



**Report to the 54th IQ-Net Conference, 15-17 May 2023, Olsztyn, Warmińsko-Mazurskie, Poland**



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## PREFACE

The IQ-Net Network promotes exchange of experience on the management and implementation of Structural Funds programmes among Managing Authorities and Intermediate Bodies. The network is managed by the European Policies Research Centre Delft under the direction of Professor John Bachtler and Heidi Vironen. The research for this report was undertaken by EPRC in preparation for the 54<sup>th</sup> IQ-Net Conference on 15-17 May 2023. The report was written by Viktoriya Dozhdeva and Liliana Fonseca.

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The partners in the IQ-Net network are as follows:

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## **Hungary**

- Managing Authority of the Economic Development and Innovation OP (GINOP), Prime Minister Office

## **Ireland**

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- Northern & Western Regional Assembly

## **Netherlands**

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- Managing Authority Noord, Northern Netherlands Alliance (SNN)
- Managing Authority OP Oost
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- Marshal Office of the Warmińsko-Mazurskie Region
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- Scottish Government
- Welsh European Funding Office

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## **Disclaimer**

It should be noted that the content and conclusions of this paper do not necessarily represent the views of individual members of the IQ-Net Consortium.



## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>CF</b>	Cohesion Fund
<b>CPR</b>	Common Provisions Regulation
<b>DG</b>	Directorate General
<b>DNSH</b>	Do No Significant Harm
<b>EC</b>	European Commission
<b>ERDF</b>	European Regional Development Fund
<b>ESF / ESF+</b>	European Social Fund / European Social Fund Plus
<b>ESIF</b>	European Structural and Investment Funds
<b>GHG</b>	Greenhouse gas
<b>IB</b>	Intermediate Body
<b>IROP</b>	Integrated Regional Operational Programme (Czechia)
<b>ITI</b>	Integrated Territorial Investment
<b>JTF</b>	Just Transition Fund
<b>MA</b>	Managing Authority
<b>MC</b>	Monitoring Committee
<b>M&amp;E</b>	Monitoring and Evaluation
<b>MS</b>	Member State
<b>NCA</b>	National Coordination Authority
<b>NSRF</b>	National Strategic Reference Framework
<b>OP</b>	Operational Programme
<b>PA</b>	Partnership Agreement
<b>PO</b>	Policy Objective
<b>RDI</b>	Research, Development and Innovation
<b>ROP</b>	Regional Operational Programme
<b>RRF</b>	Recovery and Resilience Facility
<b>(N)RRP</b>	(National) Recovery and Resilience Plan
<b>SCO</b>	Simplified Cost Options
<b>SFC</b>	System for Fund Management in the European Union
<b>SME</b>	Small and medium sized enterprises
<b>SO</b>	Specific Objective
<b>SUD</b>	Sustainable Urban Development
<b>SWD</b>	Staff Working Document



## COUNTRY/PROGRAMME ABBREVIATIONS

Country	Abbreviation
Austria	AT
Belgium (Vlaanderen)	BE (Vla)
Bulgaria	BG
Czechia	CZ
Cyprus	CY
Denmark	DK
Estonia	EE
Finland	FI
France	FR
Greece	EL
Hungary	HU
Ireland	IE
Ireland (Southern Regional Assembly)	IE (SRA)
Ireland (Northern and Western Regional Assembly)	IE (NWRA)
Latvia	LV
Lithuania	LT
Luxembourg	LU
Netherlands	NL
Poland	PL
Poland (Warmińsko-Mazurskie, Pomorskie)	PL (W-M, Pom)
Portugal	PT
Slovenia	SI
Slovakia	SK
Spain	ES
Spain (Bizkaia, País Vasco)	ES (Biz)
Sweden	SE
United Kingdom	UK
United Kingdom (England)	UK (Eng)
United Kingdom (Scotland)	UK (Sco)
United Kingdom (Wales)	UK (Wal)



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The 2021-27 CP monitoring and evaluation framework largely builds on previous practice but also introduces some substantial changes compared to 2014-20. In light of the new regulatory obligations and lessons learnt from the past, IQ-Net partners are in the process of setting up monitoring arrangements and defining approaches to evaluation in 2021-27. Adjustments are being introduced to adapt to the new requirements and address weaknesses identified in 2014-20.

Regarding **monitoring**, important changes are driven by a revised logic of result indicators and financial categorisation system, along with new requirements around climate tracking and data reporting. Lessons from 2014-20, including around indicator setting, data collection and interpretation, operation of IT systems, and communication of data, are also driving adjustments in 2021-27. These aim to improve definition and consistency of indicators, promote flexibility and interoperability of electronic monitoring systems, enhance coordination in monitoring, and improve data collection, reporting and exploration. Despite these adjustments, challenges remain or are anticipated, particularly around indicator setting, measurement and collection, climate tracking, and data transfer.

With respect to **evaluation**, the definition of approaches is still ongoing. Based on lessons from the past, IQ-Net programmes envisage introducing changes particularly around: expanding evaluation markets, including greater involvement of academia; developing new methodological approaches; rethinking the scope of evaluations, including through better targeting; revising the timelines, to ensure better balance between 'too early' and 'too late'; and introducing new ways to communicate findings and follow up on recommendations. The new regulatory framework is considered to support simplification and flexibility, but many IQ-Net managers intend going beyond mandatory requirements, adjusting evaluations to their specific needs and circumstances. Notwithstanding these incremental improvements, many challenges are systemic and persistent – including evaluation culture and capacity, and the use and impact of results.

In light of these difficulties and new obligations, IQ-Net authorities are investing in strengthening M&E capacity, including through training, networking and other capacity-building initiatives. It remains to be seen, though, how effective these measures will be in promoting long-term improvements in M&E processes and outcomes.





# 1 INTRODUCTION

Monitoring and evaluation present some of the most demanding programme management challenges in the cycle of Cohesion Policy (CP) implementation. Previous IQ-Net papers – from the 1994-99 to 2014-20 periods – have charted the difficulties in developing monitoring systems capable of delivering accurate, reliable data (especially in real time) with efficient IT. Evaluation has also been challenging for many, not least because of the formidable problem of embedding an ‘evaluation culture’ where evaluations are seen as a vital tool for understanding the efficiency of implementation systems and the effectiveness of interventions throughout the administrative eco-system.

The 2021-27 CP monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework largely builds on the previous one but also introduces some substantial changes compared to 2014-20. Against the background of the new regulatory framework, this paper reviews the approaches to M&E in 2021-27 across IQ-Net partner countries and regions. The paper is based on desk research and fieldwork interviews conducted with officials and experts responsible for M&E in each of the IQ-Net partner countries/regions and with the European Commission services.

The paper starts with an overview of the evolution of the M&E approach in Cohesion Policy and regulatory requirements for 2021-27. It then goes on to discuss the new M&E arrangements in IQ-Net partner programmes. Taking monitoring (Section 3) and evaluation (Section 4) in turn, the paper discusses the main lessons learnt with regards to M&E activity in 2014-20, including the key constraints and achievements. The paper then reviews progress with setting up monitoring arrangements and preparing Evaluation Plans for 2021-27, and key changes introduced or planned. It also discusses IQ-Net partners' views on the new regulatory provisions around M&E and their implications, as well as the main open challenges and envisaged solutions. The paper concludes with some questions for discussion. As most IQ-Net partners are still setting up / rolling out their monitoring systems and preparing Evaluation Plans, the aim is to take stock of experiences to date, lessons from the past, as well as plans and expectations for 2021-27, and stimulate discussion at the IQ-Net Conference.





## 2 MONITORING AND EVALUATION IN COHESION POLICY: A LONG-TERM CHALLENGE

### 2.1 Evolution of monitoring & evaluation in Cohesion Policy

Effective project and programme management and implementation require both monitoring and evaluation. Monitoring provides decision-makers with timely insight on policy performance, allowing them to adjust and steer policy implementation as necessary. This information can also feed into ongoing or thematic evaluations. Additionally, assessment results obtained during the policy implementation phase can inform the next policy cycle, preventing any gaps between cycles.<sup>1</sup> By leveraging monitoring data to inform evaluations and policy development and implementation, decision-makers can ensure a continuous and effective policy-making process. M&E are thus essential components for good governance, offering valuable insights into the efficacy of policies, programmes, and services. By utilising monitoring data, decision-makers can make informed decisions based on evidence, rather than speculation. Moreover, M&E shed light on the use of public funds and the outcomes they generate, helping to ensure policies are delivered in a cost-effective and equitable manner.<sup>2</sup>

**Monitoring and evaluation are crucial tools for the accountability, improvement, and financial management of Cohesion Policy (CP).** They serve to provide information and evidence about the results and impacts of CP and to support effective decision-making and resource allocation. Reflecting a perceived need to legitimise and justify government intervention, and account for (public) investments made and their impact, the European Commission (EC) has supported the development of data reporting, operations monitoring systems and evaluation in CP. This was reinforced with each new programme period as the Structural Funds, and in particular the ERDF, progressively accounted for a bigger share of the Community budget.<sup>3</sup> The 1988 reform gave greater influence to the EC in the distribution of regional development funding,<sup>4</sup> which, while at times a point of tension with Member States (MS), cemented the need to properly manage the funding in a transparent way.

EPRC has investigated the topic of M&E of Structural Funds across different programme periods, including under IQ-Net since the early 1990s.<sup>5</sup> This allows for a broader longitudinal perspective on EU reforms and the changes in emphasis, roles, and responsibilities over the years and across different MS and EU institutions. The evolution of the **monitoring** approach in CP was gradual. Until 2000-06, the monitoring approach faced organisational issues and was primarily characterised by experimentation, in which the EC sought to gather methodological insights. Since the 2007-2013 period, there has been a focus on result orientation and the consolidation of monitoring systems, emphasising the monitoring of interventions without disregarding financial accounting. The strengthening of the programming framework has resulted in a system of common indicators with precise rules for developing monitoring and IT systems. These operations monitoring systems serve as an information basis and enable data aggregation of indicators at national and EU levels.<sup>6</sup>





**Evaluation** has been extensive in CP at various levels (EU, national, and sub-national) – more than in any other policy area.<sup>7</sup> The progressive reforms of the Funds since 1988 have placed increasing obligations on the EC and MS to conduct systematic evaluations of interventions prior (*ex ante*), during (*in itinere*), and after implementation (*ex post*). Since the late 1990s, debates on the EU budget have been influenced by efforts to restrict budget growth and shift spending from CP and the Common Agricultural Policy to 'competitiveness policies' like research and development. As a result, the EC has faced increasing pressure to demonstrate the value and effectiveness of CP resources.<sup>8</sup> A greater focus has been placed on evaluating the policy and its performance in the reforms of the 2014-20 period. The period thus featured the introduction and reinforcement of performance indicators, reporting requirements, additional monitoring, and *ex ante* conditionalities.<sup>9</sup> In 2021-27, the emphasis is further placed on the results orientation, as well as simplification of procedures and indicators, considering the broader M&E culture that has been built over the decades.

## 2.2 Results orientation: a step change in the role of M&E

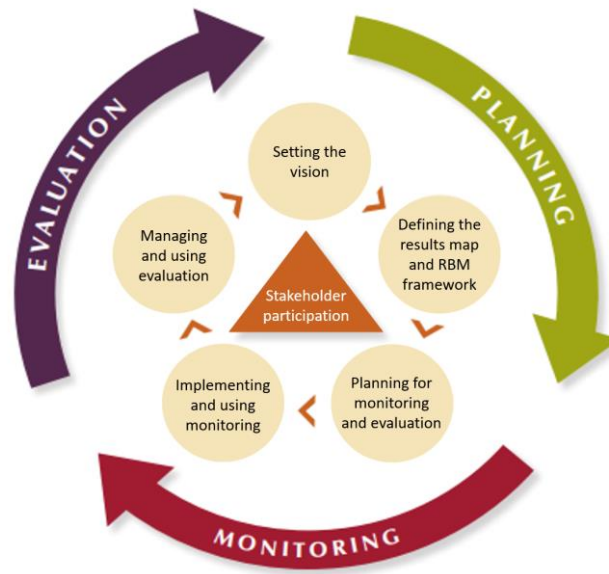
The reform to the legislative framework for M&E for the 2014-20 period placed significant importance on the results orientation of programmes, based on the three components of *ex ante* conditionalities (to ensure the necessary conditions for successful implementation are in place), programme design according to a logical framework (starting from needs-appraisal and desired results rather than resources available), and more emphasis on monitoring, reporting and evaluation during and after programme implementation.<sup>10</sup> **Results orientation can be achieved through the public policies' management approach called 'results-based management' (RBM).** This is a systematic approach that aims to support substantive accountability, transparency, and effectiveness by setting clear goals, monitoring progress, and evaluating the results of efforts to meet those goals. It seeks to align policies, strategies, and activities with desired outcomes, measure progress and impact, prompt corrective actions, promote risk-management, enhance organisational and individual learning, and use evidence to inform decision-making and improve performance over time (Figure 1).

RBM has been present in the 'programming' and 'results-orientation' principles of CP since 1988,<sup>11</sup> but has increasingly been emphasised in the most recent periods (2014-20 and 2021-27). In the context of CP, the M&E framework is designed to support this results-oriented approach by providing information and evidence about the results and impacts of the policy.





Figure 1: The RBM life-cycle approach<sup>12</sup>



The 2014-20 reform included a consolidation of monitoring systems, and proposed a shift from a focus on implementation evaluations (how the programme is managed and delivered) to impact evaluations (how support contributes to objectives) through two main recommended approaches: (i) *counterfactual approach* (to determine the extent to which observed outcomes can be attributed to the programme or intervention, as opposed to other factors or circumstances); and (ii) *theory-based approach*, particularly novel within EU CP (to pinpoint a link in a larger causal chain, and help ensure that programmes and interventions are based on sound theoretical and empirical evidence and structured in a way that maximises their potential for achieving desired outcomes and impacts).<sup>13</sup>

The 2021-27 period's legislative framework places further emphasis on the results-orientation of programmes. This follows a rationale of heightened importance of performance, effectiveness, and efficiency – especially important in a crisis context – aligned with public management paradigms that have been adopted across the EC.<sup>14</sup> The results-orientation and evidence-based decision-making logic is emphasised, with a focus on direct result indicators and data quality. Recent research<sup>15</sup> has however indicated that strengthening focus on results and improving the quality of data and evaluations has been a difficult task, efforts by MS and regions notwithstanding. Challenges also remain in aggregating indicators and the use of evaluation findings in policymaking is often limited or ineffective.<sup>16</sup>

## 2.3 New monitoring and evaluation framework

The M&E framework for the 2021-27 period of EU Cohesion Policy **builds on the previous framework but also introduces several substantial changes compared to 2014-20**. These changes were driven by experiences in the previous periods, the need to simplify and





streamline programming, monitoring and evaluation, and to take account of opinions of, *inter alia*, the European Parliament and the European Court of Auditors.<sup>17</sup>

### 2.3.1 Monitoring obligations & change from 2014-20

The restructuring of the ERDF/CF indicator system has been among the key changes in 2021-27. The programming and monitoring system will continue to be based on output and result indicators, although with some important changes.

