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EVALUATION IN THE EU: AN INSIGHT INTO THE ECOSYSTEM, PRACTICES, AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

This article provides an in-depth analysis of the program evaluation ecosystem within the European Union (EU), focusing on the methodologies, practices, and the lessons learned from various evaluation processes, especially those regarding the 2014–2020 programming period. It aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of how evaluation practices within the EU contribute to policy development, program effectiveness, and overall sustainable growth. The discussion extends to the lessons learned from past and ongoing evaluations. This includes insights into the challenges faced, such as aligning diverse program objectives with overarching EU policies, managing multi-level coordination, ensuring data quality, and addressing the dynamic nature of program environments.

The present study also aims to provide a thorough understanding of the evaluation ecosystem in the EU, offering insights into its complexities, the sophistication of its methodologies and its significant role in steering the EU towards effective policy-making and sustainable growth. Through this analysis, the article contributes to the broader conversation on the importance and impact of program evaluation in the context of EU governance and policy implementation.

Keywords: program evaluation, policy analysis, sustainable development, European Structural and Investment (ESI) funds, impact evaluation.

1. Introduction

Evaluation in the European Union encompasses a wide range of activities, from assessing the impact of legislative measures to the effectiveness of various EU-funded programs. These evaluations are critical for ensuring accountability, transparency, and the efficient use of resources. This paper explores the ecosystem of evaluation within the EU, examining the methodologies employed, the challenges faced, and the lessons learned over the years.

The practice of evaluation within the European Union is an integral part of its governance and policy implementation, especially in the context of the European Structural and Investment (ESI) funds. These funds, which are pivotal to the EU's strategy for promoting economic and social cohesion, are managed under a shared management system involving both the European Commission and Member States. While the Commission is responsible for implementing the funds, Member States oversee the day-to-day management of the programs. This dual management system necessitates that Member States conduct thorough evaluations of each program. These evaluations are not mere formalities, they are essential for enhancing the quality of program design and implementation, and crucially, for assessing their effectiveness, efficiency, and impact. This paper explores the broader evaluation ecosystem in the EU, investigating the methodologies employed, the challenges encountered, and the key lessons learned through various evaluation processes, with a special focus on the role and impact of ESI funds evaluations.

2. Literature review: The EU evaluation ecosystem

The EU evaluation ecosystem is a complex network involving multiple stakeholders, including EU institutions, member states, and independent evaluators (Stern, 2009). This system is designed to ensure that evaluations are objective, comprehensive, and aligned with the EU's overarching goals. Key components of this ecosystem are the regulatory frameworks, guidelines, and tools that standardize the evaluation process across different sectors and programs. The evaluation ecosystem within the European Union represents a multifaceted and dynamic structure, particularly evident in the evaluation of the European Structural and Investment (ESI) funds. Over the 2014–2020 programming period, Member States have completed approximately 3,600 evaluations of all ESI funds (EU Commission, 2024a and 2024b). This impressive number reflects the EU's commitment to rigorous assessment and continuous improvement of its programs.

As the implementation of these programs progresses and more results and data become available, there has been a notable shift in focus towards impact evaluations. These evaluations are crucial as they provide in-depth insights into the long-term effects and benefits of the programs, going beyond mere performance metrics. Parallel to the efforts of the Member States, the European Commission has been actively involved in conducting its evaluations. A notable example is the evaluation of European Union Cohesion policy (Batterbury, 2006) and particularly of eCohesion – an initiative aimed at improving the administrative and operational aspects of cohesion policy through electronic data exchange.

This evaluation is part of the Commission's broader strategy to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of EU fund management. Furthermore, the Commission is currently undertaking an ex-post evaluation of the ESI funds for the 2014–2020 period, which is scheduled for completion in 2025. This comprehensive evaluation is expected to provide valuable insights into the overall performance and impact of the funds over the six-year period. It is important to note that the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) is not included in this current round of evaluations as the duration of its programs has been extended, necessitating a different timeline and approach for evaluation.

This evolving focus on impact evaluations and the collaborative efforts between Member States and the European Commission in conducting these evaluations underscore the dynamic nature of the EU evaluation ecosystem. This system is not only about assessing the past but is also geared towards learning and adapting for future program cycles. The evaluations conducted by Member States, which predominantly focus on regional or national contexts, present a unique set of challenges and opportunities within the EU evaluation ecosystem (Bachtler and Wren, 2006). One significant challenge is the difficulty in aggregating these findings due to their context-specific nature. The diverse socio-economic conditions and administrative structures across different regions and countries mean that the outcomes and lessons from one evaluation might not be directly applicable or generalizable to another context. Despite this challenge, the value of these evaluations should not be underestimated. They provide rich, context-specific insights that are crucial for understanding the nuances and localized impacts of EU programs (Łozowicka, 2020). This localized focus is particularly important in a union as diverse as the EU, where regional and national specificities can significantly influence the effectiveness and reception of various programs. Moreover, these individual evaluations contribute valuable material for discussions in the monitoring committees of the programs. Monitoring committees, which often comprise representatives from the EU, national governments, and other stakeholders, play a critical role in overseeing program implementation and making adjustments as needed. The findings from these evaluations offer these committees evidence-based insights into how programs are functioning on the ground. This information is essential for informed decision-making, allowing for the adaptation and refinement of programs to better meet their objectives and serve the needs of the target populations. These discussions within the monitoring committees can also facilitate the sharing of best practices and lessons learned across different Member States.

