

Minutes of the expert groups

Meeting of the Evaluation Network - DG REGIO

5-6 October 2023, in person meeting

(ALBERT BORSCHETTE Conference Centre, rue Froissart 36, Brussels, Room 2C)

1. Approval of the agenda and minutes of the previous meeting

Ana Pires, Head of Unit Evaluation and European Semester in DG REGIO, welcomed participants and introduced the agenda of the meeting. Colleagues from MS introduced themselves and new members of REGIO.B2 were introduced. The minutes of the previous EvalNet meeting in June 2023 were approved and uploaded to CIRCABC.

2. Nature of the meeting

Non-public in-presence meeting organised for members of the REGIO Evaluation Network expert group.

Thursday, 5th October PM

3. Overall update ex post evaluation and example of ex post evaluation of WP5 – ICT

REGIO.B2 presented updates on the progress of 2014-2020 ex post evaluations: evaluating offers for WP12 (Crisis) tender; ex post seminars organised for the coming weeks. MAs have been invited and are encouraged to attend. If any MAs have not received an invitation to seminars but would like to attend, please reach out to the Regio-Evaluation Functional Mailbox (REGIO-EVAL@ec.europa.eu).

CSES/CSIL – Ex-post WP5 ITC evaluation contractor) presented an overview of the methodology, progress and preliminary findings of the work package. Case studies on digital connectivity and broadband were presented.

- HR: asked about the selection process for case studies.
- Contractor from CSES: replied that a selection criterion is used based on the available data. The evaluability of the projects (namely whether they are completed/near completion, the accessibility of data) is taken into account in addition to other selection criteria.
- REGIO.B2: asked about the findings: to what extent were there investments in technology that became obsolete, and was this detected through the programming period? Does this question feature in the evaluation?
- Contractor from CSES: replied that the evaluation has considered the obsolescence of technologies and that accounting for the duration of projects is also key for this question.

4. Roundtable on 2014-2020 evaluation findings on cohesion policy

REGIO.B2 opened the topic with a presentation on the economic modelling work on the impact of 14-20 cohesion policy programmes at the macroeconomic level, on NUTS 2 regions. The impact of the policy was assessed using a spatial equilibrium model (RHOMOLO). The methodology and results of the modelling

were discussed. Main findings are that overall, cohesion policy interventions have a positive impact on the EU economy, with the policy investments producing an annual rate of return of ~4%. Furthermore, the policy has contributed to decreasing or limiting the increase in regional disparities, with the GDP impact being substantially larger in less developed regions. In the long run, all EU regions benefit from the policy.

- **PT:** carried out a macroeconomic evaluation 2 years ago in conjunction with the JRC, using RHOMOLO and QUEST. Similar assumptions were used, and very similar results were obtained. PT asked about the most appropriate model to use if both national and regional evolutions want to be explored.
- **HU:** is also conducting modelling work using their own model. The first results for 14-20 will be ready shortly, and HU looks forward to comparing results. HU will also carry out pre-modelling work for 21-27 using estimated expenditure. HU asked about the expenditure data used – whether reported by the selected projects, or the payments by the Commission to MS (which won't all be made in 2023). HU also asked for elaboration on the chart showing negative coefficients of effect at the NUTS-2 level.
- **REGIO.B2:** replied that RHOMOLO mimics QUEST, so the results obtained with QUEST are similar. The models are tools to tell a story rather than to produce numbers. REGIO followed the modelling work of PT closely and was glad to have reached corresponding conclusions. To HU: look forward to cross-comparing results. Negative coefficients are obtained as the resources needed to finance the policy are included in the model.

