

# Case Studies in Evaluation

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## *Case studies in evaluation*

- Case studies are often used but also often criticised in Structural Fund evaluations
- They are ‘too qualitative’, ‘too costly’ ‘inevitable biased’ ‘incapable of generalisation’
  - Often these criticisms are justified! Especially when case-based evaluations are poorly designed; or not used for appropriate purposes; or rely on inappropriate methods ....

## *Getting the foundations right*

Useful and reliable case studies depend on some well-understood foundations or principles, including being clear about:

- Logic of CSs & when they are likely to add-value
  - Purposes – what CSs are able to do
    - Types of CSs
    - Main design choices
    - Choosing suitable methods
- Avoiding bias and assuring quality & reliability

## *Logic of CSs & when they are likely to add-value*

- CSs are intended to provide in-depth understandings of one particular evaluation 'object' – the 'case'

Especially suited to:

- Complex programmes: with multiple causes & effects that interact with each other

*and*

- Programmes embedded or adapted to their context

*Or both.....*

## *Logic of CSs & when they are likely to add-value*

- The interaction of multiple causes and effects suggests a unit of analysis where the case as 'system' is understood as a whole, rather than relying on isolated variables taken out of context
- This is why CSs emphasise 'within case analysis' – looking at the way patterns and 'configurations' affect outcomes rather than searching for a single cause or 'silver bullet'

## *Logic of CSs & when they are likely to add-value*

Example 1: Take-up of grants and loans by enterprises is uneven across administrative areas and nobody knows why

Found to depend both on ownership structure and cash reserves of firms; but is also affected by local decisions of financial intermediaries; *and* the availability of alternative sources of funds from national programmes for similar but not identical purposes...

A survey of firms or examination of the records of banks will not capture these causal interactions

## *Logic of CSs & when they are likely to add-value*

Example 2: Because of different labour market and sectoral structures combined with differential skill profiles as a result of previous investments in technical education, local projects were allowed to adapt their programmes to match local circumstances

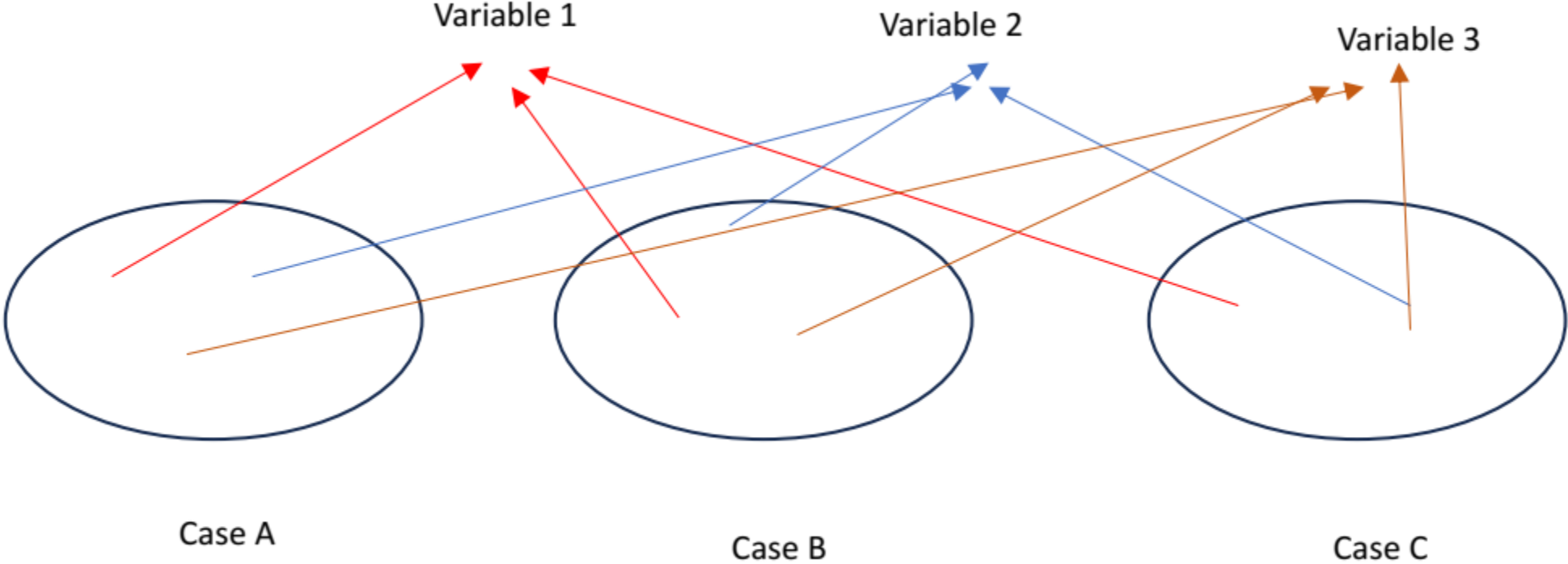
It was difficult to understand scheme take-up, quality of training offered or skills that resulted from a standard analysis of monitoring and survey data as this did not capture the effects of different programme configurations across different localities