By examining a range of evaluations, committee members can identify common challenges, effective strategies, and innovative approaches that could be applicable or adapted for use in other regions. While the regional and national focus of Member State evaluations may limit the generalizability of their findings, and therefore, their external validity, these evaluations are invaluable for their detailed, context-specific insights. They contribute significantly to the overall evaluation ecosystem of the EU by informing program adjustments, fostering knowledge exchange, and enhancing the overall effectiveness and responsiveness of EU-funded programs.

In the EU evaluation ecosystem, the distinctions between public sector evaluations and private sector ones are crucial for understanding the different approaches and methodologies required in evaluating projects (Ensslin, Welter and Pedersini, 2022). Private sector evaluations often focus more on financial viability and market success, while public sector evaluations prioritize long-term development impact and broader societal benefits. The evaluators' backgrounds, whether from a private sector or development-oriented public sector, also significantly influence the evaluation perspective and methodology.

Table 1: Distinction between private and public sector operations

Private sector Operations	Public Sector Operations
• Relationship usually short-term but can also be long-term • MDBs must assume the multiplicity of risks in a project • Private sponsors drive their projects and define their targets • Less multifaceted and deals with the project of the sponsor • For MDBs interacting with the private sector you need an entrepreneurial approach: financially sound; risks should be properly mitigated • Staff often recruited from the Private Sector	• Relationship mostly long-term • Normally the MDB obtains government or sovereign guarantees • Projects are assessed based on developmental objectives and less on market benchmarks • Usually multifaceted • Usually the MDB helps setting development-related objectives • Staff mostly recruited with a development background and public sector experience

Source: Adapted after Raghavan (2019)

In private sector operations, the nature of relationships with the stakeholders often varies from short to long-term. These relationships are characterized by the private sponsors who drive their projects, setting specific targets primarily focused on the project's financial success and market viability. The projects tend to be less multifaceted, concentrating on the sponsor's direct interests. Evaluation practices in the private sector are required to adopt an entrepreneurial approach, emphasizing financial soundness and comprehensive risk mitigation. This sector typically attracts staff with private sector experience, bringing a market-driven perspective to the evaluation process.

Conversely, public sector operations predominantly involve long-term relationships. These are often underpinned by government or sovereign guarantees, offering a layer of security and alignment with national priorities. The projects in the public sector are evaluated predominantly on developmental objectives rather than market benchmarks, reflecting a commitment to broader societal impacts and sustainable development. The scope of these projects is usually multifaceted, integrating a variety of developmental aspects. MDBs in the public sector frequently contribute to setting development-related objectives, ensuring the projects align with larger social and economic goals (Multilateral Development Bank (MDB) Evaluation Cooperation Group (ECG) Working Group on Evaluation Criteria and Ratings for Public Sector Evaluation (WGEC), undated). Staff in this sector often come from a background in development and public sector experience, equipped with skills and insights pertinent to socio-economic development and public welfare. This distinction underscores the fundamental differences in focus, approach, and expertise between private and public sector operations in program evaluation. While the private sector leans towards market-driven and financially oriented evaluations, the public sector is characterized by its emphasis on long-term developmental impacts and multi-dimensional project assessment.

Within the EU evaluation ecosystem, two entities stand out for their significant roles in shaping and enhancing the practices and methodologies of evaluation: the European Evaluation Society (EES) and the various National Evaluation Organizations spread across the member states.

At the heart of this ecosystem lies the European Evaluation Society with its Private Sector Evaluation thematic working group (TWG), a vibrant network that brings together professionals, evaluators, academics, and policymakers. The EES is dedicated to advancing the understanding and application of evaluation across Europe. It acts as a crucible for ideas and best practices, enabling a rich exchange of knowledge and expertise. Through its conferences, seminars, and publications, the EES fosters a dynamic dialogue among evaluation professionals, contributing to the evolution and refinement of evaluation methodologies and practices across the continent.

Another key component of this ecosystem is the array of National Evaluation Organizations (Tall, 2009). Each EU member state boasts its organization, tailored to align with its unique national context. These organizations play a critical role in implementing national evaluation policies, ensuring that evaluations are not only conducted in line with EU guidelines but also resonate with national priorities and contexts. They serve as the backbone of the evaluation process at the national level, providing the necessary infrastructure and expertise to conduct thorough and effective evaluations. These National Evaluation Organizations also emphasize capacity building within their respective nations. They offer training and resources to evaluators, ensuring a robust national evaluation infrastructure. This is essential for maintaining the quality and relevance of evaluations, given the diverse socio-economic and cultural landscapes within the EU. These organizations are not isolated in their efforts. They often collaborate with each other and with the EES, fostering a network of shared experiences and solutions. This collaborative approach is key to addressing common challenges and disseminating successful strategies across different regions. The European Evaluation Society and the National Evaluation Organizations are fundamental to the EU's evaluation ecosystem. The role of universities (Hinţea, Hamlin and Neamţu, 2022) also stands out when independent evaluations are necessary.

