2.2. of the study.

<sup>253</sup> EPEC/COWI (2012) *Study Measuring Current and Future Requirements on Administrative Cost and Burden of Managing the ESF*, 2012.

<sup>254</sup> For more details see section 4 of the 2018 study.

## ANNEX III: OVERVIEW OF BENEFITS AND COSTS

The complete analysis of the benefits and costs is available in the Supporting Study Annex V<sup>255</sup>.

## ANNEX IV: STAKEHOLDERS CONSULTATION - SYNOPSIS REPORT

This annex provides a synopsis of the stakeholder consultations conducted for the study supporting the ex-post evaluation of the 2014-2020 European Social Fund and Youth Employment Initiative.

### Outline of the consultation strategy

The consultation strategy for the study and respective consultation activities aimed to collect relevant data and/or opinions from key stakeholders to gather meaningful evidence to answer the evaluation questions under all evaluation criteria. The consultations complemented the mapping of ESF-related investment priorities, target populations and types of operations, as well as the analysis of the socio-economic context, and addressed gaps in the documentary evidence base of the study.

EU and national level stakeholders were consulted, including EU level policymakers and national and regional authorities involved in the management and coordination of the ESF and YEI, national and regional authorities involved in employment, training, education and labour market policy, representatives of ESF beneficiaries and participants of the ESF and YEI, academic and research bodies, as well as EU citizens. Different consultation activities and methods were used, including a **public consultation (PC)**, alongside a call for evidence with feedback submitted by organisations; targeted **interviews** with EU and national level stakeholders, an internet-based **survey** targeting ESF Managing Authorities; in-depth interviews conducted within the context of the **case studies**; and online thematic **focus groups**.

### Overview of consultation activities

The **public consultation** aimed to provide an open channel for all interested stakeholders to provide their input to the study. The consultation took the form of an e-survey, with closed and open-ended questions addressing the key evaluation criteria and tailored to the different stakeholder groups.

The **targeted interviews** were conducted with EU and national level stakeholders directly and indirectly linked to employment, training, education and labour market policy and management and delivery of ESF, including EU policymakers, Ministries of Employment and/or Social Affairs and Public Employment Services, ESF Managing Authorities, as well as national-level socio-economic partners and civil society organisations representing groups relevant to ESF and YEI support.

The **internet-based survey** targeted ESF MAs in EU27 Member States and the UK.

As part of the 27 **case studies**, 380 additional in-depth interviews were conducted with country level representatives involved in the implementation and monitoring of the ESF.

The **thematic focus groups** targeted national authorities, beneficiaries, and other stakeholders at EU and national level with the aim of filling remaining knowledge gaps and validating the findings of the study. Six focus groups were carried out.

### Summary and reflection on challenges

The consultation methods were implemented as planned, in line with the agreed consultation strategy. The targeted consultations posed some challenges, such as delays in the interview programme due to the unresponsiveness of several national level stakeholders. The impact of this on the consultation strategy

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<sup>255</sup> Available at: [Annexes](#).

was minimal, however, as the other consultations conducted allowed the research team to still gather in-depth views of a range of stakeholders across the EU27.

## Information on consultation activities and stakeholder groups consulted

**Table A9 – Overview of stakeholders consulted in all consultation activities**

Stakeholder category	Public Consultation	Targeted Interviews	MA survey	Case studies	Focus groups
EU level policymakers responsible for designing and coordinating the ESF and YEI	x		x		x
National and regional authorities involved in the management and coordination of the ESF operational programmes	x		x	x	x
National and regional authorities and stakeholders involved in employment, training, education and labour market policy	x		x		x
Representatives of beneficiaries and participants of the ESF and YEI, including civil society organisations and social partners	x		x		x
Academic and research bodies focusing on employment, training, education and labour market policy	x				x
EU citizens and any other interested parties	x				

## Public consultation and call for evidence

The public consultation ran from 16 October 2023 to 23 January 2024. It targeted ESF MAs, beneficiaries of ESF, CSOs, social and economic partners, academic and research bodies focusing on employment, training, education and labour market policy, audit/certifying authorities, Youth Guarantee coordinators, and EU citizens. The PC was disseminated through the European Commission’s website and social media channels, the Ecorys’ LinkedIn page, as well as using multipliers. The consultation was available in all official EU languages and hosted on EU Survey. It gathered input through closed multiple choice questions, with open-text questions to provide additional information. Questions were grouped by evaluation criterion. Respondents were routed to questions based on their profile, including the nature of their engagement with ESF.

**704 respondents** took part in the PC. The vast majority of respondents (99%; 697) came from within the EU, with all 27 Member States represented. The highest number of responses came from Poland (43%; 305). Responses were also received from four non-EU countries<sup>256</sup> (1% of all responses; 7).

The PC received replies from 607 organisations (86%) and 97 individuals (14%), of which 96 were EU citizens and one non-EU citizen. The highest number of responses (47%; 330) came from public authorities. Academic/research institutions and NGOs respectively accounted for 10% (72) and 9% (65) of respondents. Companies/businesses, business associations and trade unions together represented 6.5% of total respondents (46). Among the 607 organisational respondents, 36% (216) represented large organisations, 31% (188) represented medium-sized organisations, 27% (165) small-sized 6% (38) micro-sized organisations.