Roundtable on MS evaluation findings:

- **PL:** has completed several horizontal and programme-level evaluations, including over 100 impact evaluations of cohesion policy. PL also tries to use models, theory-based evaluation and counterfactual methodologies; the latter is not always used, as it has proven difficult to integrate. PL is also trying to include a territorial dimension in evaluations.
- **IT:** In Italy there is a strong interest in impact analysis, therefore IT is responding to this mandate by continuing the evaluation of 14-20 into the 21-27 cycle. IT has provided guidance to MAs to create continuity between the two cycles, as well as to give special consideration to impact analysis. For example, youth employment and digital skills in the south of Italy is receiving political attention.
- **PL:** has observed that evaluators are starting to use AI. There are opportunities as well as risks.
- **REGIO.B2:** replied that B2 has been discussing the topic of AI internally and running internal pilots that could be presented at the next session.
- **IT:** the Sicilia region has been thinking about AI, and this could be presented as a practical example.
- **HU:** has experienced difficulties with applying counterfactual methods, especially in social domains. This is different in the case of SMEs or financial instruments, as the data is more readily available. HU has worked on a Data Plan to tackle data challenges for impact evaluations.
 - o **REGIO.B2:** acknowledged the challenges. There will be a seminar on counterfactual methods in November and the topic could also feature in the Summer School.
- **FR:** in the previous programming period over 30 MAs conducted 6-8 impact evaluations each. One third of all evaluations were impact evaluations. Counterfactual analysis was limited to ESF evaluations. FR looks forward to the next programming period and is looking to develop impact evaluation at national level, using fiscal data for companies.
- **MT:** has carried out a thematic impact evaluation on SMEs with favorable findings. MT has encountered challenges in data availability. For the next programming period, MT will carry out data

availability studies to preempt data gaps as a first step. MT is launching an impact assessment on REACT-EU and is exploring the possibility of a counterfactual methodology.

- **AT**: mainly conducted theory-based impact evaluations for ERDF and used a counterfactual for SMEs (where there was control group data). It was challenging; AT is considering whether to repeat this methodology. Nonetheless it yielded good results. AT is busy contributing to the *ex post* evaluation, which is an interesting process but a lot of work for a small MS.
- **CZ**: finalised two evaluations for 14-20 (one on the partnership agreement, the other focusing on the regional level). CZ is organising 7-8 roundtables in the second half of November, where the relevant stakeholders will be invited to learn about the findings. CZ would like to use the findings for the post-27 period to determine where a priority shift is needed. CZ is organising an evaluation conference on November 8-9th; all are welcome to register and attend.
- **SE**: asked whether English translations of the 21-27 evaluation plans will be made available.
 - o **REGIO.B2**: replied that they will not, but machine translations can be made.

5. Evaluation activities – experiences from MS

PL: evaluation contractor Michał Wolański presented an impact evaluation of urban mobility investment from the 14-20 programming period. Wolański is enthusiastic about new evaluation methods such as using big data and measuring net effect in transport. The use of pilot studies for the *ex post* was found to be very useful for the evaluation process.

PT presented their evaluation plan for the 21-27 programming period. The context, approach, and main challenges were discussed. PT will have a national plan to guide OP plans. The Helpdesk provided valuable input in the plan's development. Challenges identified: the need to strengthen capacity, improve communication, and strengthen the use of and follow-up actions for evaluations.

- **HU**: stated that the two biggest projects for the 7-13 and 14-20 periods were metro projects. Therefore, PL's presentation gave some helpful ideas for how to evaluate such projects in HU.

Friday, 6th October AM

6. Innovative evaluation practices

(REGIO.B2) shared their own approach to innovative practices. Interventions included a reflection of current practices and lessons learned for future evaluation planning.

Roundtable discussion:

- **HU**: evaluations are long processes which start with stakeholder dialogue. Stakeholders are involved at all stages, which is key for the success of the evaluation design and outcomes.
- **LT**: has a good relationship with the state revenue service's database and as a result does not have many problems with data accessibility. LT often uses counterfactuals in evaluations.
- **SE**: there was a meta-evaluation carried out by the national expert authorities 10-15 years ago. Another may take place in the near future. SE did a lot of thematic evaluations in the 14-20 programming period but may shift to evaluating at the programme level.
- **REGIO.B2**: asked if there is any experience of peer reviewing evaluation work, such as between evaluation departments of MS.