These combined efforts ensure that evaluation practices are not only consistent and methodologically sound across the EU, but also tailored to the unique needs and conditions of each member state. This integrated framework enables a rich exchange of insights and best practices, ensuring that evaluations effectively inform policy decisions and contribute to the overall effectiveness and sustainability of EU programs and initiatives. By working together, these entities play a crucial role in strengthening the evaluation capacity across Europe, ensuring that the diverse range of EU policies and programs are evaluated with rigor, objectivity, and a deep understanding of the varying contexts within the European Union.

3. Methodology

In order to assess evaluation practices in the EU between 2014 and 2020, the main research methods used are document analysis and secondary data analysis.

The population of documents analyzed consists in Programs/Funds official documents, EU Commission reports and data collections: Regulation (EU) 2021/1058 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 on the European Regional Development Fund and on the Cohesion Fund, Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, 2024 (EU Commission, 2024a), Commission Evaluation Helpdesk for cohesion policy, 2023 Summary Report on the Implementation of the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESI Funds) (European Commission, 2023a), Summary report 2022 on the implementation of the European Structural and Investment Funds (European Commission, 2023b), Cohesion Open Data Platform.

4. Evaluation practices in the EU: 2014–2020

EU evaluation practices are characterized by a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods. These practices are often tailored to specific program or policy objectives, ensuring that evaluations are relevant and effective. Common methodologies include cost-benefit analysis, impact assessment, stakeholder consultations, and the use of indicators and metrics for measuring progress.

The 2014–2020 period has presented a unique set of challenges for the evaluation of European Structural and Investment (ESI) Funds, making it a particularly intricate era to assess. The ESI Funds are characterized by their long-term planning, with a 10-year implementation period that usually offers a stable and predictable framework for both public and private investments. However, the implementation phase, which extended until 2023, was significantly impacted by unforeseen global challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic, the energy crisis, and Russia's military aggression against Ukraine have all influenced the execution and outcomes of these programs, necessitating a more nuanced approach to their evaluation. Evaluations conducted by Member States typically focus on analyzing the features and results within specific regional or national contexts. This approach, while providing valuable localized insights, poses challenges in aggregating findings and making broad generalizations about their applicability. Despite these difficulties, the outcomes of these evaluations are crucial for discussions in the monitoring committees of the programs. They provide essential material for understanding the on-the-ground impact of the programs and for making informed decisions on future implementations.

The nature of evaluations has also evolved during this period. There has been a notable shift from evaluations that primarily covered procedural aspects and policy target progress to those emphasizing impact assessments. In 2022, impact evaluations constituted 44% of all evaluations, a significant increase from around 30% in 2019–2020. Countries like Bulgaria, Estonia, Lithuania, and Spain have made notable contributions in this regard, with all their evaluations in 2022 focusing on impact (EU Commission, 2023a). This trend is expected to continue, with an increase in the number of impact evaluations even after the end of the programming period, providing insights once all projects have been completed and their results materialized.

In terms of methodologies, most evaluations blend qualitative with quantitative methods. However, there has been an increase in the use of more advanced research techniques in impact evaluations. In 2022, over half of these evaluations employed sophisticated methods, up from 49% in 2019 (EU Commission, 2023a). Counterfactual analysis is predominantly used in European Social Fund (ESF) and Youth Employment Initiative (YEI) evaluations. In contrast, theory-based techniques are more commonly applied in European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and Cohesion Fund (CF) evaluations. Cost-benefit analysis, although used less frequently, is primarily employed in ERDF/CF evaluations. Despite these advancements, there are areas in need of improvement. A notable concern is the clarity in spelling out methodological choices, particularly the theory of change, which is fundamental for understanding the rationale behind the evaluations. Additionally, there is a need for evaluations to be based on the most reliable data possible. This calls for an increased use of data from administrative sources, which tend to be more accurate and comprehensive. By addressing these shortcomings, the evaluation process can be strengthened, leading to more robust and actionable findings.

The evaluation practices in the EU during the 2014–2020 period have evolved significantly, adapting to the complex challenges posed by external factors and shifting towards a greater emphasis on impact evaluations. The increased use of advanced methodologies and the push for more methodological clarity and reliable data usage are promising developments. These improvements are critical for ensuring that the evaluations effectively inform policy decisions, guide future program design, and ultimately contribute to the effective and efficient use of EU funds. As the EU continues to navigate through a rapidly changing global landscape, the lessons learned from this period and the ongoing enhancements in evaluation practices will be invaluable for shaping the future of EU-funded programs and their impact on member states and their citizens.

4.1. Sector specific evaluations

This section explores evaluations in sectors like environmental policy, regional development, and social programs, illustrating how evaluation practices are applied in different contexts and the outcomes they generate.

Evaluations across thematic objectives in the EU have displayed a notable uneven distribution, with many covering multiple objectives. This comprehensive approach provides a broader understanding of the multifaceted impact of EU programs. The following analysis explores specific thematic objectives, highlighting key findings and implications.