- **Output indicators** to measure specific deliverables of interventions. These have been used as a tool to aggregate performance information at national and EU level since 2007-13, with the main change for 2021-27 being the expansion of common indicators to more accurately capture outputs and cover a greater range of interventions.
- **Result indicators** to measure the effects of the interventions supported, with particular reference to the direct beneficiaries. Unlike in 2014-20 where programme results were measured in terms of impacts, the 2021-27 result indicators will be directly linked to the outcome or effect of actions and outputs, supporting monitoring and management processes. This shift will require increased monitoring efforts from programmes, but is expected to provide greater clarity on the direct effects of interventions (outcomes).

**Table 1: Indicator concepts used in formal ERDF/CF programming and monitoring (EC 2021)**

Indicator concepts		2014-20	2021-27
<b>Output indicators</b>	Relate to the specific deliverables of the intervention	Yes. Common and specific	Yes. Common and specific
<b>Result indicators (outcomes)</b>	Match the <b>immediate effects</b> of intervention with particular reference <b>to the direct addressees</b>	No	<b>Yes. Common and specific</b>
<b>Impact indicators</b>	Relate to the <b>intended</b> outcome of intervention in terms of <b>impact on the wider economy/society beyond those directly affected</b>	Yes. Specific only	No

A more complete list of common output indicators and a new list of common result indicators (for ERDF/CF)<sup>18</sup> has been introduced with the intention to improve their investment coverage for transparency, accountability, M&E, and communication purposes at regional, national and EU level.<sup>19</sup> This is expected to **reduce the need for programme specific indicators**.

In programming, the CPR requires the setting of the values set out in Table 2 (CPR Art 16).

**Table 2: Setting values for outputs and results in programming**

Indicator type	Baselines	Milestones	Targets
<b>Output</b>	(Not required)	Required	Required
<b>Result</b>	Required for certain indicators	(Not required)	Required

In terms of the **categorisation of financial inputs**, the programmes provide the indicative breakdown of the planned EU resources by the category dimensions (CPR Annex I) by specific objective. The approach is broadly consistent with the system applied in 2014-20, but key





changes relate to the revision of intervention field dimension categories; and revision of the weightings for climate tracking to capture more refined information on climate action. The **Funds' planned contribution to climate and environment objectives** is calculated by applying the respective tracking coefficients assigned to the intervention fields (CPR Annex I).

Finally, some changes relate to **reporting and data transmission**. While the financial reporting practices of 2014-20 are broadly maintained, the reporting frequency will increase (five times a year on financial data, and twice a year on indicator data), and Annual Implementation Reports (AIR) will no longer be required.

**Table 3: Overview of key changes in the CP monitoring framework in 2021-27** <sup>20</sup>

2021-27	
<b>Indicators</b>	Direct result indicators Wider list of common indicators No obligation to include programme-specific indicators
<b>Financial categorisation</b>	Revision of intervention field dimension categories Revised weightings for climate tracking
<b>Reporting</b>	Increased reporting frequency instead of AIRs
<b>Performance framework</b>	Encompassing all output and result indicators

The **performance framework** (PF) became a key component in the 2014-20 period. It set out the overall objectives and targets of CP, as well as indicators and data sources for measuring performance. The reformed PF in 2021-27 is composed of **all the output and result indicators** linked to the specific objectives and the **milestones** set for all output indicators and **targets** for all output and result indicators. It will be one of several factors considered in the **mid-term review** in deciding on the allocation of the flexibility amounts. The Regulation does not set a *priori* thresholds for the assessment of the milestones.

**Table 4: Performance framework elements in 2014-20 and 2021-27**

2014-20 PF elements	2021-27 PF elements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Milestones</b> established for each priority (except TA priorities and programmes dedicated to FIs), for <b>2018</b> and</li> <li>• <b>targets</b> established for <b>2023</b>.</li> <li>• Selected indicators for allocation of performance reserve purposes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Output and result indicators</b> linked to specific objectives selected for the programme;</li> <li>• <b>milestones</b> to be achieved by end of <b>2024</b> for <b>output</b> indicators; and</li> <li>• <b>targets</b> to be achieved by end of <b>2029</b> for <b>output</b> and <b>result</b> indicators.</li> </ul>

### 2.3.2 Evaluation obligations & change from 2014-20

In 2014-20, *ex ante* and on-going evaluations were introduced to, respectively, ensure programmes were well-designed for resource efficiency and effective implementation, and to assess the progress of CP towards its objectives during the programme period to make necessary adjustments. *Ex post* evaluations heightened in importance in 2014-20 given the







emphasis on results-orientation and aimed at reviewing the results and impacts at the end of the period to assess overall effectiveness.

The evaluation system has undergone some changes in the new legislative framework. The evaluation programme for 2021-27 only requires on-going and *ex post* evaluations, having excluded obligatory *ex ante* evaluations (EAE) from the regulations,<sup>21</sup> except for planned support measures through FIs.

**Table 5: Obligations and changes in the CP evaluation framework**

	2014-20	2021-27
<b>Evaluation plan</b>	Mandatory	Mandatory
<b>Evaluations</b>	<i>Ex ante</i> , on-going and <i>ex post</i> Impact evaluation for each OP priority	On-going, <i>ex post</i> Impact and implementation evaluations (OP level). Impact evaluations for each OP mandatory by end June 2029 by MS. Mid-term evaluation by end 2024 and retrospective evaluation by end 2031 by EC
<b>Capacity</b>	MSs requested to ensure evaluation capacity. EC put in force specialised TA	Capacity-building not explicitly mentioned in Regs
<b>Roles</b>		Clear division of tasks between MS and EC

- The **MS or the MA** “shall carry out evaluations of the programmes related to one or more of the following criteria: effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence and Union added value, with the aim to improve the quality of the design and implementation of programmes”. Other criteria (e.g. inclusiveness) may also be covered. The Evaluation Plan should be submitted to the MC no later than one year after OP approval. An impact evaluation of each programme is implemented in 2029, and all completed evaluations must be published on a dedicated website. (Art 44 CPR)
- The **European Commission** shall carry out a mid-term evaluation of each Fund by the end of 2024 to assess the same performance criteria mentioned above, followed by a retrospective evaluation by end of December 2031. (Art 45 CPR)

The overall focus is on simplification of requirements to reduce the administrative burden placed on MAs, which also supports increased flexibility. At the same time, this focus on simplification is also noted as running a risk of weakening evaluation standards and commitment and requiring additional effort from programmes to define the evaluation approach best suited to their needs (see Section 4.4).<sup>22</sup>





## 3 2021-27 MONITORING: WHAT ARE THE ARRANGEMENTS ACROSS IQ-NET PROGRAMMES?

While the crucial role of robust monitoring systems supporting both ongoing implementation and subsequent evaluation is widely recognised, important challenges remain, including around indicator setting and data quality, availability and usability. Recognising these constraints, both the EU regulatory changes and internal adjustments in 2021-27 aim to address the key weaknesses identified in the past and improve the overall effectiveness of monitoring processes.

This section looks at IQ-Net programmes' approaches to monitoring in the 2021-27 period. It starts by looking at the main lessons from 2014-20 followed by a review of progress with setting up monitoring arrangements for 2021-27 and key changes introduced or planned. It also discusses partners' views on the new regulatory provisions around monitoring, challenges ahead, and envisaged solutions.

### 3.1 Lessons learnt from the 2014-20 programme period

The 2014-20 period was marked by important changes in the monitoring of CP. As a result of the new regulatory framework, MS had to establish robust monitoring systems that allowed tracking progress towards the achievement of programme objectives. This involved the use of a range of performance indicators, data sources, reporting requirements, and quality control mechanisms, all aligned with the principles of sound financial management, transparency, and accountability. The establishment of a strong and integrated monitoring system that covers all aspects of programme implementation – from the initial planning phase to the final evaluation – was a relevant contribution to CP in 2014-20.<sup>23</sup> The use of standardised methodologies that allowed comparison across OPs and countries (e.g. common indicators) enabled a more consistent approach to data collection, analysis and reporting, facilitating learning from experience and applying those lessons in future programmes – although some limitations in how this data was used for in-depth analysis and evaluation were also highlighted.<sup>24</sup>

Reflecting on the experience with the design and operation of monitoring arrangements in 2014-20, IQ-Net partners have highlighted a number of issues, lessons and good practice examples – with relevant implications for monitoring activity in 2021-27.

#### 3.1.1 Result-orientation and performance framework



Performance orientation was enhanced in 2014-20 through emphasis on results in the programming of intervention logic, rather than on spending. This was evidenced in the introduction of result indicators, the establishment of an obligatory performance reserve, and the introduction of *ex ante* conditionalities that required meeting institutional, regulatory, and



strategic conditions before releasing payments.<sup>25</sup> The application of a performance framework – involving clear, measurable milestones and targets to ensure progress in implementation – was one of the key elements in the shift towards a stronger performance orientation.

Overall, **the 2014-20 framework was found to be increasingly effective in promoting result-orientation** through monitoring, with substantial improvements in the definition of indicators and in their actual collection in different regions and MS.<sup>26</sup> With regards to the performance framework more specifically, it was generally assessed in a favourable manner.<sup>27</sup> However, it was also criticised for lack of effective incentives, for the attribution of funding to MS regardless of whether programmes met their targets and for not being responsive to external changes.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, some literature has highlighted drawbacks to increased measurement in public policy, including the difficulty of establishing reliable and undistorted indicators, and the lack of clarity in chosen goals.<sup>29</sup> A study conducted by the ECA<sup>30</sup> on the 2014-20 PF criticised the emphasis on spending and outputs, leading to recommendations for a stronger focus on performance orientation for the post-2020 period. This learning is evidenced in the 2021-27 period with the incorporation of more immediate result indicators and the utilisation of milestones as tools to better demonstrate the actual performance of long-term interventions.

Several MS (e.g. [FI](#), [IT](#), [PL](#), [PT](#)) have emphasised in previous research the value of a result-oriented approach and the PF in 2014-20, while calling for stronger demonstration of results, transparency, and use of 'open data' methods post-2020. Previous IQ-Net research<sup>31</sup> has also reported that while many programme managers supported the principle of the 2014-20 PF, there were calls to eliminate the performance reserve<sup>32</sup> due to administrative burden and 'red tape'. More broadly, IQ-Net programme authorities have seen a gradual shift towards more results-orientation in 2014-20, which is set to be further reinforced in 2021-27 and expected to lead to projects with clearer targets (e.g. [FI South](#)).





**Table 6: Operational lessons from the performance framework 2014-20**

<b>Addressing administrative burden and complexity</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Complexity of establishing the performance framework</li><li>• Administrative burden of gathering and maintaining data</li><li>• Desire for data to provide value to programmes</li></ul>
<b>Maximising the value and quality of indicators and data</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Challenge in setting milestone and target values</li><li>• Differing interpretations of indicators</li><li>• Number of indicators in use undermining comparability</li><li>• Scope to use data and monitoring to inform programme development</li></ul>
<b>Improving flexibility and responsiveness</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Target setting undertaken too early in the process</li><li>• Difficulty in changing targets</li><li>• Lack of information on how data will be used and how reserve will be allocated</li><li>• Lack of meaningful targets</li></ul>
<b>Building added value</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Overlap with n+3 and other monitoring and reporting</li><li>• Overly focussed on efficiency issues</li><li>• Adds little understanding of the programme results</li></ul>

Source: Bachtler J, Begg I, Charles D, Mendez C and Wislade F (2019) *Reforming the MFF and Cohesion Policy 2021-27: Pragmatic drift or paradigmatic shift?* European Policy Research Paper, No. 107, European Policies Research Centre, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow

### 3.1.2 Indicators and data quality

Closely related to the developments around result-orientation and PF, notable strides were made in 2014-20 in setting more precise objectives for programmes, gathering highly structured data on implementation and performance, and utilising open data.<sup>33</sup> Ensuring quality and comparability of data was reinforced.<sup>34</sup> However, equally emphasised by the literature<sup>35</sup> and MS experience, was the need for timely and reliable data that could inform decision-making and facilitate a more adaptive management of programmes.



IQ-Net programmes have noted overall improvements in the role of indicators and data quality in the 2014-20 period (e.g. [AT](#), [Biz](#)), and they see this as a persistent trend in 2021-27. The following issues and lessons emerged from the previous period:



**Definition and interpretation of indicators.** Inconsistent definitions and practices with regards to some indicators, and lack of uniform interpretation of indicators across different OPs, IBs and applicants<sup>36</sup> have been highlighted in literature among the key constraints, leading to data fragmentation and incoherence.<sup>37</sup> The need for clearer definition of indicators and ensuring consistency in their interpretation has also been highlighted by a number of IQ-Net programme authorities ([AT](#), [Biz](#), [CZ](#), [EL](#), [FI](#), [HU](#), [NL](#), [Vla](#)). Provision of **guidance and instructions on indicators**, e.g. through indicator handbooks ([AT](#)), factsheets ([HU](#)) and 'codebooks' ([CZ](#)), are highlighted as examples of good practice. They helped harmonise practices and interpretations, and avoid overlaps, duplications and misunderstandings as to what data is requested and how it should be collected and aggregated – both internally and externally (e.g. with beneficiaries, sectoral ministries, auditors).





-  **Limiting the number of indicators.** Using a concise set of indicators is seen by several programmes as a good practice, helping eliminate administrative load both for applicants/beneficiaries and for the entities of the implementation structure (AT, CZ). Limiting the number of programme-specific indicators in particular is seen as supporting the aggregation of comparable data across programmes (Pom).
-  **Selecting suitable indicators and setting realistic targets.** Selection of correct indicators is crucial for the success of project implementation (EL). Programme managers also highlight that projects generally produce more than just what is measured through the indicators, which leads to the consideration of how to expand the indicators used to measure this more effectively (FI, NL, Wal). It is also important to be realistic about what can be delivered in order to accurately assess what a programme can achieve (IE SRA, Sco).