- **IT**: there was a lot of collective reflection on national evaluation systems through workshops held in 2023, thinking ahead to 21-27 evaluation plans. IT has started to involve socio-economic partners such as local development coalitions and is working with municipalities to evaluate their strategies and implementation. It is important to streamline evaluation internally.
- **EE**: the administrative burden for evaluations was high. Evaluators can now access the monitoring system themselves, which alleviates some of the burden. Regarding peer reviewing: this was raised with evaluators but was met with reluctance. EE has a central database of recommendations and wants evaluations to better steer spending review processes.
- **HU**: has decided to conduct early, rapid evaluations at the beginning of the programming period. This is also to assist MAs in preparing for the mid-term review.
- **IT**: monitoring and statistical data (regional) is publicly available for evaluators to use. IT is looking to have more statistical data (e.g. sectoral) available to support evaluations. There is still a timid use of big data overall.
- **PT**: has discussed with the national statistics office the data they would like to have available for the counterfactual on enterprises at the start of the planning process. PT spent 1.5 years working with the office as a first step in the evaluation process – a practice to be continued. PT also shares data from EU funds with the national bank.
- **IT**: is trying to use more technologies in their evaluations. They do not have a framework on results from cohesion policy evaluations but are trying to tackle this. IT is also trying to develop and use more *ex ante* impact assessments.
- **EE**: is encouraging experts to use AI, which now features in Terms of References. But AI should not be the main methodology used and evaluators must triangulate if AI methods are used.

7. Cohesion Data Stories

REGIO.B2 opened the segment on updates to the Cohesion Open Data platform and presentations on the latest data stories. **REGIO.B2** also presented the platform's recent and next updates, which include: recently published data and charts on EU payments 2021-2027, integration with Kohesio, and the first implementation figures due in March 2024 (to be updated biannually).

- **FR**: How exhaustive is Kohesio (are all projects featured)?
- **REGIO.B2** replied that Kohesio captures all projects published in the programmes' list of operations. MS are encouraged to reach out to the Kohesio team - REGIO-KOHESIO@ec.europa.eu - if a refreshed list of projects is missing.

8. Current monitoring challenges – Tour de Table

REGIO.B2 opened the discussion on monitoring challenges and asked MS: are you aware of any issues with setting up monitoring systems?

Tour de Table of MS monitoring challenges:

- **FR**: the main difficulties are with the collection of indicators after one year of operation due to contractual arrangements with beneficiaries. FR received feedback from MAs in July, when they were declaring their first indicators: some could not be entered in the system.

- **HU:** is discussing internally how indicators for soon to be phased-out projects can be cut. HU had a monitoring system audit. For 21-27, HU has started uploading data in SFC, which MAs have found to be cumbersome. Discussions about automation were welcomed by HU.
- **IT:** is working to produce a technical note on how to monitor projects started in 14-20 that will be completed in 21-27. IT is working with the Ministry of Economy and hopes to share the final note with the network. IT is trying to make technical changes for the new programming period, such as using the same monitoring system as for the RRF. For 14-20, MAs submitted data separately to the national monitoring system and SFC – discrepancies resulting from this need to be resolved.

REGIO.B2 presented the concept of 'selected operation'.

- **FR:** 'selected operation' is understood divergingly by MAs; asked about the correct interpretation.
- **REGIO.B2** replied that while key elements related to selection are set out in the regulation, the responsibility falls on the MA to interpret how to collect and report data on selected operations. It is important that MS/ programmes have a consistent approach .
- **HR:** perhaps the most secure date to use is when the grant contract between MA and project promoter is signed.
- **IT:** is working on another technical note to guide MAs on how to input data in the national monitoring system. IT finds it important to have the same definition across the board in order to give the Commission consistent data. Projects are assigned a unique national code once they are defined – this is when they are determined as a 'selected operation'.
- **HR:** national databases do not have the same identifiers as internal databases. An agreement has been made to have a common identifier (the VAT number).