## *Logic of CSs & when they are likely to add-value*

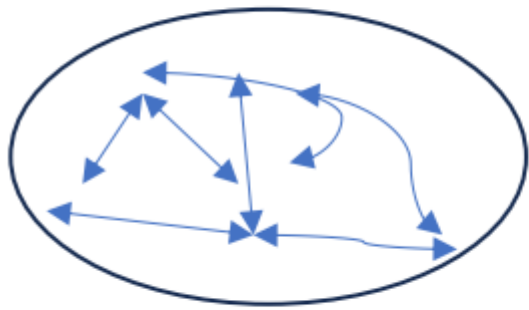
- The added value of CSs are strongest when Programmes and interventions are complex and embedded; & when implementation contexts are not standard
- CSs rely on understanding patterns of causes and effects in context rather than on variables as in frequentist statistics
- Even when Programmes are complex and contexts are not standard, CSs can fulfil very different evaluation purposes



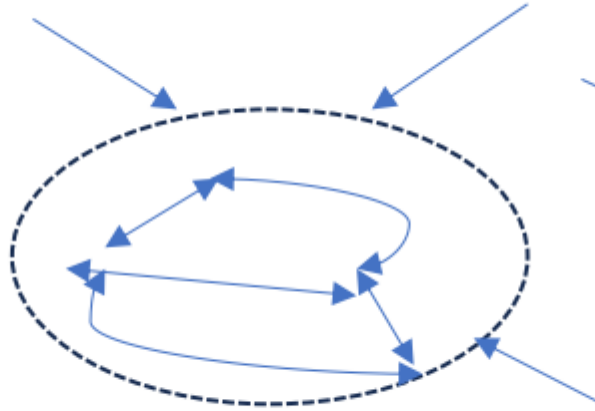
# The Logic of Variables



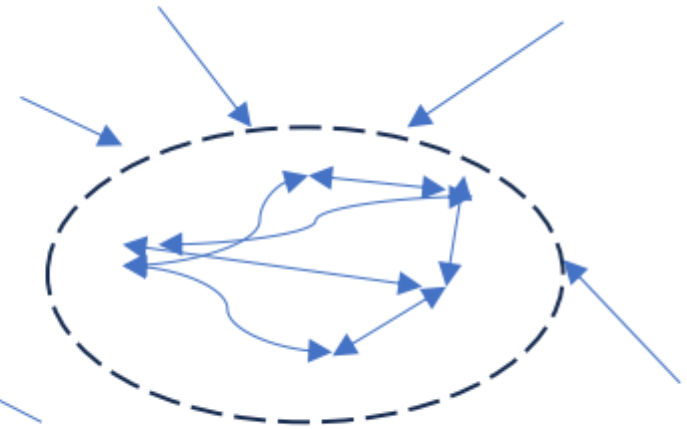
# The Logic of 'Cases'



Case A



Case B



Case C

## *Different purposes of Case Studies – which may be.....*

- *Illustrative* – when you need a detailed example to communicate what sits underneath a technical description of a policy intervention
- *Exploratory* – when something is new or little understood - key factors & relationships are not yet known – even description is difficult – what does the circular economy mean in a peri-urban region?
- *Explanatory* – for example, *why* some marginalised groups reject a grant scheme or why SMEs in some regions are more successful ‘internationalising’ than others
  - *Causal* – when, as is common in complex interventions, statistical or counterfactual methods are not able to distinguish cause & effect
- *Understanding ‘critical incidents’* – in crises or when unexpected events occur CSs can be deployed to unpick what was not predicted

# *Designing Case Studies*

Given the diversity of CSs we cannot expect a standard design for all CS evaluations. However, there are three design choices that need to be made up-front:

- 1. Defining the 'unit of analysis' i.e., deciding what is the case? This design choice sets the parameters for CS scope, scale and focus*
- 2. Balancing a clear purpose or roadmap with flexibility – a design choice often described as 'progressive focussing'*
- 3. Case selection based on some notion of types/typologies not on variable distribution – 'purposive sampling' rather than statistical sampling*