In addition, some of the lessons learnt with regard to arrangements for data collection, as well as data reliability, availability and quality relate to:

-  **Data reliability.** The source of data was found to be an important factor for data reliability and quality. Data from official institutions or established sources (e.g. statistics office, economic registers) was considered more reliable than data provided by beneficiaries (HU) or unstable agencies (IE NWRA). Official data is clear on its definition and content and does not require interpretation or verification, and is thus deemed more reliable.
-  **Data availability.** Timeliness of data provision and collection are crucial for the success of monitoring activities (AT, Vla, W-M). Further, data availability is an issue for developing evaluations. This can be hindered by data collection delays, misinterpretation of guidance by beneficiaries, difficulties related to the IT system, and administrative burden. Timelines of data provision was one of the key issues in Austria, where information was entered by the IBs into the OP monitoring system with a delay due to the IBs running separate own systems. Warmińsko-Mazurskie highlighted the importance of measurement frequency – too frequent or infrequent collection of data – for proper M&E of implementation progress. For instance while quarterly intervals are found to be adequate for the advanced phase of implementation, bi-monthly reports are better in the initial phase. Infrequent monitoring will fail to capture change, especially as implementation accelerates.
-  **Additional data collection.** Collection of data beyond that generated by the monitoring system is important for feeding both monitoring and evaluation work (Biz, IE NL). The Welsh MA carried out their own data gathering to supplement the project data to collect longer-term indicators (e.g. Leavers' Survey for the ESF).<sup>38</sup> This has worked well in terms of helping to evaluate ESF programmes and measure impact.
-  **Data-mining, data visualisation.** Data analytics and visualisation, while greatly improved in 2014-20, also need further development to provide meaningful insights, and promote the use of monitoring findings to support evidence-based policy-making.<sup>39</sup> Lack of options for data-mining and visualisation in 2014-20 were emphasised by Czechia and Portugal. Their importance, including in terms of providing data for evaluation and marketing activities, has been stressed, and reflected in the design of the monitoring system for 2021-27.





### 3.1.3 Role of context: timing, crises, and adaptability

The context in which programmes are implemented has an impact on effective monitoring. Lessons from the 2014-20 period highlight for example:



**Delayed availability of 2014-20 regulations and guidance, late start of programmes,** overlap of the two programme periods, and the time and effort required to set up the new monitoring systems or adjust the existing systems to the new regulatory requirements all **had an important impact on effective monitoring of performance** (e.g. [CZ](#), [PT](#), [Sco](#)). For instance the [Scottish](#) programmes' late start had a major impact on performance and on its effective monitoring. Getting programme activities up and running earlier would have made monitoring easier, as the programme was playing catch up throughout the period.



**Contextual changes throughout the period also impacted monitoring.** For example the COVID-19 pandemic had a very detrimental impact on programme progress across the EU. Activities stopped for over two years in [Scotland](#), with important implications for monitoring. In [Greece](#), frequent political/policy change affected the choice of indicators, and lack of political commitment regarding targets hindered the application of the PF.



**Importance of flexibility.** Since changes in context and implementation dynamics throughout the programme period are likely, it is important to carry out proactive monitoring of indicator fulfilment and include regular points of review into monitoring processes, and adapt targets if necessary ([FI](#), [Sco](#)).

### 3.1.4 Information Systems: flexibility, coordination, simplification

Lessons from data management systems suggest that, while they are useful for data collection, processing and dissemination, they are still often quite complex to manage and use by MAs and beneficiaries, and further improvements are needed. IQ-Net programmes have had varied experiences with IT systems, and some of the key lessons learnt relate to the following.



**Flexibility.** Flexible IT systems are seen as an important foundation for monitoring (e.g. [Biz](#), [CZ](#), [Vla](#), [Wal](#)). The [Flemish](#) MA started the 2014-20 period with a more flexible digital system, e.g. in terms of indicator set-up/scoring, and will bring this flexibility into their new programme. In [Czechia](#), the central electronic system did not include a sufficient level of detail for effective monitoring of implementation progress at OP level, with actors outside of the implementation structure having to resort to tools outside the system.



**Coordination and interoperability.** Having a single monitoring/IT system integrating all Funds / OPs and covering all processes related to the implementation of ESIF support was found to be important for the success of monitoring activity e.g. in [Portugal](#) and [Czechia](#). Full computerisation of the central monitoring system, and its interconnectedness with other administrative and statistical records have also proved to be good practice ([CZ](#), [PT](#)). In [Warmińsko-Mazurskie](#), concerns related to the need for a unified database given the multiplicity of organisations that hold relevant data that could be categorised in different ways. The national system SC2014 has worked well in terms of collecting material at the application stage. However, it can become overloaded as MAs from different OPs upload data at the same time.





**Administrative burden and simplification.** Some programme managers highlighted technical issues with the IT system and excessive administrative burden involved in data handling. In **Hungary**, data import involving copying data from excel spreadsheets was found to be burdensome, with the MA planning to establish a platform that would facilitate data handling. In **Czechia**, the central electronic monitoring system was found to encompass too many modules which burdened its technical functioning. In **Wales**, it was found that the monitoring system could be made easier for ESF outputs if it provided automated data at indicator level; and for the PPIMS system (see Box 1), by tailoring certain fields to specific operations and objectives to reduce validation checks and error messages.

### Box 1: The **Wales** Programme and Project Information Management System

In Wales, the Programme and Project Information Management System (PPIMS) is seen as an example of good practice. Wales has used the same integrated ESIF monitoring system since 2007-13, with some adaptations for 2014-20. It provides the MA with a rounded view of all OPs and their projects/operations in terms of both payments and performance, and allows evidence-checking for projects and the programmes as a whole. The system has improved the quality of the data which projects provide to the MA, and incorporates a built-in incentive to report good quality data.

Source: IQ-Net research

### 3.1.5 **Coordination & cooperation: ensuring common understanding & comparability**

The importance of coordination was also emphasised with regards to monitoring including:



**Across information systems/databases** (see above).



**Across implementing bodies and other stakeholders.** In **Austria**, ongoing communication with the IBs is seen as essential, especially as the IBs are running separate own systems. Coordination across actors involved in CP monitoring is also pursued through regular meetings, monitoring networks and other platforms (e.g. **PT, W-M**).



**With beneficiaries** (e.g. **AT, HU, IE, Pom, Vla, W-M**). **Hungary** and **IE SRA** highlight the need to ensure beneficiaries have the same interpretation of what data needs to be provided. **Vlaanderen** and **Austria** echo this, stressing clear communication with beneficiaries regarding measurements for baselines and data collection timelines. **Pomorskie** and **Warmińsko-Mazurskie** emphasise close coordination with beneficiaries to ensure efficient monitoring and reporting. This includes direct face-to-face meetings and telephone exchanges, where common understanding can be established and monitoring challenges anticipated and resolved in a timely way.



**Common methodological approach across OPs/MAs.** **Czechia** highlighted the importance of central coordination of the methodological framework of rules and procedures to enable the collection of more valid data (Box 2). Similarly in **Portugal**, harmonised practices for monitoring and evaluation promoted a systematic approach across OPs. A M&E network supported the development of harmonised methodologies (e.g. for the definition of indicators, forms of calculation, definition of unit costs), so that the application is comparable across OPs.





## Box 2: Good practice “One system, one set of rules”, [Czechia](#)

In Czechia, the Uniform Methodological Environment was set up under the management of the National Coordination Authority (NCA) with cooperation of all MAs and other relevant actors for the entire ESIF implementation system in 2014-20.

Within this context, a uniform structure of methodological documents was developed, valid across all OPs. It covered, *inter alia*, aspects such as project applications management, structure and definition of all monitoring indicators, financial and physical monitoring of the OPs at different levels, data mining via Oracle software and data visualisation, reporting, and interconnection with other public electronic systems. It clearly specified for beneficiaries what data must be submitted, when, and in what detail as well as what data the IBs/MAs have to deal with and report. A single central electronic monitoring system for all OPs was also established, and full e-Cohesion and ‘non-paper’ principles applied.

Overall, such a uniform approach ensured that all processes, procedures, methods, definitions, and structures for data collection and management were precisely specified and harmonised across programmes. On the other hand, the overall approach became too complex. Accordingly, for 2021-27, a more balanced approach has been pursued between ensuring the system is sufficiently robust while remaining user-friendly.

Source: IQ-Net research

### 3.1.6 Monitoring capacity & capacity-building

Some of the lessons learnt with regard to capacity for carrying out monitoring tasks relate to:



**Variation in capacity levels.** It is important to take into account that different bodies and partners involved in CP implementation often have different levels of capacity to effectively monitor progress. This was evident e.g. within the [Scottish](#) delivery model,<sup>40</sup> where lead partners have varied in terms of their monitoring capacity. Devolution of management responsibilities can be beneficial but in practice requires a more robust approach to monitoring being put in place.



**Administrative complexity** has also been highlighted both in the literature and fieldwork research. While progress has been made in simplifying administrative procedures, challenges such as complex regulations, lengthy procedures, and bureaucratic hurdles have been identified.<sup>41</sup> There is thus a need to further simplify administrative procedures, reduce red tape, and enhance administrative capacity to streamline the M&E process and make it more efficient.<sup>42</sup>



**Capacity-building.** Across several programmes, the 2014-20 period developed a greater awareness of the importance of having a capacity-building strategy in place, including around monitoring (e.g. [Biz](#), [EL](#), [PT](#)). In [Bizkaia](#), this has become a priority, with tailor-made courses and training implemented for this purpose.

### 3.1.7 Communicating results: demonstrating CP achievements

2014-20 also saw advancements in terms of communication of monitoring data, e.g. through the use of regional dashboards to monitor the progress and performance of ESIF programmes in different regions,<sup>43</sup> case study booklets, and other communication outlets. In [Portugal](#),







publication of monitoring data on the so-called Transparency Portal<sup>44</sup> is considered an example of good practice. The Portal presents an enormous evolution in terms of types of analysis and level of detail shared with the general public on the implementation of ESI Funds (and the RRF). Programme managers also emphasise that qualitative descriptions of what projects are doing provide a much more rounded picture of what is being achieved.

One of the key lessons from this period from ESIF programme managers is that monitoring activity should be strengthened overall and that results should be made more visible to enable learning (e.g. [CZ](#), [FI](#), [HU](#), [NL West](#), [PT](#)).

### 3.2 Setting up monitoring for 2021-27: state of play

Significant progress overall has been made with setting up monitoring arrangements for 2021-27, with most IQ-Net programmes pointing to an advanced stage of preparations (e.g. [AT](#), [CZ](#), [FI](#), [DK](#), [NL](#), [Vla](#)). At the same time, progress differs across individual countries and regions, as well as specific elements of the monitoring system – including around indicator and target setting, IT systems and reporting arrangements.

**Table 7: State of play with setting up monitoring arrangements for 2021-27 OPs**

Elements	Not started	Initial stages	Advanced	Finalised
<b>Indicators</b>		W-M	AT, Biz, NL, Pom, HU	CZ, DK, FI, IE, Vla
<b>Baselines, milestones &amp; targets</b>		Pom	AT, Biz, NL, Vla, W-M	CZ, DK, FI, HU, IE
<b>Reporting / data transmission templates</b>	Biz, Pom	NL, IE	AT, DK, FI, HU, Vla, W-M	CZ
<b>Digital management system</b>	Biz	HU, IE SRA, Pom	AT, DK, FI, IE NWRA, NL, W-M	CZ, Vla

Source: IQ-Net research

[Czechia](#), for example, has reported having finalised the setting up of all their monitoring arrangements based on timely planning (see Box 3). In [Portugal](#), work is ongoing on defining monitoring guidelines for 2021-27, covering the definition of the main principles, key concepts, description of the monitoring system and main variables. While the conceptual issues should be defined by May 2023, more practical aspects are due to be finalised by September 2023.

Regarding specific elements, preparations are overall more advanced with regard to establishing indicators and the related baselines/targets, while there is relatively less progress with rolling out 2021-27 information systems and finalising data transmission arrangements.



**Indicators.** These have been largely finalised and approved across IQ-Net programmes (e.g. [AT](#), [CZ](#), [DK](#), [FI](#), [HU](#), [IE](#), [Pom](#), [Vla](#)). [Pomorskie](#)'s indicator set is completed, and the MA is working on a supporting document setting out how these will be applied to different priorities in the ROP. On the other hand, indicators are still being developed in [Warmińsko-Mazurskie](#).





**Baselines, milestones & targets.** These have also been mostly finalised in the programmes (e.g. [CZ](#), [DK](#), [FI](#), [HU](#), [IE](#)), in part due to timely preparation and continuity with 2014-20 as is the case in [Greece](#) and [Czechia](#). In some cases, the finalisation of indicators and targets under specific policy instruments that are not yet fully operational will take place at later stages. For instance in [Portugal](#), a reprogramming will be carried out to include indicators/targets contracted with territorial actors under PO5 once the action plans of the territorial instruments are approved.



**Data reporting and transfer.** Many IQ-Net programmes (e.g. [AT](#), [CZ](#), [DK](#), [FI](#), [HU](#), [Vla](#), [W-M](#)) are advanced in this area, although there is variability in the state of play with some still in much earlier stages ([Biz](#), [IE](#), [NL](#), [Pom](#)). In [Austria](#), some issues remain around moving relevant components of the old monitoring system into the new one, and in the subsequent transfer of data into the SFC system, along with organising procedures for ongoing reporting tasks.



**Digital management system.** This is in advanced stages for many partners, although some issues remain. In [Poland](#), the system is still being set up and adapting quickly to the new data system will be a challenge. In [Denmark](#) information is extracted manually, but the ambition is to have an automated system starting August 2023. In [Finland](#), there have been unexpected delays with the finalisation of the digital management system (EURA2021).<sup>45</sup> One of the key reasons behind this is that the system developer has changed from the last programme period, breaking continuity. A further complicating factor is that many of the functions also need to be developed before all the specific/practical requirements are properly known. Once fully functional (expected by end 2023), the system is expected to be more user-friendly.

### Box 3: Timely planning of [Czechia](#)'s monitoring system

In [Czechia](#), all elements and methodological guidelines were prepared well on time for the 2021-27 period, including the approval of:

- methodological instructions for: (i) the Common Processes of the Implementation of EU Funds, and (ii) Indicators, Evaluation and Publicity;
- indicator structures and aggregation maps both at national and the IROP2 level;
- development of a central electronic monitoring system (MS21+).