Organisational respondents were asked about their role in the delivery of the ESF. Overall, 585 respondents had a direct role in delivery of the ESF (96% of all organisational respondents), whereas 4% of respondents had no direct role. Two thirds were beneficiaries of ESF funding for the implementation of a project (67%; 405), while one fifth of respondents represented an ESF MA or Intermediate Body (20%; 121). A smaller proportion of organisational respondents (10%) were members of a Monitoring Committee (3%; 19), representatives from an EU funds Coordinating Body (3%; 18), certifying or audit authorities (2%; 12),

<sup>256</sup> UK, Zimbabwe, Russia and Serbia

and referral or advocacy organisations including civil society organisations that were not beneficiaries (2%; 10).

The 22 organisational respondents with no direct role in the delivery of the ESF were asked about their familiarity with the ESF. 59% (13) were familiar with the goals and scope of the ESF as well as with at least one activity funded whilst 18% (4) had only a general idea of the goal and scope of the ESF, without any knowledge of specific activities funded. 9% (2) indicated that they had never heard of the ESF.

There were **17 responses to the call for evidence** document accompanying the PC. The responses came from Belgium (6), Sweden (2), France (2), Spain (2), Slovenia (1), Poland (1), the Netherlands (1), Ireland (1), and Czechia (1)<sup>257</sup>.

The contributions highlight the importance of the ESF and YEI in addressing social exclusion, promoting employment, and supporting vulnerable groups.

The most repetitive arguments or topics raised by the contributors include the need to simplify the administrative procedures and reduce the bureaucratic burden associated with accessing and managing ESF and YEI funds (including NGOs, public authorities, and EU citizens). Many contributors emphasised the importance of targeting specific vulnerable groups, such as the Roma, people with disabilities, and young people, and providing tailored support to address their unique needs (including NGOs, public authorities). The need to ensure the sustainability and long-term impact of ESF and YEI-funded projects was also a common theme, with many contributors stressing the importance of focusing on achieving long-term results rather than just short-term outcomes (including NGOs, public authorities, and academic/research institutions). Additionally, several contributors suggested that the ESF and YEI should be more flexible and adaptable to respond to changing social and economic contexts and to address emerging needs (including NGOs and public authorities).

In terms of relevance to the funds, the contributions highlight the importance of the ESF and YEI in promoting employment and social inclusion, particularly for vulnerable groups (including NGOs, public authorities, and EU citizens). The funds support education and training initiatives that help individuals acquire skills and improve their employability. The YEI has been instrumental in supporting youth employment initiatives, particularly in rural areas and disadvantaged urban settings. The ESF and YEI have also supported social entrepreneurship and innovation, particularly in the context of the social economy and circular economy.

NGOs, such as Fundación Secretariado Gitano, ENSIE, and Eurodiaconia, highlighted the importance of the ESF and YEI in supporting vulnerable groups and promoting social inclusion. Public authorities emphasised the need to simplify administrative procedures and to focus on achieving long-term impact. EU citizens (2 contributions) highlighted the importance of the ESF and YEI in supporting local development and promoting social inclusion.

However, not all contributions were positive, and some dissenting views were expressed. For example, 1 contribution expressed disagreement with the EU's actions and policies, implying that the ESF and YEI funds are not being used efficiently. Some contributors, such as a citizen and a public authority criticised the bureaucratic obstacles and administrative burdens associated with accessing and managing ESF and YEI funds. Another noted that while the ESF projects have been beneficial for individuals, they have not led to structural changes or had a significant impact on the labour market. Additionally, some contributors argued that the ESF and YEI do not provide sufficient support for rural areas, disadvantaged urban settings, and individuals with disabilities, migrant, and refugee backgrounds.

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<sup>257</sup>European Commission: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/13450-European-Social-Fund-and-the-Youth-Employment-Initiative-2014-2020-evaluation-feedback\\_en?p\\_id=32356638](https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/13450-European-Social-Fund-and-the-Youth-Employment-Initiative-2014-2020-evaluation-feedback_en?p_id=32356638)

Despite these dissenting views, the overall assessment of the ESF and YEI is positive, with many contributors highlighting their importance in addressing social exclusion, promoting employment, and supporting vulnerable groups. The contributions emphasise the need to simplify administrative procedures, ensure sustainability and long-term impact, and provide tailored support to address the unique needs of specific vulnerable. By addressing these challenges and limitations, the ESF and YEI can continue to play a crucial role in promoting social inclusion and employment across Europe.

## Interviews

The interviews targeted the following stakeholder groups: EU level policymakers and stakeholders working on ESF, YEI and employment; national/regional authorities managing ESF; national and regional ministries and government bodies responsible for employment, training, education and labour market policy; ESF Monitoring Committees, PES; CSOs; social partners; and Youth Guarantee coordinators. The interviews included questions on all evaluation criteria as well as overarching questions to investigate the characteristics and objectives of the ESF.

**150 interviews** were conducted between February and June 2023. Of these, 17 were with EU level stakeholders and 133 were with national-level stakeholders in EU Member States and the UK.