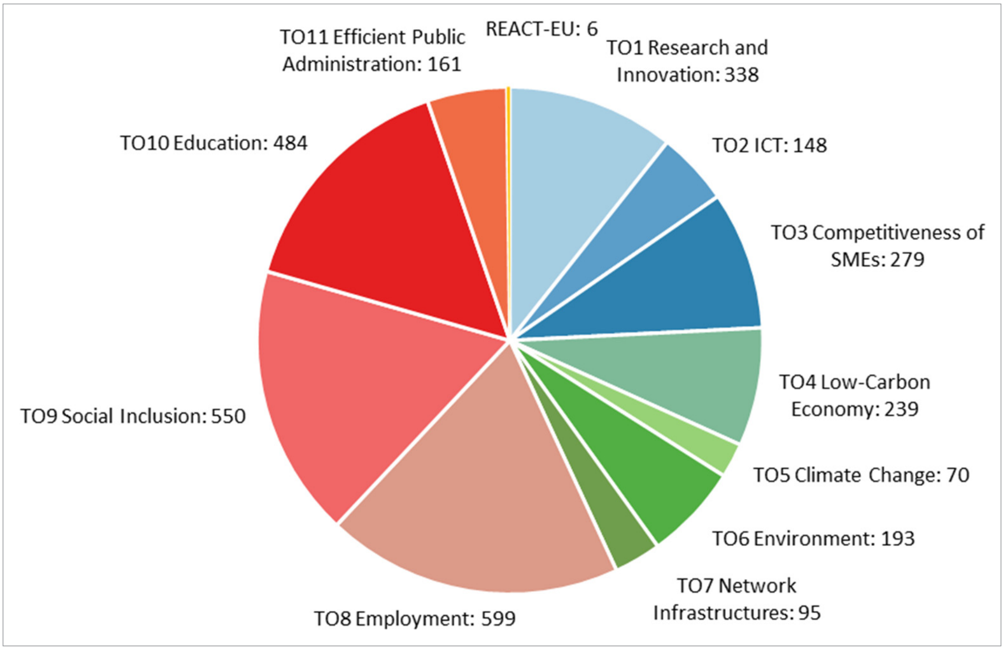

Figure 1: Evaluations of 2014–2020 cohesion policy operational programmes published since January 2015 by thematic coverage (TO – thematic objective)

Source: EU Commission, Commission Evaluation Helpdesk for cohesion policy[1] (European Commission, 2024b)

For Thematic Objective 1, Research and Innovation, evaluations in countries like Romania, Czechia, Germany, Poland, Lithuania, Italy, and Belgium have shown significant advancements in research and innovation, not necessarily in correlation with the total allocated budget. For instance, in Romania, measures to enhance research capacity have resulted in greater international collaboration and a higher rate of scientific publications. Similarly, in Czechia, about 70% of supported companies pursued further joint research initiatives post EU-fund support, showcasing the long-term sustainability of academia-private sector linkages.

Germany, Poland, and Lithuania demonstrated an increased ability to commercialize research and development results, entering new markets effectively. In Hamburg, Germany, a striking 81% of surveyed start-ups successfully launched their products in the market post ERDF investment. Meanwhile, in Lombardy, Italy, the involvement of large

1 Evaluations covering more than one thematic objective are reported under all the thematic objectives. Evaluations that broadly cover all thematic objectives have not been included in the chart.