The monitoring system was fully ready in May 2022 by the time of the approval of the PA and OP. Best practices from previous systems and specific requirements for the new period were considered during the design of MS21+. The system was tested and data uploaded to both testing and production environments as soon as all monitoring elements (e.g. national code-list of indicators, OP hierarchy, etc.) were finalised. Other functionalities, such as interconnection with other electronic systems of public administration and modifications according to the Unified Methodological Framework, are currently being implemented. The early start to the preparation, having the same technical supplier, and experience with the management of the process all contributed to the progress and stability of the system.

The monitoring system is now fully operational and includes all necessary components, with ongoing development to prepare for later stages of implementation. This marks a significant improvement compared to previous programmes, as the monitoring system is no longer a barrier to the start of OPs and project calls.

Source: IQ-Net research






### 3.3 Key changes in 2021-27 and rationale

Across IQ-Net partners, a **mix of continuity and change** is reported in terms of the monitoring arrangements and approaches introduced (or planned) in 2021-27 compared to 2014-20.

**Table 8: Overall degree of change introduced to the monitoring arrangements and approaches in 2021-27 compared to 2014-20**


<b>Overall continuity, with only incremental changes / minor adjustments and improvements on previous monitoring systems/arrangements</b>	AT, Biz, DK, EL, FI, HU, IE NWRA, NL (N, S, E), Pom, PT, Vla, W-M
<b>More systemic reorganisation: major overhauls of previous systems/arrangements</b>	NL (W, S, E) + individual elements such as IT systems (CZ, IE), model of data exploration (CZ, PT), etc.
<b>Introduction of wholly new monitoring systems/arrangements</b>	-

 The approach adopted in almost all IQ-Net programmes is that of **general continuity with incremental changes** to update and improve the arrangements existing in 2014-20. No fundamental changes in the overall rationale, principles and practices of the 2014-20 period are foreseen, with the changes introduced generally presenting a gradual evolution in the approach to monitoring. These changes (characterised by one IQ-Net partner as ‘a fresh coat of paint’) have generally been **driven by a combination of new regulatory obligations, domestic needs and pressures, and practical experiences from the past**. These changes also aim to reflect new technological developments and the possibilities they offer, address challenges identified in the past and build on the good practices from 2014-20, and ultimately improve administrative efficiency and efficacy of ESIF management processes.

Monitoring systems are complex and cover a range of various elements and some areas have naturally experienced greater modifications than others. In some IQ-Net programmes, **more systemic reorganisation** is foreseen / introduced with regards to elements such as IT systems (CZ, IE NWRA, IE SRA) or model of data exploration (CZ, PT), among others (see below).

**A wide range of changes stem from the modifications introduced by the new regulatory framework**, for example in relation to result indicators, categorisation of financial inputs and climate tracking, reporting requirements (see Section 3.4). More broadly, a wide combination of factors (regulatory changes, internal needs and lessons learnt from the past) has driven change in the following aspects of monitoring across IQ-Net programmes.

#### 3.3.1 Indicators: role, definitions & consistency

 While there is a significant degree of continuity with regard to the definition and monitoring of indicators, e.g. in terms of the overall intervention logic (NL), definitions (NL), guidance (AT), and the process of administration of indicators (CZ, FI), some changes have also been introduced. Apart from those that stem from the new regulatory provisions





(e.g. the new logic of result indicators and increased use of common indicators – see Section 3.4.1), main changes relate to:

- **Overall increased role of indicators** in the monitoring systems (AT, Biz).
- **Reduction in the overall number of indicators.** Apart from the reduction in the number of programme-specific indicators (see Section 3.4.1), some programmes will have fewer indicators in general for the new period (e.g. HU, IE SRA).
- **Better definition of indicators to ensure consistency.** Based on the lessons from the past, the meaning/definitions of certain indicators have been clarified in order to ensure consistency in interpretation (e.g. CZ IROP2, FI, NL, Vla). These efforts have been supported by issuing the associated **guidance** and manuals (e.g. AT, Biz, CZ IROP2, EL, FI, HU, NL North) and dedicated **training** (e.g. FI). For example in **Finland**, the wording and guidance around indicators have been improved, and joint training sessions on indicators have been organised to ensure that different IBs interpret them consistently. In the **Czech IROP2**, a methodological datasheet was developed for each programme-specific indicator, to ensure that all programme/project actors deal with each indicator in the same way. In **Austria**, the MA has prepared a **handbook** on indicators and intervention categories (see Box 4).

#### Box 4: The **Austria Handbook on indicators and intervention categories**

In order to provide clearer and more timely guidance on indicators for the IBs and increase data quality, the MA prepared a handbook on indicators and intervention categories (ICs). The handbook is a description of the system of indicators and ICs with information on their recording and application, and serves as guidance to the 15 Austrian IBs.

The Austrian ERDF-JTF OP uses 33 indicators and four internal metrics:

- 11 **common output indicators**: RCO 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 15, 19, 74, 75, 76, 80 and 112
- 4 **programme-specific output indicators**: E.g. “projects that contribute to strengthening the circular economy”
- 7 **common result indicators**: 1, 2, 3, 25, 29, 95 and 102
- 11 **programme-specific result indicators**: e.g. “contribution to Horizon Europe participation”
- 4 additional metrics, which are collected at project level and do not have to be reported to the EC, such as “Secured jobs in research in funded institutions”.

For each of these, the handbook gives a short explanation to ensure consistent use by the IBs as the organisations that will record the data and enter it into the monitoring system. There are also overviews of indicators organised by the programme structure, showing which indicators are used under which Priority Axis, specific objective and measure. The handbook also provides **guidance on ICs**, as these are closely related. A similar approach is taken, providing descriptions for all 24 ICs used.

For 2021-27, the MA provided the handbook before the start of implementation. In contrast, in 2014-20, a similar handbook only covered selected indicators and was only available to IBs later in the programme period.

Source: IQ-Net research

- Other modifications include, among others, change in the definition of some indicators, e.g. due to change in sources of data (e.g. IE NWRA, NL), simplification of rules for the aggregation of indicators (CZ), introduction of new specific (e.g. regional-level)





indicators (FI), decrease in the number of statistical indicators (CZ), and change in the responsibilities for analysis of the indicators (NL North).

In some programmes, these changes have generally underlined **the strengthened focus on results-orientation** and impacts of the programme. For example the authorities in **South Finland** note that the stronger programme-level results-orientation means that project actors pay more attention to the indicator data, which in turn is expected to lead to projects with clearer targets/focus. The monitoring system also prompts project actors and the authorities to provide information on the longer-term impacts and how the project will be continued after the funding finishes. In **Hungary**, there is stronger focus on indicators and achievement of targets when drafting calls for proposals, enhancing overall focus on performance and results.

### 3.3.2 Information Systems: usability & e-cohesion



Changes in the electronic monitoring systems range from minor modifications to improve usability (HU) to more substantial overhauls and the introduction of new IT systems (Biz, CZ, FI, IE NWRA, IE SRA) – but still largely building on the previous systems. New and improved IT systems are expected to contribute to more effective management of the OPs by:

- **Promoting simplification, user-friendliness and usability** (e.g. CZ IROP, FI, HU, PT). In **Czechia**, modifications have been made to the central monitoring system which in 2014-20 encompassed too many modules deemed unnecessary. In **Finland**, the new management and monitoring system is expected to simplify the process for all involved actors (project applicants and the authorities) through improvement of key functionalities.
- **Enhancing flexibility**. In **Czechia**, unlike in 2014-20, each MA can now define its own (project/programme) characteristics important for monitoring via the so-called 'Special Data Items' available in the central electronic monitoring system. This allows each MA to input relevant data independently, without involving the supplier of the system, and more importantly without burdening technical functionality for other users.
- **Promoting digital interconnectedness** (e.g. AT, CZ, PT). In **Austria**, there are now more interfaces with the SFC, allowing a more structured approach to entering data. In both **Czechia** and **Portugal**, there has been a change in the processes of user authentication, allowing better sharing of information across public administration systems. In addition, the Czech central monitoring system is now connected with the national statistical institution, and allows data collection in the area of RIS3. Also, connectivity with the information system of ESF+ has been further improved. The **enhanced interconnection of various public electronic systems** is expected to reduce the administrative burden on internal and external users and applicants, and contribute to an overall improvement in data quality and reliability.

### 3.3.3 Coordination and interoperability



Apart from changes aimed at greater interoperability between electronic systems and databases (see above), enhanced coordination in the area of monitoring is also being promoted:





- **Across Funds** (e.g. [AT](#), [IE NWRA](#)). For example in [Austria](#), the interface with the ESF+ OP, which was looser in the past, has become more important as the JTF is implemented through both the ERDF-JTF and the ESF+-JTF OP.
- **Across OPs**. For instance in [Hungary](#), there has been enhanced coordination across Managing Authorities in the elaboration of indicator factsheets.
- **Across instruments**. In the area of indicators in [Czechia](#), there are efforts to incorporate monitoring of the NRRP, and the central monitoring also now allows data collection in that area. Close coordination with the NRRP data is also pursued in [Portugal](#) – including to ensure non-duplication of support and coherent dissemination of information on EU support to the citizens – even though the NRRP has its own information system.
- **Between ESIF management processes**. In [Hungary](#), available data, such as responses to project calls, is systematically analysed to gather further information on management and draw lessons to improve various procedures and practices. The MA is reflecting on how to further develop this approach and increase the exploitation of available data.

### 3.3.4 Data collection, reporting and exploration



Some changes to data collection (sources and methods), reporting and exploration have also been introduced – some of them closely linked to changes around indicators discussed above – including the following.

- **New approaches to collecting and reporting monitoring data**. In [Austria](#), a new approach has been introduced for two indicators (companies that make use of service and advice facilities, including start-up projects; and entities such as municipalities and companies receiving advice). In 2021-27, these indicators are no longer simply counted but instead structured templates for reporting about these services are being used.
- **Enhanced use of official data sources**. The MA in [Hungary](#) will rely increasingly on official data and statistics, which was found to be more reliable than data provided by beneficiaries. Similarly in [Ireland \(NWRA\)](#), there will be more focus on established data sources such as the census or statistics office rather than agencies which could change.
- **Enhanced data checks**. [Dutch](#) programmes (North, East) will have stricter and more regular cross checks on the data from projects to avoid any mistakes in the input of data into the digital system.
- **Additional data gathering**. Some partners will increase the collection of data beyond what is generated / required by the monitoring system to serve the needs of management and evaluation, e.g. via *ad hoc* surveys, field research and studies (e.g. [DK](#), [IE SRA](#), [HU](#), [Pom](#)), although in some programmes this is standard practice which will be maintained (e.g. [Biz](#), [FI](#), [IE](#), [NL](#)). In [Pomorskie](#), the MA plans to invest in survey studies and other types of data collection and analysis – e.g. supporting surveys of residents in areas where transport investment is underway – to look at both ESIF projects-related aspects and external issues related to these investments.
- **Multiplication of reporting requirements**. In [Finland](#), separate reporting will need to take place across three funding frameworks (ERDF, ESF+, JTF) and three different regional categories (developed, transition and NSPA regions).





- **Enhancing data-mining / data exploration.** In both **Czechia** and **Portugal**, this was identified as an area which was lagging behind in 2014-20 and required major improvement. In Portugal, a model of data exploration is currently being developed which will improve the reading of data and serve the needs of all other ESIF management processes.
- **More strategic monitoring and data collection.** In **Finland**, smart specialisation is a new element in the data collection which is considered to bring valuable data. Special arrangements have also been put in place in **Ireland (NWRA)** to monitor the RIS3 strategy as part of the broader monitoring efforts.<sup>46</sup> The monitoring of horizontal principles and indicators, particularly around gender and human rights, will be enhanced in Ireland (see Box 5).

#### **Box 5: Monitoring of horizontal principles in Ireland**

Ireland is strengthening monitoring around horizontal principles to support the gender mainstreaming approach in the context of CP. This includes the development of indicators to assess gender mainstreaming in different schemes, such as tracking the number of female-led enterprises and disaggregating other indicators, such as the number of researchers, by gender. Collaborative efforts have been made with the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission to provide guidance to MAs and IBs on integrating horizontal principles based on the UN Charter on human rights and gender rights. MAs have worked together to ensure that horizontal principles are integrated into call documents, programme implementation, and annual reporting. A template for reporting on human rights and equality dimensions to the monitoring committee has been agreed upon and is being piloted in the first year to assess its effectiveness.

Source: IQ-Net research

These and other changes introduced in 2021-27 are generally expected to increase **data quality, availability, reliability and usability** – including for the purposes of evaluation.

### **3.4 Regulatory changes: assessment, implications and open challenges**

As outlined in Section 2, a number of significant regulatory changes have been introduced to the CP monitoring framework in 2021-27 – with important implications for programmes in the IQ-Net network and more widely. While these regulatory changes have had a limited impact on some programmes' overall approach to monitoring (e.g. **NL, Vla**), they have necessitated relevant adjustments across various dimensions, including the following.

#### **3.4.1 Indicators: new logic of result indicators, expansion of common indicators**

#### **Box 6: The restructuring of the ERDF/CF indicator system (EC perspectives – DG REGIO)**

As mentioned in Section 2, some of the key regulatory changes around the ERDF/CF indicators system relate to:





- a shorter intervention logic using the concept of result indicators focussing on outcomes for direct beneficiaries as opposed to expected wider impacts; and
- a more complete list of common output indicators and a new list of common result indicators, to improve the investment coverage of common indicators.

According to the EC, the indicators system has been revised in order to **harmonise the approach and achieve greater consistency in how MSs use and aggregate indicators**. *Inter alia*, the changes had the aim of addressing the ECA criticism about the high number of programme-specific indicators in 2014-20 which were found to be difficult to interpret and aggregate at EU level. The changes are expected to:

- **provide greater clarity on direct effects** of interventions for the beneficiaries of support. Result indicators have a distinct role in objective setting and monitoring, are directly connected to the supported actions and can provide more immediate evidence that can be directly attributed to the actions supported. This enables observation of direct outcomes during implementation, not just at the end of the implementation period.
- ensure better alignment with the logic of measuring policy outcomes used in the ESF+ and thus **harmonise the approach across all Cohesion Policy Funds**.
- streamline indicators across programmes and MS and **facilitate their aggregation and evidence-gathering at EU level**. It is expected that with the extended list of common indicators, the need for programme specific indicators would be significantly reduced, also allowing for more complete coverage in reporting at EU level.
- **provide valuable data for subsequent evaluation work**. Direct result indicators are argued by the EC to give MS an important building block to contextualise information in their evaluations and verify long-term outcomes.

