



Peer Review on Experimental methods for impact evaluation of social inclusion policies

Peer Country Paper – Slovenia

Lessons learnt from the Slovene experience
with the pilot social activation project and
its assessment

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1 Introduction

This paper has been prepared for the Peer Review on experimental methods for impact evaluation of social inclusion policies held in Spain. In order to potentially inform the host country's approach, the paper provides an assessment of impact evaluation methods used in Slovenia in the field of social inclusion policies.

For information on the host country policy example, please refer to the Host Country Paper.

2 Situation in Slovenia

Slovenia has traditionally got a fairly strong social policy with measures that are part of the national system: the right to a decent minimum income for people that cannot provide for themselves (means-tested) and other social benefits (insurance or non-insurance based, means-tested or needs-based), public social services covering different life risks and life situations (with centres of social work and their local offices covering the whole population with their services) and complementary social programmes provided by NGOs and funded through annual tenders of Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities (MLFSA) and other national and local sources for specific vulnerable groups or risk situations.

The main national strategic document in the social policy area is the Resolution on the national social security/assistance programme for the period 2022-2030, with three main objectives: reducing the risk of poverty and increasing social inclusion; improving the availability and variety and ensuring the accessibility of services and programmes; and ensuring the conditions for public social services and NGOs providing social programmes and strengthening the quality and development in social care.

In the last decade, the at-risk-of-poverty and the AROPE (at risk of poverty or social exclusion) rates in Slovenia have been the highest in 2013 and 2014 (14.5% and 20.4% respectfully, in both years), as the consequence of several years of economic crisis, governmental austerity measures and also the changes made in the system of social transfers. New social legislation implemented in 2012 brought more targeting and stricter conditions and rules of means-testing. After the pressure and discussions in professional public and in media, the following years were characterised by gradual changes (amending) of social legislation back to loosening the conditions and criteria for entitlement to minimum income and other social benefits. The at-risk-of poverty rate and the AROPE have been slowly decreasing over the years and stand at 12.1% (the poverty risk) and 13.3% (AROPE) in 2022.

The highest numbers of beneficiaries of minimum income (MI) in Slovenia were in 2020 and 2021, which was largely related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the combination of more people needing income support on one hand, and the government approach of less restrictive (more general) granting the right to MI during the pandemic, on the other. In mid-2021, MI was received by about 5.2% of population, while in mid-2023 there was about 3.6% of population receiving it. Around 20% of households on MI are families with dependent children.

The idea of social activation of the (very) long-term unemployed, hard-to employ people and long-term beneficiaries of MI with complex social issues/challenges had been present in the national documents for several years, before it was finally designed and implemented on a pilot basis with major co-funding from the ESF during the 2014-2020 period. Against the tradition of largely focusing on the benefits, this was the first attempt in Slovenia towards a more active policy approach for beneficiaries of MI. Its main aim was social and labour market integration of people that were distant from the labour market and/or were facing different complex problems.

Different types of programmes of social activation were developed during the pilot implementation of the project (2017-2022) for different target groups, with the entry point for participants being local centres of social work and employment offices. Participation in social activation was done on voluntary basis (not conditioned) and it did not affect in any way the entitlement of people to social benefits. Furthermore, the participants received on top of their social benefits (MI and other benefits), a monthly financial reward for participation in social activation programmes as well as some reimbursement of travel costs and lunch money.

3 Assessment of methods for impact evaluation of social policies in Slovenia

While the evaluation of policy measures in employment policy (especially evaluation of different state interventions in crisis periods and evaluation of active labour policy measures and programmes) is common in Slovenia, in social policy there is much less experience with it and no experience at all with Randomised Control Trials or even with the use of control groups in evaluation.

Evaluation in social policy area is mostly carried out in pilot projects, especially the ones co-funded from the EU (ESF) funds or different international tenders. It is very rare that the evaluation is planned already at the stage of the design and planning of the project or measure.

Besides, what is labelled as evaluation is often more monitoring and assessment of the process (i. e. the implementation and the circumstances of the measures) and only in some cases also the outcomes of the project. Such cases are, for example, the assessment of pilot project on support to families evicted from the rented apartments due to indebtedness, the evaluation of pilot projects on integrated long-term care, monitoring and assessment of the implementation of social activation.