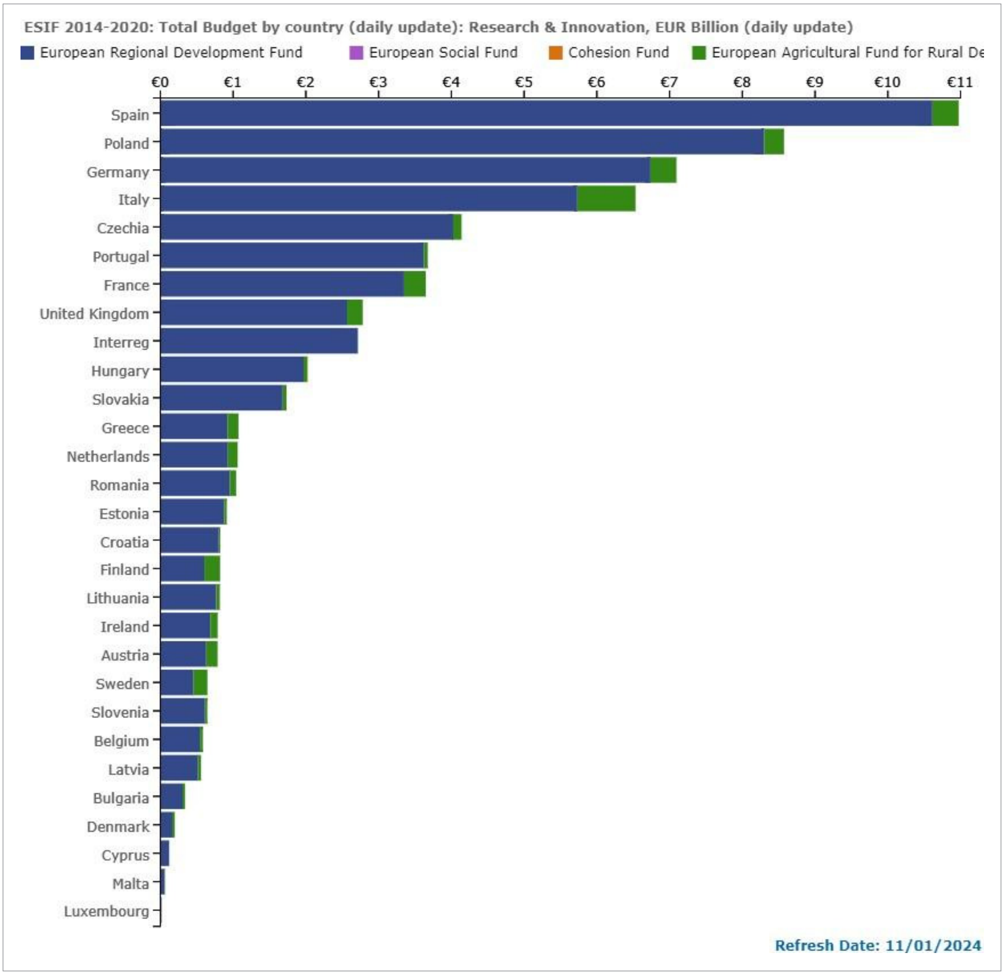

Figure 2: Allocated budget for research and innovation ESIF 2014–2020

Source: Eurostat, 2024

companies in research projects has been particularly beneficial for smaller companies due to their greater commercialization capabilities. However, in Belgium's Wallonia region, while measures to promote innovation have developed new skills and SME interactions, the impact on innovative product development has been less significant.

Concerning Thematic Objective 2, Information and Communication Technology (ICT), in Spain and Poland, the expansion of broadband networks, especially in rural areas, has been a notable achievement, enhancing the number of operating companies and the quality of e-services in the public sector. However, challenges like low digital literacy and broadband access remain obstacles to the uptake of e-government applications. Romania's evaluations highlighted delays in ICT interventions due to reorganization of strategic public beneficiaries and diverse local regulations.

Objective 3, Competitiveness of SMEs revealed in Poland's Warmińsko-Mazurskie and Małopolskie regions, as a result of counterfactual analysis, that companies receiving innovation and competitiveness support experienced higher revenues, employment growth, and increased investment in R&D activities. Slovakia and France have also seen significant growth in production, value added, and employment among supported SMEs, with France experiencing new job creation and turnover increases in supported start-ups.

Low-Carbon Economy, Thematic Objective 4, had positive outcomes, as shown by Evaluations from Germany, Estonia, Lithuania, France, and Poland. For example, in Poland, the national 'Infrastructure and Environment' program has equivalently increased energy production to 700 new wind turbines. However, the effectiveness of energy efficiency measures in SMEs varies, with larger companies often investing without EU funding.

About thematic Objective 5, Climate Change Adaptation and Risk Prevention, evaluations revealed that investments in climate change adaptation have focused on enhancing resilience to natural disasters, as seen in Romania, Germany, and France. Interreg programs like the Italy-France Maritime and Czechia-Poland initiatives have improved risk management and disaster response coordination.

For Environmental Protection and Resource Efficiency, Thematic Objective 6, evaluation highlighted that in regions like Poland's Lubelskie and Bulgaria, environmental protection measures have led to increased use of sustainable infrastructure, job creation, and a heightened culture of environmental respect. However, the necessity of infrastructure installation sometimes does not translate to household connection due to costs and charges.

According to evaluation reports of Thematic Objective 7, Transport and Energy Network Infrastructure, investments in rail and tram infrastructure in Estonia, Spain, and Slovakia have improved network capacity, journey times, and safety. However, the success of these measures can hinge on addressing multimodal transport nodes and public transport appeal.

Regarding Thematic Objective 8, Sustainable and Quality Employment, evaluations across Italy, Germany, Poland, Slovakia, and Ireland have shown effectiveness in creating employment opportunities, particularly in sustainable growth areas. For example, in Poland, cohesion policy support in 2021 resulted in the creation of approximately 490,000 jobs.

Positive effects of Thematic Objective 9, Social Inclusion, involved integrated activation pathways in Italy and Germany which have effectively increased job chances for vulnerable groups. Investments in health services and infrastructure have also improved healthcare access and quality, as seen in Poland.

Evaluations of actions under Thematic Objective 10, Education and Vocational Training, revealed that support from the ESF has shown effectiveness in reducing early school leaving and facilitating the transition from education to work in countries like Hungary, Portugal, Poland, Italy, and Germany.

Improvements in public service quality, state reforms, and civil servant expertise were noted in Lithuania and Romania, related to Thematic Objective 11, Efficient Public

Administration. However, challenges such as institutional instability and complex procedures have affected the effectiveness of measures.

This presentation of sector-specific evaluations underlines the multifaceted impacts of EU programs across various thematic objectives, revealing both achievements and areas for further improvement.