At the same time, the EC acknowledges that:

- the shift towards direct result indicators **will require increased monitoring efforts** from programmes, implying an extension of the project monitoring system and a need to integrate processes to collect values from project promoters.
- this **can raise some concerns around the administrative burden** on the operationalisation of monitoring **and the mechanics** in particular around collecting result indicators. Some of the core result indicators can be viewed as particularly problematic by the MS (see Section 3.4.2).
- the decision to drop the requirement to collect impact indicators was part of the 'trade-off' in the definition of the new indicator system. While wider impact indicators provide valuable information, it is mostly relevant for the national and regional levels as such data is often context-specific, closely linked to national indicators, and is difficult to interpret and aggregate coherently.

At the same time, the EC's overall judgement so far is that the restructuring of the indicator system is an important improvement – in particular, it has enabled a **significant reduction in the number of specific indicators**.<sup>47</sup> It is also stressed that MS were deeply involved in the long process of negotiations of the new indicators which has led to their overall preparedness to adopt them in the new programmes.

Source: EC (2021) and Interview with DG REGIO, Evaluation & European Semester Unit (REGIO B2)

Across IQ-Net programmes, the implications of these regulatory changes differ. In some programmes, no significant change is expected (Pom, PT, W-M), particularly where results were







already also measured at the level of projects through project-level contracting of indicators (e.g. PT) and some common result indicators (reclassified based on 2014-20 common output indicators) are already familiar. Where changes are being made, they include:



**Increased use of common indicators and reduced number of programme-specific indicators** (e.g. CZ, EL, HU, IE SRA, Vla). In **Greece**, the NCA recommended that programme authorities limit the use of the specific indicators and explore the possibility of using only common output and results indicators. Similarly in **Vlaanderen**, the MA plans to use only common indicators.



**Shift in the overall methodological approach around anchoring result indicators to the level of projects.** The focus on direct effects of projects rather than long-term impacts is new e.g. for programmes in **Austria**, **Czechia** and **Vlaanderen**, and requires relevant changes in the OP systems to accommodate this.

This **new approach to indicators is generally welcomed and seen as a positive change** (e.g. CZ, DK, HU, Pom, PT, Vla, W-M), although some concerns have also been raised.

## i Extension on common indicators

The **extension of common indicators is viewed as helpful** in providing increased scope for flexibility, increasing relevance and reliability of data based on a uniform approach, and supporting the aggregation of comparable data across programmes (e.g. CZ, Pom). At the same time, **some concerns have also been raised**, including in relation to:

- **Relevance for OP/regional context.** Some common indicators that had to be included in the OP are viewed as not suitable for the regional context or as inadequate in measuring the objectives of a given intervention. In **Warmińsko-Mazurskie**, for example, this means that those projects that are able to most effectively generate these indicator values are rewarded in the project selection criteria, although they are not in line with the main objective of the intervention. Common indicators are not always viewed as suitable for projects funded in **Finland** (particularly some RDI and infrastructure projects), as they are often designed for the purposes of larger MS and their respective needs (e.g. covering the measurement of physical actions such as kilometres of roads built). They do not, therefore, always show the results achieved by Finnish projects in the correct light, often being more relevant for measuring EU-level achievements.
- **Lack of suitable common indicators.** **IE SRA** found that there are no common indicators in the area of energy poverty that would be suitable for measuring progress with their residential energy efficiency measures supporting the retrofit for those in or at risk of energy poverty.
- **Unclear benefit and purpose of certain common indicators.** In **Finland**, certain indicators are considered particularly difficult and unfit for purpose (see Box 7).

### Box 7: Indicators RCO74 and RCO75: key issues for Finland

Indicators RCO74 (number of inhabitants covered by ITI projects) and RCO75 (ITI strategies covered by support) are related to the 8 percent special funding pot of Sustainable Urban Development which in Finland is implemented in 16 urban areas.





The issue, for example, in the case of RCO74 arises as soon as one project has been implemented in each urban area under the same Specific Objective, as this means that the population target of RCO74 (=3.565 million inhabitants) is automatically reached and the monitoring is completed.

Indicator RCO75 also raises some questions as the Commission has instructed the Finnish authorities to use 1 as the target. The intention of the indicator is to measure the payment applications processed for ITI projects, but the Finnish authorities are slightly uncertain as to the value of this type of information.

## ii Focus on direct results

The **new logic of result indicators is also widely welcomed**, particularly as long-term impacts can be difficult to link directly to individual projects (CZ, DK, HU). The change is considered to help directly link indicators to project implementation by ensuring the maximum possible elimination of external factors (CZ, HU). Overall, this is praised for providing increased scope for flexibility (Pom), ensuring greater consistency with the ESF logic and streamlining the monitoring of multi-Fund programmes (PT), and giving the opportunity to measure the effects of projects more efficiently and accurately (Vla). At the same time, **some concerns have also been raised**, including in relation to:

- **Communication towards beneficiaries.** The **Vlaanderen** MA foresees a challenge in explaining the difference between result and output indicators to the beneficiaries.
- **Increased workload.** In the new **Vlaanderen** programme, the indicator set is now doubled compared to the old OP because it also includes result indicators. This means the MA has to ask more from the beneficiaries which results in more work for the MA.
- **Loss of valuable context information at EU level.** **Portugal** will continue collecting context result indicators and developing them further (based on cooperation with the National Statistical Institute) but notes that the absence of reporting them implies that the EC will lose a valuable source of context information.

## iii Setting baselines, milestones and targets

Some difficulties around the definition of baselines, milestones and targets in the new period have also been highlighted, including in relation to:

- **Challenges of setting baselines due to lack of experience, data or guidance.** In **Warmińsko-Mazurskie**, the need to show the baseline values in some result indicators before implementation is the key change in the overall approach to monitoring and is expected to present a difficulty, including as beneficiaries will need to remember that some indicators require such an approach. In **West NL**, the rules of calculation for the baselines have been an issue because for some indicators there was little to no data available. In **Greece**, the NCA identified errors in the indicator fiches sent by the EC (indicators with a base value of zero instead of  $\geq 0$ ) and had to instruct the programme authorities to use the indicator fiches elaborated at national level instead. As a general principle, it considers that most result indicators should be specified with a base value greater than zero, unless relevant interventions had not been undertaken by the Programme to date, and relevant guidance should be available.





- The **identification of baselines and targets in programmes covering different regional categories** can also present a challenge (e.g. **NL North**). Specific issues with regards to **setting baselines and targets for 'green' indicators**, particularly the GHG emissions, have also been raised by several IQ-Net partners (discussed in Section 3.4.2).
- **Difficulty of setting milestones and targets due to delays in the launch of the programmes and potential impact of external factors** (e.g. **CZ, FI, Pom, W-M**). In **Czechia**, it is considered challenging to set target values for result indicators due to the fact that they are highly influenced by factors outside CP implementation. Identification of milestones for output indicators to be checked in the performance framework in 2024 is viewed as problematic in **Pomorskie** and **Warmińsko-Mazurskie** as the OPs had a delayed start and it is likely that some outputs will not be evident by 2024, particularly for 'hard' investment projects.

#### Box 8: Setting baselines and targets – EC guidance

As clarified by the EC, the *estimation* of baselines is required for a subset of common result indicators (Annex 3, Table 2 of SWD (2021) 198),<sup>48</sup> whereas baselines for all outputs and many common result indicators are not required.

The experience with *target* setting for output indicators in 2014-20 should prove valuable when setting targets for 2021-27. At the same time, given that many result indicators are new, and during programming target setting is done without knowing the projects or beneficiaries that will be subsequently supported, the Commission expects that targets for result indicators should involve *estimation*.

**Other aspects of the reformed performance framework are assessed generally positively**, e.g. in relation to its greater flexibility in taking into account the entire programme and removing the pressure linked to the performance reserve, with the hope that this may promote a more qualitative, instead of quantitative, approach to the framework (**CZ, CZ IROP2, HU, Vla**).

#### iv Other challenges: measurement & aggregation

More broadly, some other difficulties related to the definition and monitoring of indicators in the new period relate, among others, to the following:

- **Consistency in measurement methods.** **Warmińsko-Mazurskie** anticipates issues across programmes and MS in being consistent in interpretation and measurement methods. Some indicators will need specific methods for monitoring that will be new to some beneficiaries (e.g. around emission levels related to road traffic use, people using the supported infrastructure in the open air, etc.). There are different approaches to measuring this across the EU, and some indicators require advanced and often costly methods of verifying the achieved indicator values by the beneficiaries. The lack of a single adopted method or common assumptions means that it will be difficult to ensure comparability. In **Hungary**, there is an issue with how data for indicators using FTE (full-time equivalent) is gathered as Hungary does not use the same methodology to calculate employment statistics as that used in the framework of CP.
- **Aggregation issues / double counting.** In **Hungary**, applying the right methodology for the aggregation of data to feed indicators is an issue, while **IE SRA** have experienced a technical challenge with the requirement to remove duplication at the level of the





specific objective. **Warmińsko-Mazurskie** noted the risk of double or triple counting of people for indicators such as ‘population covered by a strategy or measure’.

- Other issues include the **timeliness of data** (the need to keep data on indicators up to date, **HU**), **linking the results and the output indicators** at programming stage (**IE NWRA**), and a potentially complex process of **setting indicators for FIs** (**Pom**).

### 3.4.2 ‘Green’ monitoring: climate tracking and green indicators



For many programmes, the monitoring of the environmental and climate impact of CP interventions, including the climate tracking based on the intervention categories and the setting and measurement of ‘green’ (PO2-related) indicators, is particularly difficult. Previous research also showed that monitoring the adherence to climate goals is viewed as a new administrative challenge. Developing procedures and appraisal criteria for sustainable projects along with other tasks (e.g. preparation of documentation, cost estimates, environmental decisions) may create an administrative burden, especially where new types of projects are introduced.<sup>49</sup>

#### i Navigating through ‘green’ indicators

Environmental indicators (particularly related to GHG emissions reductions and energy savings) are among the most difficult ones to handle for many programmes, including in terms of defining the baselines and putting in place mechanisms for their measurement (e.g. **AT, DK, FI, IE NWRA, NL, PT, Vla, W-M**).

“In relation to SOs targeting renewable energy, energy efficiency and low carbon transport interventions: it is expected that the use of the specific energy and transport result indicators would be combined with the indicator on GHG emissions” (SWD 198).

Setting the baselines for and measuring the **GHG emissions indicator** is viewed as particularly challenging (including in terms of recording data before and after the measure).



For **Vlaanderen** and **West NL**, translating baselines for energy and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions to project level is problematic because the setting of baselines relies on the input from projects, and these baselines are not easy to communicate to beneficiaries.



For **Portugal**, the GHG indicator, while considered a generally relevant context indicator, is considered very difficult to measure at programme/project level. It is argued that the existing methodologies do not allow the quantification of the contribution of energy projects to a reduction of emissions (which can only be done in an indirect manner via modelling). For this reason, it was only included in relation to transport projects (SO 2.8) – where it is possible to make an estimation of emissions reduction – but not for other types of projects (notably related to energy efficiency), where it is not feasible to provide such an estimation.



The measurability of GHG emissions also raises concerns in **Finland**, where these types of indicators have been linked to business aid projects. The Environmental Centre of Finland has developed a *multiplier* for the national level, which converts the energy





consumption into GHG emissions. In practice this means that the project actors need to measure the energy consumption before the start of the project and after its delivery, and then use the multiplier to convert the data to establish the change in GHG emissions. While this approach works, it does not necessarily have the reduction of GHG emissions as the main focus, but rather the maximisation of productivity. Another challenge concerns the conversion of this national data into EU-level data.



In **Denmark**, where green indicators are also the most difficult ones, some progress has been achieved by using the so-called '*climate compass*'<sup>50</sup> to standardise indicators. It is a website (developed with ERDF/ESF support) which allows firms to estimate their GHG emission and provides an indication of how and by how much they can reduce it.

The EC acknowledges the difficulties in setting the GHG emissions indicator, but stresses its importance as well as the fact that the ask is to “make the best effort” and provide an **estimate** of the carbon footprint before and after the intervention, rather than to set an auditable target.<sup>51</sup>

To address some of the concerns, seminars were organised in 2020 on GHG methodologies and transport result indicators,<sup>52</sup> and methodological support produced by JASPERS on the options for measuring the transport result indicators.<sup>53</sup>

## ii Dealing with climate tracking

The monitoring of the planned contribution to climate and environment objectives, calculated based on the intervention categories (ICs) by applying the respective tracking coefficients, is also viewed as potentially challenging by some programmes (e.g. [AT](#), [FI](#), [PT](#)).



In **Finland**, there are some categories of expenditure where there is a certain level of duplication (where one category is 'less demanding' and the other one 'more demanding'), particularly notable in the case of categories 044<sup>54</sup> and 045<sup>55</sup>. There is some concern as to how individuals will tick the options (will they go for less demanding or more demanding), as this choice will also affect the delivery of climate targets.



In **Portugal**, the adopted list of ICs associated with climate projects is not viewed as the best approach to project categorisation, which can also create issues in terms of climate tracking. This is considered particularly challenging for projects that are not exclusively focused on energy efficiency objectives but have other components as they are more difficult to 'fit' into this categorisation system. While there is an opportunity to split expected investment cost among more than one category, this entails considerable administrative complexity. At the same time, considering those projects which include different components, there are potentially a lot of areas which are relevant to the requirements associated with climate tagging but which are not captured by this categorisation. In addition, there is an ongoing discussion (at the time of writing) regarding the way in which the obligations around climate tracking can be translated into specific regulations and project calls.



In **Austria**, the climate tracking via ICs is not easy as these need to be monitored at project level. The handbook on indicators and intervention categories has provided an overview of which codes contribute to the climate goals and to what extent (Table 9). Since up to three ICs can be selected per project and the threshold of 30 percent (total ERDF funding for climate goals) is only narrowly achieved by the OP, the climate-





relevant ICs should be taken into account when making the selection, especially those that contribute 100 percent to the climate goals.

**Table 9: Intervention codes and their relevance for climate goals in Austria**

Contribution to climate goals	Relevant intervention categories
40%	030, 038, 044, 069, 075, 079
100%	029, 040, 045, 046, 060, 081

**Box 9: Climate tracking through ICs (EC perspectives – DG REGIO)**

The EC acknowledges that MS may have some concerns regarding the use of the revised intervention field dimension categories and the weightings for climate tracking. It stresses that the revised categorisation system is not meant to be an accounting system, and the allocations to the various intervention fields are *indicative*, meaning that this might need to change during implementation (in which case no programme modification is required).