The following sections focus on the pilot social activation in Slovenia and the methodology used for its monitoring and assessment.

3.1 The design and implementation of the social activation project

The pilot social activation project in Slovenia was carried out on the territory of whole Slovenia and was thus a huge and complex project, involving many actors in different roles. The key actor with the overall responsibility for the project was MLFSA. The Social Protection Institute of Republic of Slovenia (SPIRS) served in different roles through the project – first as a consultancy body (e.g. prepared the background study) and since 2018 as the body monitoring and assessing the process and outcomes.

The pilot project was composed of the social activation system and the social activation programmes.

The system was structured parallel to the social and employment systems (not as part of the existing ones). The central point was the Project Unit that was established at the MLFSA (Directorate of Social Affairs) where 48 people were newly employed, the majority as coordinators of social activation and some as managers of the project. The role of coordinators was central to the project, as they, on one hand, worked with candidates for participation (interviews and motivation) and supported the participants through the programmes, while on the other hand they coordinated the stakeholders of the project and encouraged their cooperation. The coordinators were dislocated in 15 so-called regional mobile units (regional offices), all over Slovenia (3 to 4 coordinators per unit).

In all local centres of social work and local employment offices there were professionals appointed to function as contact persons for social activation. Contact persons were in charge of preparing lists of candidates for participation in social activation programmes and informing them about the possibilities of participation and the regionally available programmes. After, the coordinators took over and performed individual interviews with the candidates to the point where individual agreement on participation was prepared and signed by the participant.

The social activation programme providers were selected by the MLFSA on five public tenders, that also defined the types of programmes, the content and the target groups for each type of programmes. The first four public tenders were for the programmes implemented in the period mid-2017 – autumn 2019, and the fifth tender for programmes implemented in the period autumn 2019 – autumn 2022. In the first period there were three types of programmes implemented: long ones (11 months; target group: unemployed for at least one year, aged up to 49 years), short ones (3 months; two target groups: long-term beneficiaries of MI; immigrant women) and intermediate programmes (6 months; target group: mixed, mostly beneficiaries of MI with different complex problems). In the second period there were only 6-month programmes, but for three different target groups: mixed long-term unemployed, mostly beneficiaries of MI and with different complex problems; immigrant women from different cultural background; Roma women.

All programmes had social and employment contents, all included individual and group work with participants and all had some practical job-oriented skills training or on-the-job placement by the end. The groups of participants were relatively small, up to 15 participants per programme. They were expected to be present in the programme activities for 4 hours per working day.

The programme providers selected at the public tenders had to be non-profit organisations with some previous experience of work/activities with the vulnerable groups. In fact, they were from different backgrounds: some from more employment area (employment of disabled, social enterprises), some more from education and training area and some with experience of providing social programmes. As was shown by the monitoring and assessment, the background of organisations providing the programmes influenced the way they implemented the programmes and worked with the participants (which elements they stressed more). The other important factor influencing the programmes was the local environment, with different social and employment situations that affected the options of participants after the programmes.

In the period mid-2017 – autumn 2019 there were all together 42 organisations selected at four public tenders to provide social activation programmes in all regions of Slovenia (the locations of programmes were predetermined by the tenders). In this period there were all together 72 social activation programmes and 29 workshops carried out. In the period autumn 2019 – autumn 2022 altogether 22 organisations were selected for the implementation of social activation programmes and they carried out 195 six-month programmes.

For all types of programmes, the MLFSA set the main indicator of success: positive exit of participants from the programme. The exits were checked on the 28th day after the conclusion of the programmes (they were checked during the exit interview of coordinators of social activation with each participant). The following exits/transitions were defined as positive: employment (any type, including temporary and on different contracts), education and training (regular or part-time, short or long duration; any form or training – not only employment oriented), participation in active employment policy measures (public works, on-the-job training, work trial and similar), registered as unemployed at the public employment office. The goal (the criterion for success of the programme) was set at 25% of participants that entered the programme transiting to positive exit after the conclusion of the programme. All programmes reached the set criterion, but the main problem was not

the exits/transitions of participants that concluded the programmes (since the positive exits were broadly defined) but the drop-out of participants from the programmes.