4.2. Lessons learned

The tremendous complexity and interconnectivity of EU policy instruments and the ever evolving dynamics of programs structure imposed by the overwhelming diversity (see Figure 3) dictate shifts in the number and nature of evaluation practices and a resilient leadership (Ticlau, Hinţea and Trofin, 2021) both in organizations coordinating evaluations and in those implementing the results and configuring their future activity according to the lessons learned.

Findings suggest a maturing evaluation landscape in the EU, characterized by more in-depth analysis and a strategic focus on key objectives. However, it is important to maintain a balance to ensure that all critical areas are adequately covered and that the evaluation processes continue to evolve to meet emerging needs and challenges. Over the years, the EU has gleaned significant lessons from its evaluation experiences. These include the importance of stakeholder involvement, the need for continuous methodological improvement, and the value of transparency and communication in the evaluation process. The paper discusses how these lessons are shaping current and future evaluation practices within the EU.

The evaluations of EU programs focused on smart growth, encompassing research and innovation, information and communication technology (ICT), and competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), offer insightful lessons. Smart specialization strategies have successfully identified competitive advantages at national and regional levels, fostering stakeholder involvement.

However, there is a need for enhanced monitoring of outcomes, as existing systems show limitations in tracking the cross-cutting actions' results. Investments in research and innovation have notably bolstered cooperation between research centers, businesses, and SMEs, leading to commercial opportunities. Yet, this focus on collaboration should be balanced with support for education, training, infrastructure, and appropriate equipment. In terms of SME competitiveness, investments have spurred business innovation and market expansion. Nevertheless, administrative burdens, especially for smaller and newer companies, persist, suggesting that support for SMEs should be diversified, combining repayable and non-repayable aid and financial instruments tailored to different business development stages.

Regarding ICT investments, tangible results have been slow, particularly benefiting less developed regions, though there is a risk of widening the digital divide with more developed areas. The digitalization of services has significantly improved the use and quality of e-services in the public sector, but heterogeneity in local regulations and procedures has sometimes delayed implementation. To maximize the impact of ICT infrastructure

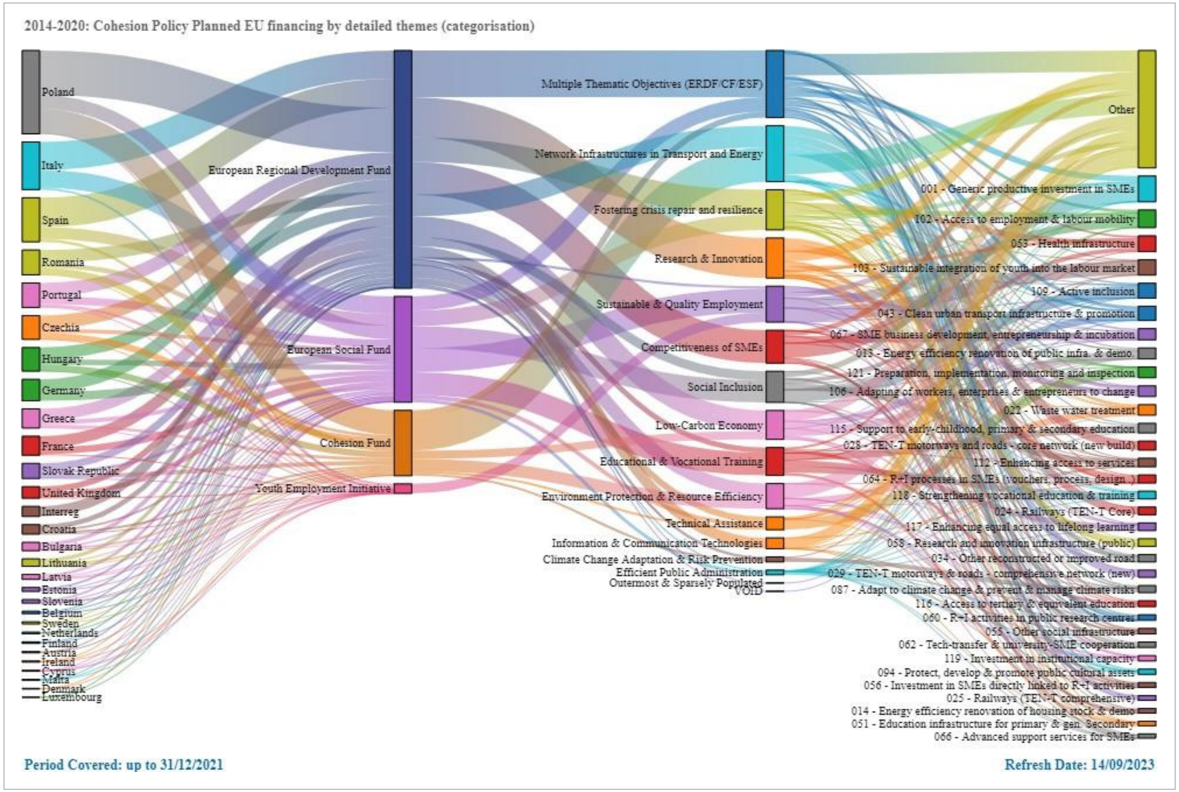

Figure 3: Complexity and interconnectivity EU Cohesion Policy Themes

Source: European Commission, Cohesion Open Data Platform[3]

3 The data is updated on a regular basis: https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/cohesion_overview/14-20.

investments and digital service enhancements, there is a crucial need for increased support in digital literacy. This would ensure that the benefits of digital advancements are more evenly distributed and effectively integrated across various regions and sectors.