**Table A10 – Targeted interviews completed**

Stakeholder	Number of interviews conducted	Member States
DG EMPL (Units G.1, B.2, B.5, D.3, Geodesk for Czechia, Denmark, Italy, Poland, Slovakia, Spain/Malta, Sweden)	6	
DG EAC (Unit A.2)	1	
BusinessEurope	1	
European Federation of Education Employers	1	
European Confederation of Trade Unions (CESI)	1	
European Youth Forum	1	
Lifelong Learning Platform (LLP)	1	
European Women's Lobby	1	
Caritas Europe	1	
ERGO Network	1	
European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA)	1	
Expert group on quality investment in education and training	1	
<b>Total EU level interviews</b>	<b>17</b>	
ESF Managing Authorities	34	AT, BE, BG, CZ, DE, DK, EE, EL, ES, FI, FR, HR, HU, IE, IT, LT, LU, LV, MT, NL, PL, PT, RO, SE, SK, UK
National and regional ministries and other public institutions responsible for employment, training, education and labour market policy	51	AT, BG, CY, EE, EL, IE, IT, LT, LU, LV, MT, NL, PL, PT, RO, SE, SK, UK
ESF Monitoring Committees	3	BG, DK, IE
Public Employment Services (PES)	13	BE, BG, ES, FI, FR, HU, IE, IT, LT, LU, MT, PL, SE
Civil society organisations and networks	14	BE, CY, DE, DK, EE, ES, HR, IE, LU, PT, SE, SK
Social partners (incl. trade unions, employer organisations, chambers of commerce)	9	BG, CY, DE, DK, ES, LU, MT, PL
Youth Guarantee coordinators	7	EE, FI, LT, LV, PT, SK
National ESF partner organisations	2	RO
<b>Total national level interviews</b>	<b>133</b>	

Source: *Ecorys, 2024*

## Online survey of Managing Authorities

The internet-based survey targeted all ESF MAs. The survey focused on all evaluation criteria, investigating MAs' experience with their operational programme and perceived challenges in

implementation. The survey ran for 10 weeks, until 2 June 2023 and had a total of **114 responses** (61% response rate, as seen in the Table below).

**Table A11 – Response rate of MAs to the survey, by country**

Member State	Number of OPs	Completed survey responses	Response rate
AT	1	1	100%
BE	4	1	25%
BG	3	2	67%
CY	1	1	100%
CZ	3	3	100%
DE	17	9	53%
DK	1	1	100%
EE	1	1	100%
FI	2	2	100%
FR	33	15	45%
GR	17	6	35%
HR	1	1	100%
HU	5	3	60%
IE	1	1	100%
IT	29	16	55%
LT	1	1	100%
LU	1	1	100%
LV	1	1	100%
MT	1	1	100%
NL	1	1	100%
PL	17	13	76%
PT	10	5	50%
RO	2	1	50%
SI	1	1	100%
SE	2	2	100%
SK	2	2	100%
ES	23	18	78%
UK	6	4	67%
<b>Total responses</b>	<b>187</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>61%</b>

## Case studies

The in-depth interviews carried out in the framework of the case studies focused on gathering additional insights on the delivery of OPs, and examples of good practices and/or potential misuses. A total of **380 national stakeholder interviews** were conducted for the case studies from July to October 2023, with stakeholders from ESF MAs, implementing bodies, ESF beneficiary organisations, national and regional ministries, governmental departments, and other public authorities responsible for employment, training, education and labour market policy, social partners and CSOs.

## Thematic focus groups

The online focus groups targeted ESF MAs, national authorities responsible for employment, training, education and labour market policy; ESF beneficiaries or project partners; PES; EU-level civil CSOs and networks representing groups relevant to ESF and YEI; academic and research bodies; and European Commission representatives. Six focus groups were conducted in June 2024 with a total of 62 attendants

**Table A12 - List of participants in focus groups, by country and stakeholder type**

Country	Stakeholder type
<b>TO 8 focus group (12 participants)</b>	
AT	Managing Authority
BE	Managing Authority
CY	Ministry
FI	Ministry
FR	Representatives of beneficiaries and participants
DE	Ministry
IE	Implementing body
PL	Representatives of beneficiaries and participants
PT	National authority
SK	Managing Authority
ES	Managing Authority
EU	EU social partner
<b>TO 9 focus group (15 participants)</b>	
CZ	Ministry
FR	Representatives of beneficiaries and participants
FR	Representatives of beneficiaries and participants
DE	Representatives of beneficiaries and participants
EL	Ministry
HU	Ministry
HU	Ministry
LV	Implementing body
LT	Ministry
MT	Representatives of beneficiaries and participants
MT	Representatives of beneficiaries and participants
PT	Implementing body
ES	Representatives of beneficiaries and participants
EU	EU NGO
EU	EU social partner
<b>TO 10 focus group (13 participants)</b>	
BE	Representatives of beneficiaries and participants
EE	Ministry
EL	Ministry
EL	Ministry
EL	Ministry
EL	Ministry
HU	Implementing body
IE	Implementing body
LT	Implementing body
LU	Representatives of beneficiaries and participants
EU	EU social partner
EU	EU social partner
EU	EU NGO
<b>TO 11 focus group (6 participants)</b>	
HR	Representatives of beneficiaries and participants
HR	Representatives of beneficiaries and participants
CY	Implementing body
CY	Implementing body
MT	Ministry
PL	Managing Authority
<b>Crisis Response tools (6 participants)</b>	
CY	Managing Authority
IT	Representatives of beneficiaries and participants
LT	Ministry
LT	Managing Authority
MT	Representatives of beneficiaries and participants

SE	Managing Authority
YEI (10 participants)	
BG	Representatives of beneficiaries and participants
BG	Representatives of beneficiaries and participants
IE	Representatives of beneficiaries and participants
LV	National authority
ES	Representatives of beneficiaries and participants
ES	Managing Authority
HR	Ministry
HR	Ministry
HR	Ministry
EU	EU NGO

Source: Ecorys 2024

## Methodology for data processing

Quantitative analysis of results of the **public consultation** included analysis of frequency distribution for each variable related to the closed-ended questions, and cross-tabulations between specific variables and characteristics of respondents and between specific variables, though the low number of responses has limited the possibilities for this. For the qualitative data analysis, data was classified by related variable and analysed to identify additional information.