Motivation of the candidates for enrolment to programmes as well as motivation of participants to stay in the programmes was the main problem. As the participation was completely voluntary and the decision not to participate or the decision to drop-out from the programme had no consequences for them, the turn-down and drop-out rates were very high. For example: from all the candidates for social activation identified by centres of social work and employment offices only about 25% decided to participate (and signed the agreement on participation). About 45% of participants that signed the agreement on participation dropped out at some stage during the programme duration (terminated the agreement). At the end, only about 12% of people originally on the lists of candidates concluded the programmes (stayed in the programmes until the end). In numbers (for the whole duration of pilot project): there were 20 633 persons on the lists of candidates for participation in social activation programmes; 5 051 persons signed the agreement on participation (enrolment to programmes), 2 234 persons stayed in the programmes until the completion.

All main stakeholders put a lot of effort into motivation and support of participants, especially the social activation coordinators and programme providers. The reasons for drop-out varied: from the fact that the participant did not feel accepted in the group or had conflicts with colleagues or the professionals of the programme, to not liking the content of the programme, finding a job or another activity, and to not being able to participate on regular (everyday) basis or to drop back to their acute problems (mental health, addictions, domestic problems or similar).

3.2 The methodology of monitoring and assessment of social activation implementation

The Social Protection Institute of Republic of Slovenia was contracted by MLFSA for the activities of monitoring and assessment of the pilot project. This was not planned from the beginning and only started in 2018 (actually it was carried out in the periods 2018-2019 and 2021-2022), but it covered the whole duration of the project.

While preparing the methodological plan for monitoring and assessment, two main problems were faced: first, the complexity of the project with many different dimensions, actors and stakeholders, and second the inability to access the personal data of participants in the social activation programmes (due to personal data protection rules). Actually, many data on participants were collected in the process of their participation and there was an application developed to which different context and progress reports on individual participants were uploaded – the Institute researchers made use of the anonymised data from the application to compare the situations of participants in different types of programmes and their exits (and outcomes for the participants).

The monitoring and assessment of implementation referred to different elements of programmes implementation, good and bad practices and the exits from the programmes, but as well to the functioning of the social activation system and to cooperation of the key actors and development of a common, more integrated approach of support to persons from vulnerable groups. The key focus of monitoring and assessment was on the aspect of gains and benefits for the participants (what did they gain from the participation) and also on the cooperation between the key actors (especially the employment offices and centres of social work).

Mixed methods (quantitative and qualitative) were used for gathering the data and for analysing it. Several surveys were issued (at different points in time – different project stages) for all key actors: contact persons at local centres of social work and contact persons at employment offices (two surveys), coordinators of social activation (three

surveys), programme providers (two surveys) and programme participants (one survey; with the help of coordinators who sent the survey materials to participants). Besides, focus groups with the policy makers involved in the pilot project were held (two focus groups), as well as field visits to selected programme sites (including the interviews with professionals in the programmes). The data on participants from the MLFSA application on participants in the programme (anonymised) were analysed by type of the programme (thus by target group).

A large amount of data was collected, and it was quite a challenge to structure it in a way to get to the conclusions. All together there were five interim reports produced (each with a different focus) and two final reports (for two different periods of the monitoring and assessment project).

At the end, the researchers tried to answer whether the pilot project was successful from the three different levels of observation: for individuals that participated (positive effects and improvements for participants), for actors and stakeholders at the local level (the cooperation developed) and from the (social) system point of view (macro level). The conclusion was that the pilot project showed results and improvements for the included individuals (although the programmes were more successful in terms of social goal, i.e. in the empowerment of participants, building a positive approach to problem solving in life, rising self-confidence, building competencies for participation in different areas, including IT competencies, etc., than in terms of employment goals), of course those that participated in the programmes to the end. It also improved the cooperation between the stakeholders, especially between centres of social work and employment offices and the consultation on common users of services. The most ambiguous is the assessment of the success of the pilot project at systemic level of the national social policy. As the perceptions of social activation and its goals (and therefore the expectations) among different stakeholders were not completely aligned from the beginning, this did not improve through the project implementation, and it influenced the way different stakeholders saw the success or unsuccess of the project. One proof of that is also that after the conclusion of the pilot project the social activation was only very partially integrated into the social system. The coordinators of social activation (a bit more than half of them as others found jobs elsewhere) were re-employed at centres of social work, but the social activation programmes are not existing since autumn 2022. They are expected to start again with co-funding from the new ESF programming period.