In cases where interventions fall 'in between' ICs, there remains an opportunity to split expected investment cost among more than one category. At the same time, it is important to be pragmatic and avoid situations where very small amounts of allocation are split across a large number of intervention fields.

It is also acknowledged that it may be difficult to attribute a precise contribution to climate objectives in all categories through the tracking coefficients (e.g. situations where the 40 percent coefficient is not entirely appropriate for some categories, whereas the 0 percent coefficient hides some contribution to climate objectives). But the expectation is that overall, the coefficients applied to expenditure split across different ICs would eventually get balanced out (e.g. some expenditure that might be hidden in the 0 percent intervention fields may be compensated in other intervention fields that have a 40 percent contribution to climate objectives).

Source: EC (2021) and Interview with DG REGIO, Evaluation & European Semester Unit

### iii Other 'green' issues: DNSH & climate proofing

Across several programmes, **some open questions still remain around the practical application of the DNSH principle and climate proofing** (e.g. CZ, IE SRA, PT), including in terms of translating those into projects and ensuring their monitoring during implementation (see also the IQ-Net Review paper). More broadly, partners also raised issues with regards to:

- misalignment between the specific objectives focused on sustainability (and the associated indicators) and the overall nature of the OP focused on innovation, which presents difficulties in terms of monitoring (NL West, NL East);
- challenges of establishing specific arrangements for monitoring water & waste management actions and contribution to biodiversity, along with climate tracking (EL).

### 3.4.3 Data reporting and transmission



IQ-Net programmes have mixed views on the modified data reporting and transmission requirements. For many, the increased reporting frequency accompanied by the abolition of the AIRs is **not seen as presenting a major change** compared to 2014-20, as overall,





the need to report on the same issues is maintained (CZ, FI, Pom, W-M). While the discontinuation of the mandatory AIRs is viewed mostly positively (e.g. AT, CZ, DK, Pom, W-M) and the new format is seen as easier, **the trade-off between no longer having to produce AIRs and having to report on indicators more often** is also noted (e.g. DK, IE NWRA, IE SRA). For some programmes, **more frequent reporting might become burdensome** / resource-consuming – both in terms of reporting financial data five times a year and reporting indicator data twice a year, particularly where data is produced by external providers.

Some **technical issues around data transfer/synchronisation** have also been raised, focused on how the data will be encoded and transmitted to the SFC (e.g. AT, DK, PT). First findings from the [Ex post evaluation of CP in 2014-20](#) ('Preparatory study on data collection', WP 2)<sup>56</sup> have shown that a lot of programmes still need to invest more in their IT systems, and this will be especially relevant in view of the increased frequency of reporting.

There are also **concerns around the more quantitative focus of new reporting**. The increased frequency of reports risks resulting in less in-depth reporting, more emphasis on quantitative data and decreased focus on the programmes' contents, and it is not clear how any qualitative comments or explanations can be included when submitting data (NL, HU, Vla).

### 3.5 Other open challenges: timing & administrative pressures



Apart from the issues described above, particularly with regard to the setting and monitoring of indicators, climate tracking and data reporting, IQ-Net programmes have identified other constraints in relation to 2021-27 monitoring arrangements. **Many issues were successfully resolved during programming**, but some still remain open or are expected to affect programmes later in the period. Some of them relate to:

- **Timing**, including: (i) time required to adapt to new/updated IT systems and their different modules (CZ, FI, W-M); (ii) finding the appropriate time to report in terms of implementation progress, including under the PF (Pom, W-M); (iii) the juxtaposition of the two programme periods with overlapping monitoring/reporting tasks and time required to clarify doubts regarding the new reporting requirements (W-M).
- **Data transfer**, to the SFC (Section 3.4.3) and from the old domestic monitoring systems into the new ones (AT).
- **Administrative burden and capacity**, e.g. issues around availability of staff for the delivery of Structural Funds or reduced TA in 2021-27 (e.g. Biz, FI). Specific concerns around unnecessary load for beneficiaries and other entities caused by the requirements of CPR Annex XVII<sup>57</sup> have also been raised (CZ).
- **Monitoring of specific instruments, themes or project types**, e.g. complex monitoring framework around FIs (HU, Pom) or SCOs (CZ), and measurability issues in relation to operational (non-investment) projects (Vla).





### 3.6 Responses: building capacity through guidance & training



Many of the changes introduced to the monitoring arrangements in 2021-27 (Section 3.3) aim to improve processes and mitigate the key challenges. Additional measures to build monitoring capacity and improve monitoring systems include:

- **Provision of guidance** to the programme authorities, e.g. on the intervention logic, indicators (selection, objective setting and monitoring) and performance framework, data transmission and templates, data quality and other relevant issues (e.g. [AT](#), [Biz](#), [CZ IROP2](#), [EL](#), [FI](#), [HU](#), [NL North](#), [PT](#)).
- **Internal reorganisation**. E.g. [NL North](#) has improved the monitoring process by changing the internal process and appointing one person responsible for the substantive part of the programme monitoring and accurate recording of data.
- **Training**, e.g. training courses and activities aimed at MAs, IBs and beneficiaries (e.g. [Biz](#), [FI](#), [HU](#), [IE](#), [PT](#)). Training actions are considered important for reinforcing the general understanding of the purpose of monitoring and its practical implementation as well as for harmonising practices.
- **Coordination**, exchange of information and capacity-building through joint meetings, workshops and conferences (involving MAs, IBs, beneficiaries and other relevant stakeholders) and dedicated coordination structures such as monitoring and supervisory committees and monitoring networks.







## 4 APPROACH TO EVALUATION IN 2021-27: OLD LESSONS, NEW CHALLENGES

Despite significant developments in the area of CP evaluation, persistent issues have continued affecting progress over consecutive programme periods – particularly around broader evaluation culture and market, affecting the quality of evaluation studies and the uptake of findings. IQ-Net programmes are navigating through shifting regulatory requirements and internal challenges, gradually strengthening evaluation capacity in an effort to understand better the relevance, value, efficiency and effectiveness of CP interventions.

This section looks at IQ-Net programmes' approaches to evaluation in the 2021-27 period. It starts by looking at the main lessons drawn from 2014-20 before reviewing progress with the preparation of Evaluation Plans for 2021-27. It then discusses the key changes introduced or planned to evaluations to be carried out in the new period, as well as partners' views on the regulatory provisions around evaluation in 2021-27 and their implications. It concludes by looking at the main open challenges and envisaged solutions.

### 4.1 Lessons from 2014-20: culture, capacity and quality

The evaluation of CP was an important area of focus during the 2014-20 period, with significant developments. Lessons can be taken from this period's evaluation framework for improving the overall effectiveness and efficiency of CP.

Overall, evaluation activities during 2014-20 are viewed positively by IQ-Net managers (e.g. [AT](#), [Biz](#), [NL](#), [HU](#), [PT](#)). In [Hungary](#), the evaluation system set up in 2014-20 is seen as well-functioning, and its benefits continue in the new period including capacity optimisation within MAs, development of an evaluation culture, and the increased capacity of evaluation experts for higher quality evaluations. Additionally, given that the Hungarian evaluation system has been running now for the third programme cycle, this has provided important stability and continuity that allows for a fuller exploitation of evaluation findings. [North Netherlands](#) also highlights that they started taking evaluations more seriously in the previous period, and [Bizkaia](#) note that the understanding of CP's contribution to development has grown over time.

#### 4.1.1 Results orientation and causality challenges



As mentioned before, the 2014-20 period emphasised the importance of a results-oriented approach, resulting from a need to assess the effects of CP interventions via the collection of reliable data. This led to increased emphasis on performance indicators, effectiveness and efficiency of interventions, and ultimately evidence-based policy making, with a focus on outcomes and impacts rather than just inputs and outputs. In this period, the CP evaluation framework has improved in terms of accuracy and the use and definition of indicators, as well as their collection in different regions and MS, even though issues remain





(see Section 3).<sup>58</sup> The emphasis on results and performance orientation led to a **greater number of evaluations being undertaken throughout the programme period at various stages of policy decisions**, and with prescriptive requirements on the planning and conduct of evaluations.<sup>59</sup>

However, this results orientation also has limitations related to its causality logic. This is associated with attributing the observed changes in outcomes and impacts solely to specific CP interventions, rather than considering other external and contributing factors related to the complexity of the socio-economic context.<sup>60</sup> **Assessing causality can be challenging, and limitations in establishing direct causal links between interventions and outcomes may affect the accuracy of evaluation findings** and the ability to fully understand the effectiveness of interventions. For this reason, a lesson from this period is the need to use reliable methods that can distinguish the effects of the intervention from other factors, and to verify observed outcomes with quantitative evidence or triangulation (e.g. in-depth case studies, representative studies, etc.).<sup>61</sup>

#### 4.1.2 Variance in evaluation quality



The evaluation framework has nonetheless become more robust and comprehensive in this period.<sup>62</sup> Evaluations have contributed to identifying successes, best practices, and areas for improvement, potentially leading to more informed policy decisions and enhanced accountability.<sup>63</sup> Nonetheless, **evaluation quality is still limited by the availability and quality of the data**, including inconsistencies in data collection methodologies, and gaps in data coverage and reliability.<sup>64</sup> National and regional authorities may also interpret elements of the regulatory framework in different ways, which can lead to a certain level of data fragmentation and incoherence.<sup>65</sup> Alongside this, and despite the EC's endeavours to promote advanced evaluation methods and provide guidance, evaluations conducted at national and regional levels have often adopted simplistic approaches and lacked quality.<sup>66</sup> As a result, the effectiveness of the framework is mixed. For evaluation results to be more accurate and reliable in informing decision-making, it is necessary to implement standardised methodologies, use administrative data wherever possible, and allow for adequate resources for independent evaluations.<sup>67</sup>

**The need for sound monitoring systems for robust data was emphasised** by IQ-Net programmes. For instance **Wales** noted their information system for data collection provided good quality data for evaluations. In **Portugal** one of the main achievements was the PT2020 information systems databases (also available for researchers), which link PT2020 data with other administrative and statistical records. Data limitations were an issue for **Greece**, with efforts to address this concentrating on the provision of data from the monitoring system.

##### i Varied evaluation culture



The mandatory use of Evaluation Plans in 2014-20 has enabled a more consolidated approach to evaluation among MAs.<sup>68</sup> However, **countries exhibit variation in their**





**commitments and practices concerning policy evaluation** – or evaluation culture.<sup>69</sup> Some countries (e.g. [DE](#), [NL](#), [SE](#)) have a stronger tradition of integrating policy evaluation into the policymaking process, particularly for regulatory policies. In others (e.g. [IT](#), [ES](#)), the use of policy evaluation may be less systematic and more context-dependent. EU CP has also introduced the concept of public policy evaluation in some countries (e.g. [HU](#), [IE](#), new MS).<sup>70</sup> IQ-Net research shows that in [Wales](#) the introduction of the mandatory project-level final evaluation in 2007-13 (continued in 2014-20) helped build evaluation capacity and culture, and contributed to the evidence base. Similarly, in [Hungary](#), the creation of the EP led to the development of the evaluation culture, as well as to improved quality of evaluations as experts built up capacity to meet demand. Nonetheless, evaluation efforts can still be hampered where there is a lack of a strong domestic evaluation culture (e.g. [EL](#)).

## ii Evaluation capacity and market



Alongside the broader evaluation culture, the **evaluation capacity and market are key factors in the quality of data and evaluation**.<sup>71</sup> For 2014-20, the overall pool of independent evaluators familiar with CP requirements and in the market to conduct evaluations was limited in some countries ([CZ](#), [FI](#), [IE](#), [PL](#), [PT](#), [Sco](#), [Wal](#)). In [Poland](#), the requirement to evaluate every OP priority created an overload of evaluation demand, with 16 regional OPs and several national OPs all commissioning evaluation studies at around the same time. The demand for evaluation outstripped the supply of evaluators with the resources to produce quality studies. In [Wales](#) and [Scotland](#), this was a particular issue for projects in the low carbon/net zero theme, causing bottlenecks and delays. In [Finland](#), in addition to the limited pool of competent evaluators, there was a concern about the lack of critical reporting by evaluators potentially associated with the desire to win future bids. Conversely, in [Denmark](#), 2014-20 was the first period in which all projects were evaluated by the same external contractor, which was argued to increase consistency in terms of methods and approach and will be continued in 2021-27.

Additionally, there was **clear need for more involvement from academia in evaluations** ([CZ](#), [PT](#)). [Portugal](#) noted this would be useful to increase the response capacity in a limited market, respond to new methodological challenges and improve the quality of evaluations. Expansion of the market is thus required, together with an improvement of education and training in the field of evaluation of CP and public policies. Contributing to the advanced training of qualified human resources in the field on both the management side and in the market could also help tackle specific capacity issues (e.g. low carbon themes).

## iii Internal capacities & capacity-building



Aside from the above-mentioned constraints, some MAs and MS also have **limited internal resources for evaluations**, including budgetary and/or time constraints, and limited availability of internal expertise.<sup>72</sup> These limitations can affect the quality and scope of evaluations, potentially restricting their ability to provide comprehensive and robust findings.





Another lesson highlighted is that limited existing resources should be directed towards critical policy questions in evaluation, i.e. the main issues where evidence is needed, in order to improve the quality of the resulting evaluations.<sup>73</sup> **Importance of measures to strengthen evaluation capacity** has been emphasised. Actions included, for example, supporting regional/national evaluation networks (EL, PT) and participation of national entities in EC evaluation networks; setting up consultations with evaluators and experts (CZ, Pom, Sco); and training actions, organised internally, by EC (e.g. DG REGIO summer schools, ESF CIE Community of Practice), or by other entities.

#### iv Methodologies & methodological advances



IQ-Net countries and MAs also report applying more sophisticated or innovative evaluation methodologies in 2014-20 (e.g. ES, PT). In **Spain**, new methodologies were commissioned to the Institute of Fiscal Studies for the realisation of internal evaluations – such as counterfactual impact evaluations (CIE) – and this work is expected to continue in 2021-27. In **Portugal**, methodologies developed in the evaluations combine the application of good practices with relevant advances in the EP. These also include the use of CIE, but also the introduction of the Theory of Change, Theory-Based Evaluation and the Evaluation Matrix, the combination of both counterfactual and theory-based methodologies, and the triangulation of different techniques for collecting information.