For the **targeted interviews with EU and national level stakeholders**, the write-ups were collected and exported into analytical grids, broken down by question and evaluation criterion. The research team used the analytical grids to carry out in-depth analysis to inform the relevant sections and annexes of the interim and final reports.

The **MA survey** was analysed using both quantitative and qualitative methods (for the open questions). The responses to the open-ended questions provided by the respondents in their native language were translated into English. Survey findings were used by the research team for all sections of the interim and final reports.

Information from the **case studies interviews** was used in the analysis of each case study report, which informed the analysis carried out for all sections of the final report.

Discussions in the **focus groups** were summarised in a report drafted by the research team and used to finalise the findings and fill gaps in all sections of the final report.

## Overview of results of consultation activities

### *Effectiveness*

**Achievement of programme milestones and enabling/hindering factors:** Stakeholders overall agreed that ESF achieved its programme milestones to a large extent. MAs frequently highlighted the importance of effective governance and implementation approaches, sufficient ex-ante and ongoing analysis of priorities at the Member State and regional levels, and synergies with other policy instruments and funding sources. Beneficiaries, CSOs and social partners reported that effective target group identification and reach drawing on the expertise of actors ‘on the ground’ and well-developed networks were key factors supporting the achievement of milestones. By contrast, hindering factors reported included difficulties in monitoring participants’ development or results after the completion of interventions. This was particularly raised by stakeholders in Member States that were reliant on surveys or re-contacting participants as opposed to administrative data. Administrative burdens or costs were also frequently reported as a hindering factor by beneficiaries, particularly smaller or less experienced organisations for which capacity emerged as an issue.

**Contribution to CPR thematic objectives and wider EU policies:** In terms of **employment**, 87% of respondents to the MA survey felt that the ESF and YEI had contributed to a ‘large’ or ‘moderate’ extent to the European Pillar of Social Rights principle on equal opportunities and access to the labour market. Over 9 in 10 of the 114 respondents to the MA survey reported a positive contribution to the EU2020 employment rate target. These views were echoed in interviews at the EU and national levels across all

stakeholder groups. The only contrasting view was from a small number of CSOs at the EU and national level who felt that the ESF could still do more to support the employability of disadvantaged or marginalised groups in particular.

While remaining positive overall, stakeholder views on the contribution to **social inclusion and combatting poverty** were slightly more nuanced. While 65% of MA survey respondents felt that Thematic Objective (TO) 8 operations met their objectives to a large extent, the equivalent figure for TO 9 was slightly lower at 59%. A number of CSOs interviewed felt that operations struggled to effectively support the most marginalised groups in some specific contexts.

Stakeholders consulted overall felt that the ESF and YEI made a positive contribution to expanding **access to education and training**. Case study interviews conducted for the four IPs within TO 10 show this, as do the results of the MA survey, where around 8 in 10 respondents felt that TO 10 operations had met their objectives to a large (63%), moderate (15%) or small (2%) extent.

There is less evidence from stakeholder consultations on the contribution of the ESF to **institutional capacity building**. Most EU and national stakeholders consulted had very limited or no insights into TO 11 operations. Two-thirds of respondents to the MA survey reported that they did not know if TO 11 operations had met their objectives.

**Role in implementing Country Specific Recommendations:** All stakeholder groups expressed positive views on the contribution of the ESF and YEI to implementing CSRs. However, stakeholders were less able to assess the extent of this contribution, often citing the difficulty of disaggregating it from other influencing factors. MAs in particular felt that ESF made a positive contribution to implementing the CSRs, but that other national political priorities also influenced the focus of programming.

**Effectiveness in reaching intended target groups:** Overall, the perception from stakeholders is that ESF and YEI actions reached the intended target groups, though the extent of this depends heavily on the national/regional context and the specific intervention itself. 93% of MAs responding to the MA survey held the view that operations had reached unemployed, 92% that they had reached women and 88% that they had reached the long term unemployed. However, these shares were notably lower for older workers (46%), the inactive and unemployed aged 55+ (53%), those with disabilities (63%), Roma (22%) and the homeless (22%). Similarly, ESF beneficiaries interviewed for the case study on IP.8ii-YEI operations highlighted challenges in reaching the most vulnerable. However, interviewees across stakeholder groups and MA survey respondents felt that targeting harder to reach groups had been positively supported by the requirement to allocate a minimum 20% of the ESF allocation to TO 9.

**Changes to the target groups from ESF support:** All stakeholder types overall held the view that the ESF brought positive changes to target groups. Beneficiaries, MAs, CSOs and social partners interviewed held the view that TO 8 increased opportunities for participants to find/maintain a job, improve their working conditions and earn more or, in the case of companies, to improve their productivity and profitability. Similarly, all stakeholder groups held the view that operations under TO 9 contributed to improved employment rates, including for the most disadvantaged, although at different degrees. Stakeholder interviews confirmed that operations providing vocational and post-secondary education, under TO 10 had a positive contribution to improved educational environments for both students and teachers, setting the basis for better educational achievements as well as limiting early school leaver rates. In general, people taking part in ESF-supported operations declared that projects activities helped them in both improving their competencies and qualifications and in making their career choices.