4 Assessment of success factors and transferability

The perception of whether the social activation was a successful measure in Slovenia varies among different stakeholders to the extent that it is somewhat difficult to give a uniform answer. Basically, there are three types of perception about the social activation experience in Slovenia among the stakeholders: some see it as a very positive measure that helped many people in vulnerable situations and even if it did not result in high flow to employment, it had strong social integration and empowerment impacts on participants. Others acknowledge some positive outcomes of the measure but emphasise that the ratio between the inputs (different resources, especially finances and human resources) and the outputs (objective results for the participants) is unfavourable and that there should be more results for such a high input. Some stakeholders also made a negative assessment, seeing the results of the measure as simply not sufficient or hardly visible.

Actors that were actively involved in the implementation in the field (i.e. the coordinators of social activation and staff of programme providers) are much more positive about social activation and its results. Also, professionals of employment offices are more positive than professionals at centres of social work. At the national level, the ministry responsible for the action assesses the programme as positive. The coordinators are now employed at the social work centres where they mostly work on providing the service of personal assistance.

The new public tender for providers of social activation programmes is expected in 2024, after nearly two years without the programmes.

The reports on monitoring and assessment of the pilot project offered numerous findings and conclusions and many of them are more general and refer also to the process of designing the measures and involvement of stakeholders.

- The pilot projects should be implemented on a reasonable scale not immediately on a national level, as it is very complex and difficult to assess them if they are too broad.
- The clear setting of project goals is important, as it also influences the expectations of different stakeholders. It goes without saying that it is very important to have a common understanding of the goals among different stakeholders.
- Personal commitment and believe in the action/programme among the main actors seem crucial when working with people from vulnerable groups.
- Social activation should offer longer support; when the programmes are completed there should be different supported paths (a continuation) for people to keep their motivation for changes and their inclusion.
- People (participants) who are seemingly in the same circumstances or share similar characteristics (e.g. long-term unemployment, lack of resources, low education) are still very heterogenous and need individual approaches. It is unrealistic to expect quick solutions (employment or similar) as many of them have additional problems that are not visible and need longer term support. Social integration of people from vulnerable groups is not on-time programme but a lasting support.
- The creaming effect does not always result in better outcomes. Putting people that need less support into programmes that were created for people who need more and longer lasting support can have adverse effects on their motivation to stay in programmes.
- The circumstances that influence most the outcome from the programmes are the local employment situation and the type of enterprises in the region as well as previous experiences and practices of programme providers (what type of organisation is providing the programmes).
- There should be more positive promotion of the measure so that it is visible in society and among stakeholders (on national and local level).

5 Questions

We commend the effort of Spain in setting up a national minimum income scheme and in acknowledging the need of accompanying active inclusion programs for different target groups. The whole structure of evaluation of 34 social inclusion measures that can be scaled up provided they pass the test of random control trial (RCT) evaluation, and the number of involved actors is very impressive and so is the commitment of all actors.

Also, we congratulate Spain for the approval of the Law on the Evaluation of Public Policies (2022), which seems as a landmark towards evidence-driven decision making. With this Spain institutionalised the evaluation of public policies and regulated its practice with the aim of contributing to the improvement of the effective and efficient use of public resources and adding transparency to decision making processes.

Questions (comments):

1. The host country paper focuses on the mechanics and the scientific rigor of the evaluation technique. However, it does not touch upon how the 34 policy measures

were designed. This is quite relevant because the designing phase is critical for the success of the measure. Prior to the new minimum income policy and pilots, it seems that in Spain there was some scatter experience on minimum income and activation policies that could have been already a good starting reference for the policy design (or is it relying on international best practice?). Was this previous experience taken into account when designing the new strategies? Also: policy impact of the measure might change if the population was already subject to a pre-existing activation policy or policy stimulus. What is your opinion in this regard?