## 4.2 Lessons from 2014-20: flexibility, coordination, impact

### 4.2.1 Type and scope of evaluations



The type and scope of evaluations carried out in 2014-20 varied significantly across MS. For example, in **Czechia** fewer evaluations were completed in total compared to 2007-13. There was an even greater difference in terms of process evaluations which were needed only to a very small extent in comparison to 2007-13. The main reason is that the implementation structure gained needed experience and was able to conduct process analyses internally. In **Portugal**, PT2020 had a stronger focus on impact evaluations, although a greater mix of different types of evaluations is seen as preferable for 2021-27.

Regarding the scope of evaluations, some IQ-Net programmes found it to be too broad and are therefore seeking a more targeted approach in 2021-27 (e.g. CZ, IE, NL, PT). **North Netherlands** mentioned that in the previous programme they started to take evaluations more seriously and moved from broader evaluations with less depth to more limited evaluations with more depth and detail. This is echoed by **Portugal** and both **Ireland** programmes (NWRA and SRA), who plan to break down broader evaluations and pursue more focused and thematic evaluations.





## 4.2.2 Timing, flexibility and adaptability



Across the EU, the 2014-20 period demonstrated significant evaluation delay issues. Some of these were the result of ineffectiveness or inadequate planning while others were caused by external factors or shifts in internal needs and schedules.<sup>74</sup> Across IQ-Net, **several programmes experienced delays or changes to the initially foreseen timetables**. In some cases, deadlines had to be extended – e.g. in **Portugal**, where completion times sometimes took longer than expected due to the methodological changes and effort to develop more in-depth assessments. While broadly adhering to the evaluation plan, **Austria** also reported changes to the timetable.<sup>75</sup> In addition, several programme managers noted that **evaluation results came too late** to influence the 2021-27 period planning. In this context, both **Denmark** and **Finland** argued that the focus should be on mid-term, ongoing and thematic evaluations, which appear to be more valuable than *ex post* evaluations. Programmes (**AT, PL, PT, CZ**) also noted the difficulty of finding the right balance between carrying out evaluations early enough to feed into the next period, and late enough to have sufficient data to evaluate. **Portugal** highlighted the **importance of advance planning**. In this sense, evaluation fiches included in the EP were an advantage as they enabled the anticipation of required knowledge for the evaluation process (e.g. objectives, stakeholders, methods, questions, information needs).

The **role of the external context, as well as the importance of flexibility and adaptability in evaluation processes and requirements**, have also been noted. The socio-economic context and needs of regions and MS can change over time, and evaluations need to be able to respond to evolving challenges and opportunities.<sup>76</sup> This may be difficult, not least due to the rigidity of the regulatory framework. The 2014-20 period experienced several external shocks or crises that presented new demands for programme managers.



**Bizkaia** has highlighted the external context as having created demanding situations and complex goals for evaluation. **Wales** echoed this, also suggesting that the introduction of new Priority Axes under the OPs (including those to adapt quickly to the COVID-19 effects) have generated issues in terms of measuring impact and setting evidence requirements. In turn, this has made evaluation of impact more arduous.

The **need for more flexibility to adapt to changing and challenging circumstances** was highlighted by IQ-Net programmes as a key lesson for this period. **Pomorskie** considers that flexibility at the ROP level in deciding what to evaluate is crucial, but was lacking in most of 2014-20. Evaluation obligations in the CPR and national level guidance led to a rigid framework for the MA evaluation unit and the MTE exercise, for example, had limited utility given the stage of ROP implementation at that point.

On the other hand, **flexibility has also been useful regarding internal circumstances and the general management of evaluation systems**. **Portugal**'s national EP proved to be useful in defining the logical model for defining the evaluations and their corresponding schedule, and was considered flexible enough to adapt to shifting evaluation needs. **Pomorskie** and





**Warmińsko-Mazurskie** considered the requirement to evaluate every programme priority too demanding, putting a strain on capacity and the evaluation market. They thus welcome the increased flexibility introduced in the 2021-27 framework to target evaluation according to specific regional circumstances. This echoes **Bizkaia**'s sentiment on the need for simplification.

### 4.2.3 Coordination and stakeholder engagement



The **value of a coordinated approach to evaluation** has been emphasised, both in literature,<sup>77</sup> and by IQ-Net programme managers (e.g. **AT, DK, EL, HU, IE, NL, PT**).

- In **Hungary**, for example, having a single evaluation plan for all OPs and a central coordination authority responsible for the execution of all evaluations was seen to help achieve economies of scale and free capacity within the MAs.
- In **Greece**, the practice of conducting evaluations on a single theme across many programmes was noted. Similarly, the **Irish SRA** and **NWRA** conducted a public awareness survey across multiple programmes (ERDF, ESF, EMFF), also coordinating on evaluation with each other. In the **Netherlands** joint evaluations on process and on overlapping objectives in the programme were considered good practice with clear added value.

**Stakeholder engagement and participation was also highlighted**, with evaluation guidelines calling for the need to involve local and regional authorities, civil society organisations, and other actors in the design, implementation and evaluation of CP interventions. Across the EU, this has led to increased efforts to ensure that stakeholders are actively engaged in the process. Despite this, there are still varying levels of stakeholder participation in evaluation, and evidence has shown that some stakeholders may have limited capacity to engage effectively.<sup>78</sup> For example, in **Scotland**, achieving buy-in and cooperation from delivery partners/stakeholders into the evaluation process has been challenging, with a need to be reassuring that the evaluation process is not an audit or scrutiny of their activities.



**IQ-Net programmes have emphasised the need for the involvement of stakeholders in the evaluation process** (**Biz, CZ, EL, HU, Sco, Pom, PT, Vla**), and their desire to continue promoting this in 2021-27. Close involvement with stakeholders and evaluators was highlighted as a way to identify pertinent research questions for evaluation questionnaires, lending itself to useful data being obtained (**CZ, Pom, Sco**). Cooperation with other public administrations bodies was also noted (e.g. **Biz, IE, Pom, Vla**) as a good experience from 2014-20.

- **Bizkaia** highlighted the benefits of collaborating with experts in the public administration – notably the Institute of Fiscal Studies – to boost internal evaluation capacity in the MA. **IE NWRA** and **SRA** increasingly collaborated with each other.
- In **Vlaanderen**, beneficiaries had a greater involvement in evaluations, together with the MA, the chair of the supervisory committee and ITI steering groups.
- In **Pomorskie** there was increased involvement of the Regional Board and other regional government departments outside of CP units, for example feeding into the evaluation of social infrastructure support and education.





The **establishment of dedicated bodies for carrying out and coordinating the evaluation process** has been a generally positive lesson from 2014-20. IQ-Net partners have set up evaluation networks (EL – Box 10, PT), advisory groups (AT, Wal), and broader steering groups (PT, W-M). Usually, advisory groups meet frequently throughout the programme period (e.g. three times during evaluation activities in AT), keeping awareness of evaluation high (Wal). They can include lead project beneficiaries and discuss evaluation plans and methodologies. The involvement of advisory or steering groups in consultations on both the scope of research and the reporting on evaluation implementation is also argued to have positively influenced the quality of the evaluation process as a whole (W-M).

#### **Box 10: Evaluation network in Greece**

In Greece, a good practice example from 2014-20 has been the establishment of an Evaluation network by the NCA, which was run by the Special Service for Strategy, Planning and Evaluation. The network comprised representatives of the NCA and the programme authorities. It provided a consultation forum for the formulation of a common framework on evaluation principles, methodological tools, indicators, evaluation plans, a cooperation platform for the fulfilment of regulatory obligations and the safeguarding of coherence and quality of evaluations conducted.

Source: IQ-Net research

The need to engage more academics in the evaluation work, including for expert data interpretation, was also highlighted (CZ, PT). In **Wales**, a dedicated evaluation research team was created in the MA to aid in the data collection and analysis process (Box 11).

#### **Box 11: A Research, Monitoring and Evaluation team in Wales**

A dedicated Research, Monitoring and Evaluation team within the Welsh MA is responsible for evaluation, with the exception of evaluation at project level, where the MA works with project sponsors to provide advice and guidance.

Through Technical Assistance, the MA funded four research posts in the Welsh Government's Knowledge and Analytical Services department in 2007-13 to take forward project evaluation of Welsh Government Structural Funds projects. This increased the quality of project evaluation and was built into the TA proposal for 2014-20, resulting in TA-funded posts for two social researchers.

Source: IQ-Net research

### **4.2.4 Communicating evaluation results**



Communication and dissemination of evaluation results are a crucial channel for improving the use of evaluations, as evaluations vie for attention from decision-makers and the public alongside other types of information.<sup>79</sup> IQ-Net programmes have emphasised the importance of quality communication of results, in a clear format and with the use of visualisation. To illustrate key points to stakeholders and policymakers and promote the use of findings, programme managers emphasised the use of graphic overviews like maps and charts (Pom, PT), factsheets (CZ), qualitative descriptions of projects and evaluations (CZ, Sco, Wal),





different types of summaries/briefs (e.g. research, data, for different audiences) (CZ, PT, Wal), comprehensive databases (CZ), and seminars (PT). Examples include:



The **Scottish** MA produces an annual Case Study booklet to provide an overview of what projects are doing.<sup>80</sup> The **Welsh** MA prepared regular summaries of published research directly relevant to Structural Funds programmes, including evaluations, policy papers, articles, and others. These generated a comprehensive but accessible evidence base to inform programme management.



In addition to the Library of Evaluations (see Box 12), **Czechia's** IROP also prepared larger factsheets on certain relevant topics (e.g. social housing, transport infrastructure), providing up-to-date monitoring data that was published on the MA website.



In **Portugal**, there was a high level of consistency in the communication of evaluation results. Good practice examples of dissemination products include e.g. executive and graphic summaries, policy briefs, and seminars for the dissemination of results, which had a high level of stakeholder participation. In addition, the Summary Report of Evaluation Results is considered a good practice, providing important insights into the evaluation work carried out in 2014-20. The report presents the evaluation process in 2014-20 and its main results. It highlights the main strengths, constraints and lessons learnt in each stage of the evaluation cycle (planning of the overall evaluation approach; preparation and implementation of each evaluation, communication of evaluation results, follow-up of recommendations, and capacity-building), and contains detailed fiches of each evaluation carried out.

#### Box 12: **Czechia's Library of Evaluations<sup>81</sup> and overview of conducted evaluations**

The Czech [Library of Evaluations](#) is an online single database with all evaluations undertaken by the MAs and the NCA. The National Evaluation Unit oversees the publication of evaluation reports and executive summaries. Entries are uploaded to the library from the central electronic monitoring system, and the database can be filtered by various criteria. The objectives are to: (i) disseminate evaluation findings; (ii) support learning through evaluations; (iii) spread awareness about evaluations and their added-value; and (iv) support the transparency of evaluations and overall implementation of ESIF. The library is accessible for policymakers, managers, implementers, evaluation professionals, academics, and the wider public.

Additionally, the Evaluation Unit of the NCA annually prepares an attractive [overview of the main conducted evaluations](#) including the key findings. The topics covered are diverse, from process evaluations to result evaluations and cover CP in 2021-27. The overview also contains examples of interesting evaluations from abroad. It is considered a good practice example in the country and is recommended to be emulated at other levels (e.g. EU level). The tool is seen as especially important for disseminating evaluation findings among stakeholders of middle and top management of the implementation structure.

Source: IQ-Net research

#### 4.2.5 **Use and impact of evaluation findings**



Lastly, across the EU, evaluation findings seem to have had greater utilisation in policy decision-making in 2014-20.<sup>82</sup> Evaluation results are generally used to inform policy







design, improve implementation, and enhance accountability, leading to better-targeted interventions and improved outcomes.<sup>83</sup> However, the overall use of evaluations for policy-learning was still rare, despite a strengthened evidence-based approach.<sup>84</sup> There is also mixed evidence regarding: MAs taking a pro-active stance to carry out evaluations adapted to their needs; and on how evaluation findings are used by policymakers in the decision-making process, as the analysis is made more complex given the large number and variety of evaluations conducted.<sup>85</sup>

IQ-Net authorities echo some of these experiences with the use of findings. Some already had or put in place methodologies and arrangements to support the use of findings (AT, PL, PT). **Austria** placed a strong focus on defining useful evaluation questions, which put them in a good position for following up on evaluation findings, and **Pomorskie** made increased efforts to make findings and recommendations less abstract and more practical.

Some countries have a **formal system for following up on evaluation findings** in place (e.g. PL, PT). For instance **Portugal** developed a comprehensive follow-up methodology, ensuring an ongoing follow-up process for CP evaluations.<sup>86</sup> In 2014-20, findings were incorporated through both recommendations of a strategic nature (formulated mainly in impact evaluations) and operational recommendations. The follow-up model facilitated the streamlining and monitoring of the process of implementation of the recommendations. The evaluations carried out are assessed overall as having contributed strongly to the process of learning and continuous improvement in the cycle of planning and implementation of public policies. The **Polish** formal system for implementing evaluation recommendations is also of note (Box 13).

Several programmes emphasised the **difficulty in making use of evaluation findings** in the 2014-20 period. In **Czechia**, the process of following up on evaluation recommendations at national level, involving technical work within the central monitoring system and regular assessments of fulfilment of progress, was found to be complex and eventually discontinued given the bureaucratic burden – although this process worked better at the level of the OPs.

**Box 13: The Polish evaluation follow-up system<sup>87</sup>**

In Poland, a formal system for implementing evaluation findings is organised around an electronic database managed by the National Evaluation Unit, which collects all conclusions and recommendations from completed evaluations. There is a formal obligation for all evaluation units to supply the database, which has a standardised typology of recommendations and implementation statuses. This allows the tracking of the degree of recommendation take-up at the level of programme, organisation, or the whole system. The database may also support the process of using the findings of a particular evaluation in a specific organisation.

Source: Pellegrin J & Colnot L (2020) *The role of evaluation in Cohesion Policy*, Research for REGI Committee, European Parliament, Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies.





### 4.3 2021-27 Evaluation Plans: state of play and approaches

IQ-Net programmes are still largely in the initial stages of developing their evaluation plans (EP) for 2021-27. Nonetheless, preparations are progressing as planned, with expectations for submission at latest one year after programme approval, as required.