## *Defining 'the case' – or unit of analysis*

What we call the 'case' is usually determined by:

- Pressing problems or puzzles – for example something isn't working or how do we meet the needs of a marginalised group of beneficiaries – problems and puzzles usually define CS focus
- Programme architecture, timing or territorial reach - for example in ERDF one or many OPs, Policy Instruments or projects; one or many territorial units; one or many programming periods.... Architectures usually defines scope and scale
- Existing knowledge or theories – which shapes EQs and further down the line methodological choice: the balance between description & explanation; or between theory validating/testing or theory-building

## *Purpose, flexibility and 'progressive focussing'*

### *Case studies must balance purpose with flexibility*

- CSs are not static, they unfold - important to allow for the unexpected! For example, defining the unit of analysis gives a CS an *initial* focus, which is further defined by formulating EQs and by taking account of any 'theory' that exists
- However, in case-study methodology we speak of 'progressive focusing'

*"The transition from stage to stage, as the investigation unfolds, occurs as the problem areas become progressively clarified and redefined"*

(Parlett & Hamilton 1972)

- All CSs need a roadmap & preliminary tools to begin, but they need to be open to revision during the journey....

## *Case selection & purposive sampling*

- To an extent defining the case as a 'unit of analysis' also aids case selection – the case has to match both the practical realities of what we mean by OPs, policy instruments and territories in ERDF and CP *and* be able to exemplify theoretical assumptions - if there is a theory to 'validate' or 'test'
- However, case selection in CS evaluation is usually based on multiple characteristics rather than a single dominant variable
  - The usual approach in CS evaluation, is to construct typologies - a classification of potential cases made up of sets of characteristics and to intentionally or 'purposively' sample to adequately represent the main 'types' within the typology

## *Case selection & purposive sampling*

- Using typologies is especially important when comparative case studies are planned
- CSs where the purpose is explanation or causal analysis cannot rely on a single case – they gain their strength when evidence from varied cases set in similar and different contexts are compared
- A well-constructed typology allows for comparator cases (or case examples) to be selected so as to disentangle the effects that different within-case configurations in different contexts have on the problem or puzzle of interest



## *Choosing suitable methods: data collection*

- Defining the case also frames methods/techniques & data requirements - knowing the CS focus, specifying EQs and typologies points towards method choice
- In terms of data collection Case Studies are 'method agnostic' and while both quantitative and qualitative methods are used, qualitative methods able to describe interactions and behaviours in depth are especially common
- Not only interviews but often *observations* (e.g., of meetings) or even *participant observation* in which an evaluator sits in on Committees and asks questions; and *longitudinal methods that use panels*, cohorts, diaries, time-series data or repeated cross-sectional data

## *Choosing suitable methods: structuring & analysing data*

- The traditional ethnographic CS favoured participant observation and interpretations that were mainly subjective – CSs still live under the shadow of this ‘interpretative’ model!
- CS can use a wide range of analytic methods – interview summaries; content analysis of documents sometimes computer aided; ways of representing longitudinal data in charts and diagrams...
- Most useful are those methods that mirror *the logic of CSs* - analysing cases as holistically as possible and to represent patterns and configurations: network analysis, QCA, Process Tracing, Realist Configurations

## *Avoiding bias and ensuring quality & reliability*

If they are well-designed many criticisms of CSs would be answered, if:

- The scope and focus of CS is clearly justified
- The CS starts with a design but leaves space for progressive focussing
  - Cases are selected on the basis of empirically derived typologies
- The extent to which the CS validates existing theory or is more about contributing to new theory development is thought through
  - EQs are linked to user needs and theory where it exists

*But for some CSs still need extra safeguards!*

## *Avoiding bias and assuring quality & reliability*

Safeguards are partly to assure CS quality and partly to reassure those legitimately concerned about risks of bias, for example in the way qualitative evidence is interpreted

Such safeguards include:

- Developing QA processes & templates to assess the validity and reliability of both qualitative and quantitative data analysis and reporting
- Ensuring procedural transparency, e.g., explicit method and data protocols; keeping 'fieldwork diaries'; ensuring an auditable data trail
  - Reducing risks of biased or unsupported conclusions by methodological triangulation as well as systematically testing conclusions against 'rival' interpretations

## *Case studies in evaluation*

In any evaluation portfolio there will be some problems or puzzles that need to be explored in depth but are not amenable to standard methods that aggregate evidence from across many sites or cases

Often these problems or puzzles are complex with many causes and effects that interact; and are also much affected by the contexts in which they are embedded

In these circumstances, CSs can be a valuable part of an overall evaluation portfolio.....

Provided they are well designed and implemented!