2. How do you deal with the issue of disclosure of policy intention to the control group without affecting their behavior? Do you not tell the person or group of persons that they are subject to observation? When there is no background of policy in place this can be easier as one can choose a group of individuals. But if there is already policy in place this could be more complicated. Please, also explain more on the issue of individual data protection and ethical issues related to control groups. Could you elaborate in general on typical ethical concerns the review board is concerned about?
3. RTC seems most relevant when there is no policy in place. How relevant is RTC for assessing the existing policies covering the full universe of recipients? What method of evaluation is (in your opinion) the best to assess the effectiveness of an existing program?
4. How RTC takes into account or controls for external circumstances? For example, an active labor market policy targeted to the employed can be different in a region that has labor shortages than in other?

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Annex 1 – Summary table

The main points covered by the paper are summarised below.

Situation in the peer country

- Slovenia traditionally maintains a robust social policy which includes the right to a decent minimum income, various social benefits (insurance or non-insurance based), and public social services.
- Slovenia experienced peak at-risk-of-poverty rates in 2013 and 2014 due to economic crisis and austerity measures. Legislation changes in 2012 brought stricter means-testing, with subsequent gradual amendments. By 2022, at-risk-of-poverty and AROPE rates decreased to 12.1% and 13.3%, respectively. Beneficiaries of minimum income increased during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021.
- While social policy traditionally mainly focused on benefits, since 2017 Social Activation was introduced. Key objectives of the Slovenian Resolution on the national social security/assistance programme for 2022-2030 cover reducing poverty, enhancing social inclusion, improving service accessibility, and strengthening the quality and development in social care.

Assessment of experimental methods for impact evaluation of social policies

- In Slovenia, social policy evaluation is limited and often conducted in pilot projects, mainly co-funded by EU funds or international tenders and no experience with Randomised Control Trials can be found. Evaluation in social policy is typically more focused on monitoring and assessing processes rather than outcomes.
- The Pilot Social Activation Project in Slovenia coordinated by the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs, and Equal Opportunities included various programmes targeting specific groups of individuals distant from the labour market. Challenges included high voluntary drop-out rates among participants. The Social Protection Institute of the Republic of Slovenia conducted monitoring and assessment for the pilot project. Challenges included project complexity and limitations in accessing personal data, leading to the use of anonymized data for analysis.
- The pilot project showed positive outcomes at the individual level, emphasizing social goals over employment goals for participants. Improved cooperation between local stakeholders was observed, but challenges in aligning perceptions and goals persisted at the national, policy, and systemic levels.

Assessment of success factors and transferability

- Recommendations include starting pilot projects on a reasonable scale before national implementation, clear goal-setting and a shared understanding of goals among stakeholders, personal commitment among key actors, longer-term support post-program, and individualized approaches for diverse groups
- For successful social activation, recommendation include recognizing the heterogeneity within seemingly similar groups and addressing long-term support needs, as well as acknowledging the influence of general employment conditions and regional enterprises on outcomes.

Questions

- Were previous experiences in Spain used as reference for the policy design or does the new pilot relying on international best practice?
- How to deal with the issue of disclosure of policy intention to the control group and intervention group without affecting their behaviour?

- Which are individual data protection and ethical issues related RCT and which types of ethical concerns the review board is concerned about?
- What method of evaluation is best to assess the effectiveness of an existing program?
- How RTC takes into account or controls for external circumstances and factors?

Annex 2 – Example of relevant practice

Name of the practice:	Social Activation project
Year of implementation:	2017 – 2022
Coordinating authority:	Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities of Slovenia
Objectives:	Establish a nationwide system for social activation programmes focusing on different target groups at a distance from the labour market.
Main activities:	Different types of voluntary programmes developed for different target groups, with the entry point being local centres of social work and employment offices, including individual and group sessions, job-oriented training and job placement: long-term unemployed, long-term beneficiaries of minimum income and beneficiaries with different complex problems, immigrant women, Roma women.
Results so far:	Since 2018, the Social Protection Institute of Republic of Slovenia monitoring and assessing the process and outcomes. Mixed methods were used (quantitative and qualitative) to evaluate the results: surveys, two focus groups, field visits, analysis of data from application on participants. Main challenges observed were the motivation of candidates and high drop-out. The pilot project showed positive outcomes at the individual level, emphasizing social goals over employment goals for participants and some improved cooperation between local stakeholders was observed. Social activation was only partially integrated into the national social system after the project's conclusion.

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