**Structural changes from ESF:** Stakeholders generally held the view that structural changes had taken place, but that the presence and scale of such contributions was relatively limited against other national drivers. MA and government representatives commonly reported in interviews that significant changes in employment, social inclusion and education policies and systems tend to be implemented in response to national needs (rather than being caused by the ESF). Stakeholders consulted from all groups also commonly noted that other cohesion/structural funds, alongside national policy reforms and strategies, were equally or more significant drivers of change. Beneficiaries held the view that structural issues underlying the disadvantages some groups faced could not be significantly addressed by EU support, as it formed a small part of overall funding for reform in Member States.

**Effectiveness in implementing horizontal principles:** Stakeholders held mixed views of the extent to which horizontal principles were implemented and influenced implementation. EU level stakeholders were

often unsatisfied with the extent of the use of horizontal principles to inform ESF operations. Conversely, national and regional level stakeholders, particularly MAs, argued that horizontal principles were taken on board in ESF operations in their countries. For example, 93% of MA respondents reported that the principle of gender equality, equal opportunities and non-discrimination was applied to a large or moderate extent. By contrast, interviews with beneficiaries highlighted more limited experience and institutional capacity on how to concretely support gender mainstreaming.

### *Efficiency*

Overall, stakeholders, particularly EU policymakers and MAs noted that **administrative procedures had improved and simplified** during the programming period, thanks to simplified cost options, digitalisation, and online tools. Stakeholders viewed simplification as a means to reduce administrative burdens in ESF procedures: 89% of MAs (101 of 114) in the survey found that **simplified cost options** improved operational efficiency, and 61% (358 of 585) of PC respondents involved in ESF management and coordination considered these aspects adequate. However, CSOs, and beneficiaries interviewed pointed out that beneficiaries' lack of knowledge and familiarity with ESF procedures hindered implementation of these simplifications. National and regional stakeholders recommended ensuring flexibility in these options to adapt to external shocks, tailoring services to participants' needs, and simplifying reporting and auditing requirements. **Digitalisation** of application and reporting procedures, commonly cited by national MA and beneficiary stakeholders, was another improvement.

Despite these improvements, **administrative burdens** were widely reported by stakeholders across all groups as hindering efficiency. More than half of MAs in the survey noted significant administrative/regulatory burdens affecting beneficiaries (61%; 69 of 114) and MAs (51%; 58 of 114). Audit requirements were reported as a hindrance by 43% of MAs in the survey (49 of 114) and identified as an unnecessary administrative burden by stakeholders consulted through case study research and national-level interviews. Other common issues included beneficiaries' lack of administrative capacity, mentioned by various stakeholders, and strict data protection rules, reported by beneficiary organisations and MAs. Nonetheless, some MAs and public authorities interviewed found the administrative level necessary and justified for transparent fund management. In addition, positive feedback was noted by MAs interviewed for the case studies regarding clear guidance and support initiatives, and by beneficiaries regarding straightforward administrative and application processes.

MA stakeholders reported successful efforts by ESF monitoring committees at the national level to enhance **monitoring and evaluation** efficiency through digitalisation and online tools. 89% of MA survey respondents (101 of 114) and 69% of PC respondents (406 of 585) reporting that evaluation requirements did not significantly hinder efficiency. However, 45% of MA survey respondents (51 of 114) indicated that the large number of indicators hindered efficiency, and some beneficiary stakeholders criticised their effectiveness in measuring the success of operations. Other monitoring challenges reported in the case study interviews included the lack of detailed linkage between expenditure and indicators and overly quantitative indicators.

### *Coherence*

**Internal coherence of dedicated EU support:** Stakeholders overall held the view that dedicated EU support delivered through the ESF and YEI demonstrated strong internal coherence, with complementarity both within and between TOs and their respective IPs. Interviews conducted for the case studies indicated that centralised mechanisms to ensure appropriate funding and operational objectives, using EU-level policies as a reference point, helped reduce overlap and reinforced complementarities. Regarding REACT-EU, MAs noted in case study interviews that its role as a crisis reaction tool, facilitating project continuation, contributed to good internal coherence. Some isolated examples of potential overlap were provided by stakeholders, who noted instances where mechanisms to ensure coherence were absent.

**Coherence with other EU Funds:** Stakeholders generally found dedicated EU support to be coherent with other EU funds. EU-level interviewees, MAs and public authorities consulted through the case studies noted strong coherence between ESF and ERDF and FEAD unlike the interviewees in the frame of the 2014-2020 ERDF ex-post evaluation. Case study interviewees predominantly highlighted coherence with

ERDF, reflected in PC results where 61% of respondents reported ESF complemented or reinforced ERDF (386 of 638). Fewer respondents indicated coherence with Erasmus+ (48%; 309) and the European Agriculture Fund for Rural Development (27%; 171). However, MA and public authority stakeholders reported practical difficulties in creating complementarity in practice, such as differing administrative requirements across funds and the lack of coordinated announcements or calls for co-financing opportunities.