The evaluations of EU programs centered on sustainable growth, which encompass the low-carbon economy, climate change, environment, and transport and energy networks, provide critical insights. There is evidence that initiatives aimed at enhancing energy efficiency in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have been successful. However, some evaluations indicate that certain investments in large companies might have proceeded even without EU funding. Notably positive results have been observed in projects related to the generation and distribution of electricity, particularly from renewable sources, and in reducing energy consumption in both corporate and public/private buildings. Yet, the full impact of these projects is somewhat constrained by the fact that many are still in progress.

In the field of environmental protection, measures like wastewater treatment and water supply interventions have effectively met water policy objectives and aligned with EU water directives. Investment decisions in these areas should, however, consider ongoing maintenance costs and charges, as these can influence households' willingness to connect to new infrastructure. In terms of transportation, investments in rail infrastructure have successfully reduced journey times and improved city connections. However, network projects often take a considerable time to yield results, making it challenging to assess their impact within an ongoing programming period. Policymakers are advised to consider additional necessary investments, especially in multimodal nodes that connect rail and road infrastructure, to ensure the comprehensive success of these measures. This approach underscores the importance of holistic planning and long-term impact assessment in fostering sustainable growth across the EU.

The evaluations of EU programs dedicated to inclusive growth, which focus on employment, social inclusion, and education, yield vital lessons for future policy and program development. EU support has been instrumental in increasing employment opportunities, particularly through integrated approaches designed to meet the needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable populations. Despite these advancements, challenges persist in effectively supporting the long-term unemployed and unskilled individuals. The evaluations underline the necessity of integrated approaches that not only provide employment opportunities but also encompass the identification of suitable education and training paths, alongside requisite social support, necessitating collaboration with relevant social services. In the healthcare sector, investments have notably increased access to and improved the quality of healthcare services. This success is particularly evident in less developed regions, where the combination of European Social Fund (ESF) support and European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) investments in infrastructure and equipment has been beneficial.

In the field of education, the effectiveness of ESF support is evident through various initiatives aimed at reducing early school leaving and boosting the chances of participants progressing to higher education. The evidence suggests the importance of continued support throughout educational pathways and highlights the need for enhancing the skills and capabilities of teachers and trainers, especially those working with vulnerable groups struggling with social and economic integration issues.

As well, the evaluations reveal positive outcomes in initiatives supporting company creation and the adaptation of workers and companies to change. Most assessments indicate that entities and individuals supported by ESF measures tend to have more sustainable operations or show more significant improvements in their job situations compared to those without such support. However, there is a noted need for further evaluation regarding the quality of jobs created, including aspects like wages, work patterns, and contract types. This highlights the necessity for a holistic approach to job creation, considering not just the quantity but also the quality of employment opportunities generated through EU support.

EU support has facilitated structural changes in public administration, enhancing efficiency and collaboration, though further simplification of procedures and political will are key to maximizing effectiveness. Territorial and financial instruments, along with territorial cooperation, have effectively stimulated local-level cooperation and innovation in SMEs, although challenges like administrative capacity and regulatory complexities influence their uptake and impact. Crisis response measures have provided essential flexibility to EU Member States, enabling effective reprogramming of resources for recovery, highlighting trade-offs in beneficiary coverage and the significance of scale in project success.

4.3. Challenges in evaluation

In a landscape marked by well-established practices and sophisticated methodologies, there still lie significant challenges that need addressing. One of the key hurdles is bridging the gap between contracting and actual spending, an issue that intertwines with broader challenges such as data availability and quality, the robustness of methodologies, and the complexities inherent in the EU's multi-level governance structure.

The divide between what is contracted and what is actually spent in EU projects represents a critical concern. This gap often arises from delays or discrepancies in project implementation, changes in project scopes, or unanticipated challenges that affect the allocation and utilization of funds. This disparity not only impacts the financial management of EU programs but also poses significant challenges for evaluators who rely on accurate financial data to assess program effectiveness and efficiency.