9. 2021 – 2027 Data transmission developments

REGIO.B2 presented on data transmission developments for 21-27. REGIO is initially planning to only publish data (including for indicators) for the two semesters next year (December 2023 and June 2024). This is a preliminary approach while a new system with checks is being set up.

- **AT:** split projects into several intervention field categories, but this resulted in an error message while transferring the data. This could be the reason for the results.
- **REGIO.B2:** welcomed bilateral discussions with any MS that faced similar technical issues.
- **PT:** is interested in developing data transmission through web services to reduce the administrative burden. PT has asked IT colleagues to contact the SFC team.
- **HU:** asked when the next transmission will take place and requested feedback ahead of this.
- **REGIO.B2:** replied that the next data transmission is at the end of November. MS are encouraged to email the functional mailbox – regio-eval@ec.europa.eu - and B2 will arrange to send country extracts.
- **IT:** has some blocking controls in national monitoring systems for data that did not pass the check, but this data is not corrected and returned. IT tried to shift from blocking to warnings in the previous programming period, but even with warnings the data was not resubmitted. IT is now trying to implement a better warning system to give more information to MAs.
- **REGIO.B2:** shares this experience. B2 will have a user testing seminar with geographic desks. B2 would like to identify the most implausible values, to avoid overburdening geographic desks.
- **FR:** would be very interested in having aggregated data published more often than biannually.

- **REGIO.B2:** this is the preliminary approach while the system with checks is set up. There would then be a move to publishing 5 reporting cycles the following year.
- **IT:** asked whether there are plans to publish 2 datasets for 21-27: one on finances planned (detailed) and the daily updated financial plans. The 14-20 versions of these datasets were frequently used resources.
- **REGIO.B2:** the dataset on finances planned (detailed) should be public already. B2 has asked the finance unit to make available the data for financial plans; this request will be reinforced.
- **HU:** would also like more frequent data but only if the data is reliable.
- **REGIO.B2:** is rather confident that the financial data will be accurate but are practicing caution due to it being the start of the programming period as well as new table templates and technologies. Nonetheless, if other delegations are interested in more frequent data this will be taken into consideration.

10. SFC2021: Exploring the latest developments

Mr Himanen, DG EMPL presented on the developments to the SFC2021 platform. The SFC support team is available to contact in case of further questions.

Q&A:

- **REGIO.B2:** asked how to best connect MS with the IT teams building the web services links.
- **DG EMPL:** replied that the contact details of the teams who may be active can be obtained.
- **DE:** there are groups of Bundesländer who share monitoring systems and would also be interested in knowing how to connect with the responsible IT teams.
- **REGIO.B2:** asked if it is possible for MS colleagues to extract aggregated data from their national programmes, or whether the data can only be extracted programme by programme.
- **DG EMPL:** replied that through the data warehouse, there is the possibility of publishing reports through the SFC application. The reporting team would have to prepare the report upon request.
- **SE:** asked about whether an Excel format for extracting/printing results from SFC will be made available in addition to the PDF format.
- **DG EMPL:** replied that there are no plans for an Excel format.

11. AOB

- **REGIO.B2** presented the results of the feedback survey circulated among MS.
- **REGIO.B2** thanked MS for their participation. The topic of AI should feature in the next meeting. B2 has taken on board the comments and feedback from the last meeting and the survey results. The topic of counterfactual will be raised again, and in the meantime, MS are encouraged to participate in the counterfactual seminar on November 9th. The contract for the new Evaluation Helpdesk has been signed. B2 is starting preparations for the evaluation conference in 2025.
- **PT:** is hosting a conference on October 20th discussing the global evaluation plan with stakeholders. All interested parties are invited to attend.

12. Next steps

The next Evaluation Network meeting is planned for Q2 2024 as an online meeting.

List of participants

The meeting was attended by 31 governmental experts from 19 Member States, 16 representatives from DG REGIO and 1 from DG EMPL, 2 external contractors from Work Package 5 (ICT) of the 2014-2020 ex post evaluation (CSES/CSIL) and 1 external contractor who presented on transport ex post evaluations in PL (Wolański).