**Coherence with EU policies:** The ESF and YEI programmes were seen as strongly coherent with other EU policies by stakeholders consulted. EU and national stakeholders in the interviews shared that Member States often used key EU-level policies as the main reference when designing interventions. EU stakeholders particularly noted that ESF programming related to employment was most coherent with EU policy objectives. The Europe 2020 Strategy, the European Pillar of Social Rights, and the European Skills Agenda were the most frequently referenced policies in national interviews.

**Coherence at a national level:** National and regional stakeholders interviewed largely felt that ESF and YEI support aligned well with other national and regional initiatives. This view was echoed in the MA survey, where 84% of respondents (96 of 114) reported that ESF operations were largely coherent with national/regional policies. However, some MA and beneficiary stakeholders mentioned challenges in aligning local needs with ESF TOs.

### *EU added value*

**Volume effects:** Stakeholders consulted in the interviews, PC and case study consultations held the view that ESF/YEI funding significantly increased the volume of activities and support, surpassing what could be achieved with national resources alone. 94% of MA survey respondents (107 of 114) and 86% of PC respondents (568 of 660) reported that the ESF generated significant volume effects, through increasing the quantity and scale of activities and projects. EU and national stakeholders interviewed corroborated this view, emphasising that ESF/YEI funding enabled more extensive activities than would have been possible with only national or local resources.

**Scope effects:** ESF and YEI interventions were widely recognised by all stakeholders interviewed for their positive impact in broadening the scope of support, reaching previously underserved groups and introducing new measures. This extended to target groups such as migrants, Roma, NEETs, and other vulnerable populations, which were not adequately covered in the previous programming period. The MA survey supported these findings, with 87% of respondents (99 of 114) reporting significant scope effects in target group reach and policy areas. Several examples mentioned by MA and beneficiaries consulted through the interviews and case studies referred to the re-orientation of national policies and introduction of new types of support for NEETs<sup>258</sup>.

**Role effects:** Stakeholders reported mixed outcomes across different TOs on the contribution of the ESF and YEI to innovation, idea transfer, and changes in national systems and structures. There was stronger consultation evidence of role effects in areas such as gender equality, labour market policies, and company competitiveness. 58% of respondents to the MA survey (69 of 114) reported observing role effects due to ESF and YEI, indicating some level of innovation and structural changes. Role effects were recognised by PC respondents, though less emphatically, with 41% of respondents (269) acknowledging that ESF supported innovative service delivery methods.

**Process effects:** Stakeholders consulted through the MA survey, case studies, and interviews held the view that ESF/YEI led to process effects through the development of new competencies and tools, as well as the professionalisation of implementing bodies. 61% of respondents to the MA survey (69 of 114) reported process effects, such as enhanced collaboration among stakeholders toward long-term objectives and increased capacity of government administrations and beneficiaries. Stakeholders consulted in the interviews and case study research expressed that ESF management and implementation have led to cumulative learning and professionalisation.

**Sustainability of added value:** Stakeholders widely expect the positive effects from ESF and YEI support to continue beyond the end of EU funding. 88% of MA survey respondents (100 of 114) believed that the

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<sup>258</sup> BG, FR, LT, LV

results for participants are likely to be sustained after funding ends. Similarly, many beneficiaries interviewed highlighted ESF's long-lasting impact on individuals, particularly through upskilling and training measures, noting improvements in personal confidence and wellbeing. On the other hand, MA and public authority stakeholders raised concerns about over-reliance on EU funding.

### *Relevance*

The relevance of ESF and YEI operations to specific **target groups** varied across different stakeholder groups. MA survey respondents perceived ESF and YEI operations as relevant to many target groups, such as women, which 88% of MAs found to be adequately prioritised (110), the unemployed (87%; 99), and the long-term unemployed (82%; 94). However, there were concerns about the adequacy of support for specific groups like Roma, found by only 27% of MAs surveyed (21) to be adequately prioritised. Lower relevance was reported for TO 11 (19% of respondents). IP8.ii-YEI operations were generally very relevant for young NEETs, particularly in Member States most affected by the 2008-2012 economic crisis. Different stakeholder types expressed the view that the **involvement of stakeholders** in the design and implementation of ESF/YEI operations supported relevance. According to respectively 32% and 39% of MA survey respondents, NGO/CSOs and social partners were properly involved in the implemented ESF operations at the national/regional level.

Finally, stakeholders consulted had mixed views on the **flexibility and adaptability** of ESF/YEI OPs to changes in the implementation context. 53% of MA survey respondents viewed the changes and measures introduced under REACT EU as relevant to their Member State's needs to react quickly to crises, while this was only the case for 17% in the case of CARE operations. Nonetheless, as captured in the case study stakeholder consultations, all stakeholder types particularly in countries with a high influx of refugees<sup>259</sup>, found CARE relevant in directly addressing the needs of refugees.

### *Visibility*

Stakeholders directly involved in the management and delivery of ESF operations had a positive view of visibility. According to the PC, 79% of these respondents (461) rated communication as an adequate aspect of the administrative arrangements. 90% of respondents to the MA survey (113) indicated that public visibility had increased to a large or moderate extent. Furthermore, 79% of MA survey respondents (90) noted that more emphasis was placed on visibility actions compared to the previous programming period. Successful visibility actions reported by stakeholders included dedicated websites, the display of the EU logo, and specific communication campaigns and events. Moreover, PC respondents highlighted that the multiplier effect was significant, with ESF recipients learning about the support through their employer (49%), educational or training institution (32%), or employment services (19%).