Addressing the divide between contracting and actual spending requires a multifaceted approach. Reliable and timely financial data are crucial for accurate evaluations. Enhancing data collection mechanisms, ensuring timely reporting from project implementers, and adopting advanced data management systems can help reduce the gap between contracted amounts and actual spending. Evaluation methodologies need to be adaptable to account for the dynamics of financial management in EU programs. This includes developing models that can accommodate changes in project scopes and financial allocations, thereby

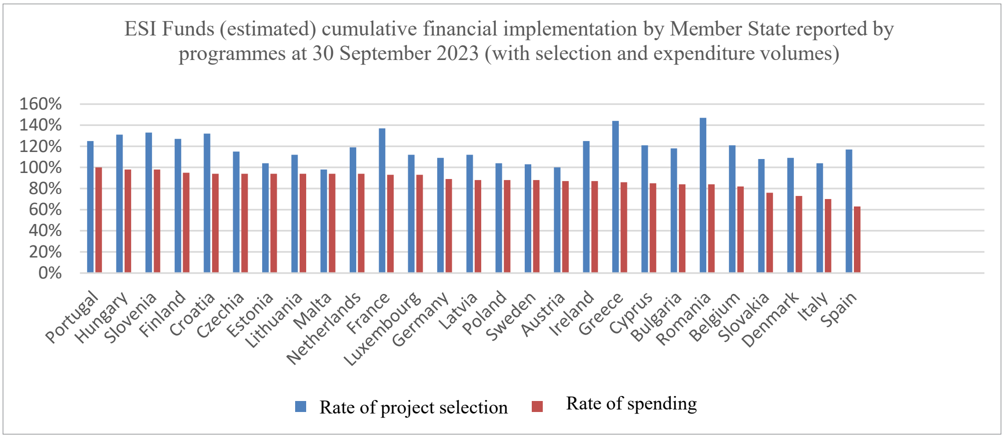

Figure 4: The divide between contracting and actual spending

Source: Author's analysis, adapted after European Commission based on data reported by programmes available on ESIF Open Data[3]

providing a more accurate picture of program performance. Evaluations should not only identify the gaps in contracting and spending but also provide actionable recommendations for improvement. This involves analyzing the root causes of the discrepancies and suggesting measures to streamline financial management processes.

The EU's multi-level governance structure adds layers of complexity to financial management. Evaluations must consider the various administrative levels involved – from the EU to national and regional authorities – and how they impact financial decisions and flows. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for identifying where and why gaps in contracting and spending occur. Regular monitoring and audits can help in early detection of disparities between contracting and actual spending. This proactive approach allows for timely interventions to rectify discrepancies and ensure that funds are utilized as intended.

Reducing the divide between contracting and actual spending is not just a matter of financial management; it is a critical aspect of ensuring the integrity and effectiveness of EU programs. It requires a collaborative effort from all stakeholders involved in the program lifecycle – from planners and implementers to evaluators and auditors. By addressing this challenge, the EU can enhance the transparency, accountability, and overall impact of its programs, ensuring they deliver value and meet their intended objectives.

Transversal challenges explain the complexity of evolution and change process. Addressing challenges at the program level within the EU evaluation ecosystem involves navigating a complex landscape of issues that can significantly impact the effectiveness and efficiency of EU-funded programs. These challenges are multifaceted and often interlinked, requiring a comprehensive and nuanced approach to address them effectively. One

3 The data is updated on a regular basis: https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/d/99js-gm52.

of the primary challenges at the program level is ensuring that projects align with overarching EU policy objectives. This requires a clear understanding of EU policies and how they translate into specific program goals. Misalignment can lead to ineffective use of funds and a failure to achieve desired outcomes. The EU's multi-level governance structure, involving various administrative layers from EU institutions down to local governments, poses significant coordination challenges. Effective communication and collaboration across these levels are essential to ensure that programs are implemented smoothly and efficiently. EU programs often have multiple stakeholders with varying interests and expectations. Balancing these diverse interests, while ensuring that the programs meet their intended objectives, can be challenging. This requires effective stakeholder management and engagement strategies. Many EU-funded projects are complex, involving multiple components, phases, and actors. Managing this complexity, especially in terms of project planning, execution, and monitoring, is a significant challenge at the program level. Effective financial management is crucial for the success of EU programs. Challenges include ensuring proper allocation of funds, adhering to budgetary constraints, and managing financial risks.

Additionally, there is often a need to demonstrate cost-effectiveness and value for money. EU programs must be adaptable to changing circumstances, such as shifts in policy priorities, economic fluctuations, or unforeseen events like the COVID-19 pandemic. Flexibility and resilience in program design and implementation are essential to address these dynamic conditions. Another critical challenge is ensuring that the programs have a sustainable and long-term impact. This involves not only achieving immediate project goals but also ensuring that the benefits of the project continue beyond the funding period.

5. Conclusions

Evaluation in the EU is a dynamic and evolving field, essential for informed policy-making and the effective implementation of programs. The lessons learned from past experiences are vital for improving the evaluation ecosystem, ensuring that it remains robust, relevant, and responsive to the needs of the EU and its citizens.

Addressing these challenges requires a strategic, coordinated approach that combines effective planning, stakeholder engagement, robust project management, and continuous monitoring and evaluation. By overcoming these hurdles, EU programs can more effectively achieve their objectives and deliver tangible benefits to EU citizens and member states.

Effective monitoring and evaluation are vital for understanding the impact of programs and for making informed adjustments. Challenges include collecting relevant data, employing appropriate evaluation methodologies, and translating findings into actionable insights. Complying with regulatory requirements and navigating bureaucratic processes can be challenging, especially given the diverse legal and administrative frameworks across EU Member States. Finally, EU programs must often address significant regional disparities within and between Member States. Tailoring programs to meet the specific needs of different regions, while maintaining a cohesive overall strategy, is a complex task.

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