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<sup>259</sup> BG, HU, PL

ANNEX V: KEY DATA AND ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

**Legal requirements**

During the 2014-2020 period, the ESF was governed by the European Parliament and Council Regulation 1303/2013<sup>260</sup> (Common Provisions Regulation) and by the Regulation 1304/2013 on the European Social Fund (ESF)<sup>261</sup>. The evaluation was carried out in accordance with the Art 57 of the Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013 which requires the Commission to carry out and complete by 31 December 2024, with the assistance of external experts, an ex-post evaluation, to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of the Fund and contribution to the Union strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth in accordance with specific requirements established in the Fund-specific rule<sup>262</sup>.

**Table A13: Europe 2020 strategy headlines indicators - EU27 (2013-2022)**

Topic	Headline indicator	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Target 2020	Target 2030
Employment	Employment rate age group 20-64, total (% of population)	66.8	67.5	68.5	69.6	70.9	71.9	72.7	71.7	73.0	74.6	75.0	≥78
	Employment rate age group 20-64, females (% of population)	61.2	62.0	63.0	64.1	65.2	66.3	67.1	66.2	67.6	69.2	:	
	Employment rate age group 20-64, males (% of population)	72.4	73.1	74.1	75.2	76.5	77.6	78.4	77.2	78.5	80.0	:	
Education	Early leavers from education and training, total (*) (% of population aged 18-24)	11.8	11.1*	11.0	10.6	10.5	10.5	10.1	10.0	9.8**	9.6	<10.0	≤9.0
	Early leavers from education and training, females (') (% of population aged 18-24)	10	9.4*	9.4	9.1	8.9	8.7	8.4	8.1	8**	8.0	:	
	Early leavers from education and training,	13.6	12.7*	12.5	12.1	12.1	12.1	11.8	11.9	11.5**	11.1	:	

<sup>260</sup> Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and laying down general provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1083/2006. [Regulation - 1303/2013 - EN - EUR-Lex](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32013R1304)

<sup>261</sup> Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32013R1304>

<sup>262</sup> Regulation (EU) No 1304/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on the European Social Fund and repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 1081/2006. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2013:347:0470:0486:EN:PDF>

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	males (') (% of population aged 18-24)													
	<b>Tertiary educational attainment, total (') (% of population aged 30-34)</b>	35.6	36.5*	37.3	37.8	38.6	39.5	<b>40.4</b>	41.2	41.9**	<b>42.8</b>	≥ 40.0	<u>≥45.0</u> (25-34 years old)	
	Tertiary educational attainment, females (') (% of population aged 30-34)	40.1	41*	42.2	42.9	43.9	44.8	<b>45.7</b>	46.3	47.3**	<b>48.4</b>	:		
	Tertiary educational attainment, males (') (% of population aged 30-34)	31.2	32*	32.5	32.7	33.2	34.2	<b>35.2</b>	36.1	36.6**	<b>37.4</b>			
<b>Poverty or Social Exclusion</b>	<b>People at risk of poverty or social exclusion</b> (Thousand persons)	:	:	104 946	103 556	98 142	95 066	<b>92</b> <b>201</b>	94 771***	95 581	<b>95</b> <b>324</b>	Lift 20 million people out of poverty or social exclusion:	Lift 15 million people out of poverty or social exclusion:	
	People at risk of poverty or social exclusion (% of population)	:	:	24.0	23.7	22.4	21.7	<b>21.1</b>	21.6***	21.7	<b>21.6</b>			

Source: Supporting study

(\*) Break in time series in 2014 (switch from ISCED 97 to ISCED 2011).

\*\* Break in time series due to changes in EU-Labour Force Survey definition;

\*\*\* data 2013-2019 estimated; in 2020 break in time series due to changes in EU-SILC survey;

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**Table A14: Distribution of EU and national planned funds by EU fund, country and category of region (national co-financing included). Top-up funding of REACT-EU and YEI by country in 2022 (million EUR, %).**

MS	ESF			Total ESF	REACT-EU	YEI	Total	Total (%)
	Less dev.	Transition	More Dev.					
AT		42.2	833.6	875.7	114.2		989.9	0.7%
BE		681.2	1 478.5	2 159.7	164.0	193.2	2 516.8	1.7%
BG	1 735.6			1 735.6	266.0	120.3	2 122.0	1.4%
CY			176.8	176.8	65.0	39.5	281.3	0.2%
CZ	4 005.2		495.5	4 500.7		29.6	4 530.3	3.0%
DE		4 151.0	8 398.9	12 549.9	896.8		13 446.7	8.9%
DK		76.2	334.6	410.8	55.6		466.5	0.3%
EE	682.2			682.2	12.8		695.0	0.5%
ES	694.5	4 688.6	4 905.7	10 288.8	5 937.3	3 030.2	19 256.3	12.8%
FI			1 036.5	1 036.5	89.9		1 126.5	0.7%
FR	1 380.3	2 397.0	5 753.8	9 531.2	1 219.4	1 141.8	11 892.4	7.9%
GR	2 579.3	1 276.1	1 180.9	5 036.2	100.0	587.4	5 723.6	3.8%
HR	1 664.4			1 664.4	530.0	224.5	2 418.9	1.6%
HU	5 167.2		557.1	5 724.2	346.5	108.3	6 179.0	4.1%
IE			832.7	832.7	141.6	204.4	1 178.8	0.8%
IT	8 062.7	972.8	7 739.6	16 775.1	8 053.3	2 362.4	27 190.9	18.0%
LT	1 412.2			1 412.2	46.0	69.2	1 527.4	1.0%
LU			39.1	39.1	73.2		112.3	0.1%
LV	762.0			762.0	22.5	63.1	847.6	0.6%
MT		168.3		168.3	111.2		279.5	0.2%
NL			1 020.6	1 020.6	292.0		1 312.6	0.9%
PL	13 770.5		1 378.5	15 149.1	80.1	586.9	15 816.1	10.5%
PT	7 947.0	122.0	638.3	8 707.3	431.8	501.8	9 640.9	6.4%
RO	5 093.9		330.8	5 424.7	234.0	330.0	5 988.6	4.0%
SE			1 436.6	1 436.6	293.1	132.5	1 862.2	1.2%
SI	474.3		424.1	898.5	13.2	20.7	932.4	0.6%
SK	2 794.5		182.1	2 976.6	491.1	187.5	3 655.1	2.4%
UK	1 279.2	1 843.3	5 204.3	8 326.8		532.0	8 858.8	5.9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>59 505.1</b>	<b>16 418.8</b>	<b>44 378.5</b>	<b>120 302.4</b>	<b>20 080.6</b>	<b>10 465.4</b>	<b>150 848.4</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Source: Supporting study

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**Table A15: Total outputs and results of ESF, YEI and REACT-EU reported by the Member States totals at the end of 2022**

Country	OUTPUTS			RESULTS					
	CO01 - unemployed, including long-term unemployed	CO03 - inactive	CO05 - employed, including self-employed	CR01 - inactive participants engaged in job searching upon leaving	CR02 - participants in education or training upon leaving	CR03 - participants gaining a qualification upon leaving	CR04 - participants in employment, including self-employment, upon leaving	CR06 - participants in employment, including self-employment, 6 months after leaving	CR07 - participants with an improved labour market situation 6 months after leaving
AT	94 780	174 818	28 698	14 412	16 091	93 789	22 515	29 067	3 044
BE	979 885	388 554	290 696	11 888	148 750	142 366	226 504	436 647	57 774
BG	230 476	1 487 591	594 674	18 470	502 622	219 549	36 791	74 612	244 240
CY	15 124	26	136 421	23	735	2 282	5 558	4 498	1 957
CZ	247 827	86 220	556 385	3 899	21 305	247 031	131 053	113 961	16 431
DE	751 442	1 276 518	1 410 386	64 705	335 032	1 594 554	272 269	119 595	117 594
DK	12 920	74 796	37 711	1 133	2 149	9 400	3 739	39 453	3 679
EE	71 581	36 401	145 471	1 319	19 108	60 676	18 120	22 329	4 380
ES	3 983 058	3 044 045	1 768 415	307 807	398 777	2 742 729	1 506 625	516 559	30 662
FI	102 714	147 237	186 102	2 220	10 855	7 073	21 387	24 770	19 502
FR	3 838 286	1 603 563	948 627	535 317	389 031	595 516	1 418 080	2 158 390	278 340
GR	500 955	171 682	761 290	44 084	48 135	361 900	74 615	184 154	35 200
HR	144 222	141 681	216 489	5 172	3 478	31 156	43 606	77 749	59 945
HU	704 254	606 720	1 332 439	13 244	45 997	631 419	415 540	116 042	72 284
IE	130 679	136 758	62 752	4 785	81 563	116 862	25 761	14 120	5 225
IT	4 165 124	7 100 435	1 347 331	195 138	324 953	527 807	801 370	1 405 332	100 873
LT	238 636	539 650	358 611	5 995	27 556	159 897	115 923	33 931	11 426
LU	6 011	8 856	55 367	247	0	1 465	826	2 566	0
LV	173 614	97 111	187 223	1 635	19 861	42 512	39 284	37 755	14 374
MT	7 182	14 153	193 469	362	3 814	15 362	3 888	1 822	2 007
NL	490 042	195 887	171 363	16 342	16 922	25 034	160 234	151 192	77 995
PL	1 842 585	4 200 695	3 198 296	110 748	66 518	1 211 027	1 146 398	763 389	70 035
PT	1 206 841	1 122 361	1 364 653	75 131	81 565	365 887	351 099	176 063	44 033
RO	334 460	1 052 493	579 921	36 453	101 742	133 651	150 164	20 773	1 670
SE	154 336	52 421	259 657	3 582	24 645	44 885	36 808	34 695	91 003
SI	83 246	48 113	156 410	172	4 835	51 152	40 074	34	0
SK	495 395	580 724	239 270	750	125 744	26 745	56 246	138 729	2 101
UK	1 234 463	583 716	768 883	73 602	209 190	825 110	313 073	156 554	70 866
<b>Total</b>	<b>22 240 138</b>	<b>24 973 225</b>	<b>17 357 010</b>	<b>1 548 635</b>	<b>3 030 973</b>	<b>10 286 836</b>	<b>7 437 550</b>	<b>6 854 781</b>	<b>1 436 640</b>

Source: Supporting study. Elaboration based on SFC2014 data up to end of 2022, extracted in September 2023