**Table 10: State of play with the preparation of the Evaluation Plans**

Not started	Initial stages	Advanced	Approved
Vla, W-M	AT, Biz, CZ IROP2, FI, HU, IE, NL	PT	CZ, DK

The timeline below shows an overview of reported plans by IQ-Net partners:

**Figure 2: Timeline of reported preparations of the Evaluation Plans by IQ-Net partners**



In **Denmark**, the EP for ERDF and ESF was approved back in November 2022, while the EP plan for JTF is expected to be approved in April 2023. As with the monitoring arrangements, **Czechia** is also well advanced in the preparation of the EP which was approved at the beginning of 2023. Two challenging tasks were noted in designing the EP: (i) internal communication with relevant implementation system actors with respect to their needs and expectations from evaluations, and timing of evaluations; and (ii) how to prepare the tender dossier to ensure the delivery of the evaluation as expected by the NCA. **CZ ROP2's** Evaluation Plan is nonetheless in early stages, with drafting starting in May 2023. The attention has been mostly focused on the launch of the programme, with the Plan not being a priority so far. Other IQ-Net programmes are planning a submission later in the year.



**Warmińsko-Mazurskie** are planning to submit the EP in December 2023, as they are still waiting to hear from the National Evaluation Unit which studies will be carried out at the horizontal level in order to avoid duplication. They are also waiting for the adoption of the detailed priority descriptions of the OP which will allow them to formulate the scope of the planned evaluation studies.



The **Irish NWRA** has started the EP activity in earnest, though they are planning a November 2023 submission. For this, they have gathered additional resources, are revising 2014-20 activities and recommendations to feed into the new period, and are



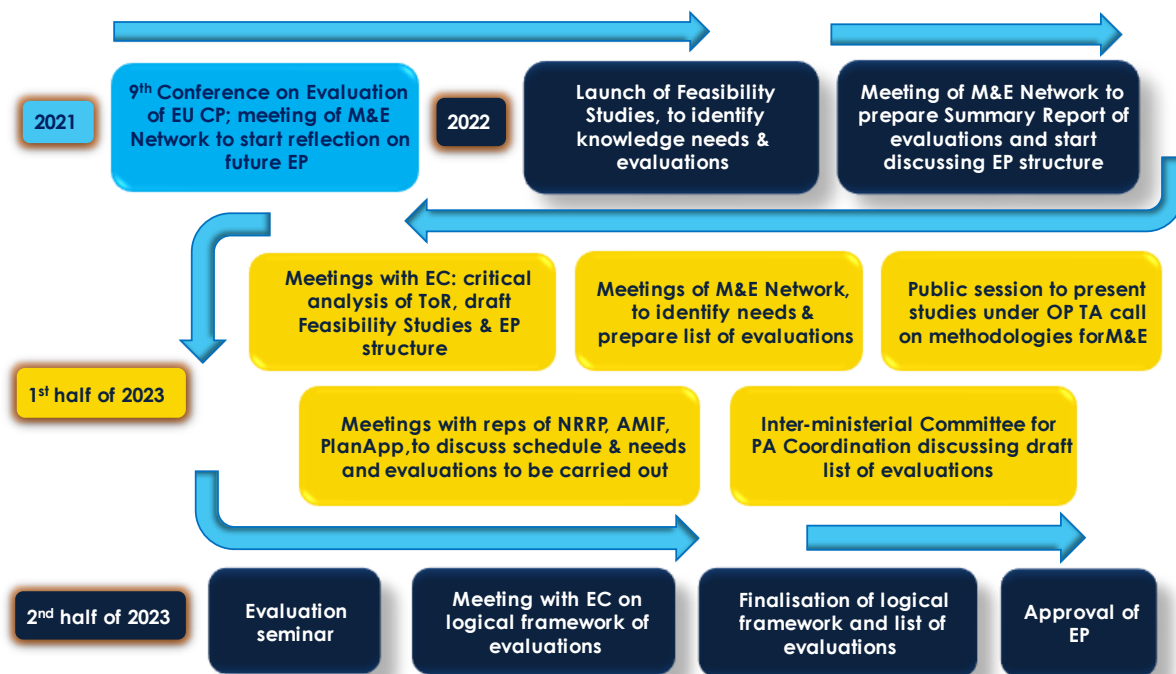


attending the evaluation summer school. They are also engaging with the IBs earlier in order to better define the scope of the EP.



In **Portugal**, a lot of work has been done on planning the approach to evaluation in 2021-27. Reflection on evaluation plans for the new period started back in 2021. Among other things, the OP TA call on methodologies for evaluation and monitoring was launched,<sup>88</sup> aimed at the development and/or testing of innovative tools and methodologies for ESIF M&E. In 2022, discussions started on the structure of the national EP, and Feasibility Studies were launched,<sup>89</sup> to identify knowledge needs and prepare technical specifications for evaluations. This work is being carried out with universities, which are undertaking a literature review around the key themes of ESIF support, and outlining alternative methodological solutions for carrying out evaluations in 2021-27. The overall intention is to have the main principles and approach finalised over March-April 2023, with the list of evaluations to be carried out defined by June 2023 and the final EP approved by September 2023 (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Indicative EP preparation timeframe in Portugal**



Source: Own elaboration based on internal document of Agency for Development & Cohesion (ADC)

#### 4.3.1 Overall approach to the EPs in 2021-27: flexibility & scope

Most IQ-Net partners are still considering the overall approach to their EPs, including in terms of flexibility and scope.

The **EPs are generally intended to be flexible documents**, to allow the accommodation of evaluation needs as they emerge and the readjustment of work where considered necessary.<sup>90</sup> This approach will be continued in 2021-27 although, in some cases, **additional flexibility will be introduced**. For instance in **Austria**, a key difference in 2021-27 is the plan to revise the EP when and where necessary, which was not done in the previous period.





In some cases, **decisions on the coverage/scope of the EPs are still pending**, but a significant degree of continuity is foreseen overall. For example in **Portugal**, a single national EP, covering all ESI Funds, will continue pursuing a global approach that combines the evaluations of programmes, thematic areas and specific territorial aspects, and which will be complemented by EP for each OP. In **Austria**, as in 2014-20, the EP will be tendered as one package, covering all evaluations. The national **EPs will ensure coordination across programmes (AT, CZ, HU, NL, PT), Funds (AT, CZ, DK, PT, W-M)**, as well as with **other policy instruments such as the RRF**. For example:



In **Portugal**, cooperation with evaluation processes outside CP instruments will be strengthened through the global EP, covering dimensions such as the NRRP, AMIF and PlanApp (Competence Centre for Planning, Policy & Foresight in Public Administration).



In **Denmark**, a joint EP for ERDF and ESF+ has been produced as the programmes and projects will be evaluated using the same approach and the same external evaluator. Experience from previous periods shows that evaluation themes and issues are often identical for the two programmes, and as both operate within the same organisational set-up, a joint plan was the obvious solution. JTF has a separate EP, although will be subject to the same approach and methods as ERDF and ESF+.

## 4.4 2021-27 evaluations: key changes and rationale

As most IQ-Net programmes are still working on their approach to evaluation in 2021-27, in many cases at this point **there is only limited information on the specific changes that will be introduced in terms of the scope, focus, timing, organisation and methodological approaches** of 2021-27 CP evaluations. Overall, however, **a significant degree of continuity is foreseen**, with no fundamental changes planned and intentions to maintain the overall approach to evaluations along similar lines as in 2014-20 both in terms of content and processes (e.g. **CZ, DK, HU, NL, Vla**). Some **adjustments and incremental improvements are also anticipated**, primarily aimed at addressing the weaknesses identified in the past and reflecting interest in knowledge-based improvement.

### i Number, scope and thematic coverage of evaluations

IQ-Net partner's plans in terms of the overall **number of evaluations** to be conducted in 2021-27 vary from a similar number of studies (**CZ, Pom**), to more (e.g. **IE NWRA**) or fewer (**W-M**) evaluations than in 2014-20. This also reflects varying plans in terms of the **scope of evaluation** activities, with some changes compared to the previous period relating to:

- **Greater focus on thematic evaluations**, as opposed to priority-specific studies (**FI, Pom, W-M**), also reflecting the changes in the regulatory provisions regarding the scope of mandatory impact evaluations (see Section 4.5.3).
- **More focussed evaluations**, as opposed to larger, more complex studies (**CZ, FI, IE NWRA, IE SRA, PT**). For example **Finland, Ireland** and **Portugal** are considering the possibility of carrying out shorter evaluations, more focused on specific themes or sub-themes, rather than focusing on very large / comprehensive evaluations. Apart from allowing for more in-depth analysis, smaller (but possibly more frequent) evaluations





can allow for additional flexibility. In **Czechia**, considering lack of suppliers that can produce large complex evaluations, the Evaluation Unit plans to reorganise them into several independent evaluations in order to distribute evaluation commissions more equally across the evaluation market.

- **More focus on the evaluation of the regional dimension** (Pom, PT, W-M). More regional analyses in thematic evaluations is recommended for the global EP in **Portugal**. In **Czechia**, evaluations of regional dimension of CP will cover e.g. territorial integrated tools (processes and impacts) and the benefits of the ESIF for regional development.
- **Integration of the RRF**. In **Portugal**, thematic evaluations will cover both ESIF and NRRP dimensions, whenever it is relevant and there is complementarity in interventions.

For many programmes, it appears early to elaborate on the **thematic coverage** of evaluations to be conducted in 2021-27. In **Poland**, evaluations are expected to cover a broader range of topics than in 2014-20 (W-M) or put more emphasis on issues related to horizontal principles (Pom). In **Finland**, the themes have not been decided yet, but may include all/some of the following: availability of skilled labour, green growth, digitalisation, social inclusion. In **Denmark**, DBA expects to undertake thematic evaluations of issues pertaining to individual priorities or cross-cutting themes. For JTF, thematic evaluations regarding investment support (priorities 2, 4 and 5) and competence development are planned.

## ii Timing of evaluations: striking a balance

Current planning or initial discussions around the timing of evaluations point to:

- **Earlier start of evaluations** (e.g. CZ, FI). The **Czech** NCA intends to launch impact evaluations of 2021-27 earlier than in the 2014-20 period to provide sufficient time-space for impact evaluators to collect data and process the information in a more consolidated way. Similarly in **Finland**, given the late results of evaluations in 2014-20, the intention is to start evaluations earlier or adopt an ongoing evaluation approach. This would enable the authorities to carry out corrective actions if needed.
- **Increased focus on mid-term evaluation**. In **Denmark**, the evaluation scheme for 2021-27 was revised, placing more emphasis on mid-term evaluation (see Box 14).
- **Assessing the impacts over longer periods** than the current programming cycle (CZ, FI, NL, PT). The aim is to provide results in parallel to programme implementation but also using data from previous periods, to monitor changes over a longer period of time, see the bigger picture and inform planning for subsequent periods.
- **Revised schedule for impact evaluations**. In **Portugal**, lessons from experience have shown that it only makes sense to carry out impact evaluations when there is a sufficient level of progress on the ground. For this reason, in the first years of the programme period, only impact evaluations on 2014-20 (ex post) will be carried out, along with process evaluations, whereas impact evaluations on 2021-27 will only start in the second half of the period.
- Overall, as in 2014-20, **finding the right balance between 'early enough'** (to allow an impact for the next period) **and 'late enough'** (to have sufficient data to evaluate) remains a challenge for most programmes (AT, CZ, Pom, PT, Vla, W-M).





#### Box 14: Planned evaluation timeline and approach in Denmark

**Mid-term evaluations.** For all projects involving over €400,000 (EU and/or national funds), mid-term evaluation will be compulsory (in JTF this only applies to priorities 1 and 3). *Ex post* evaluation is no longer compulsory for projects over €270,000 but can be requested by the DBA or the project itself. This change reflects the experience of the 2014-20 period that showed that mid-term evaluations are more useful for projects, allowing adjustments on the basis of the recommendations of an external evaluator. This shift increases the focus on learning from evaluations, not just for future projects and programmes but also during the implementation of individual projects.

**Evaluation of initiatives/priorities.** Mid-term and final evaluations are planned for each initiative/priority under ERDF and ESF+, assessing the experience of projects and overall progress. These will be theory-based evaluations and are planned to take place in 2025 and 2029 respectively. 2025 is expected to be the earliest point where enough experience has been generated to allow evaluations to provide input to adjustments for the remaining period. Focus will be on effectiveness (goal achievement), resource efficiency (the price of producing results), and impact (to what extent results reflect the programmes). For JTF neither mid-term nor final evaluations are planned, instead evaluation of individual projects or thematic evaluations will be used.

**Thematic evaluations.** Thematic evaluations of issues pertaining to individual priorities or cross-cutting themes are planned, although their themes and timing cannot be predicted at this stage and they have not been specified in the EP.

Source: IQ-Net research

While further details regarding the evaluation timeline are not yet available for most programmes, in **Finland**, the draft EP outlines a provisional timeline (see Table 11) with the first results of the evaluations due to be discussed at the last MC meeting of 2024.

Table 11: Draft timeline for 2021-27 evaluations in Finland

Timeline	Task	Content
1/2023 MC meeting	Evaluation plan	
2/2023 MC meeting	Plan regarding the procurement for the mid-term evaluation	
2/2024 MC meeting	Discussion of the results of the mid-term evaluation	
31 March 2025	Results of the mid-term evaluation to the EC	
2/2025 MC meeting	Discussion of the results of the evaluation and plan regarding evaluation procurement	Results of the evaluation Plan for thematic evaluations (availability of skilled labour/green growth)
2/2026 MC meeting	Discussion of the results of the evaluation and plan regarding evaluation procurement	Results of the evaluation Plan for thematic evaluations (digitalisation/social inclusion)
2/2027 MC meeting	Discussion of the results of the evaluation	Evaluation of the impacts of the programme and reports related to the thematic evaluations
2/2028 MC meeting	Discussion of the results of the evaluation	Evaluation of the impacts of the programme and reports related to the thematic evaluations
1/2029 MC meeting	Final report of impact evaluation	





30 June 2029	Finalised impact evaluation and submission to the EC	
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Source: Adapted from draft EP, *Renewing and Competent Finland 2021-27*, Evaluation Plan, 5 April 2023

### iii Organisation: resources, capacities, coordination

Organisational changes planned around evaluation work in 2021-27 are primarily aimed at addressing the constraints identified in the past, particularly around weak evaluation culture and capacity, limited evaluation market and ultimately sub-optimal quality of evaluations. Some of the strategies to address these issues include:



**Rethinking the balance between in-house and external expertise** (Biz, IE NWRA, W-M). In **Bizkaia** and **Warmińsko-Mazurskie**, there are plans to undertake more CP evaluations 'in house' as part of efforts to build greater internal evaluation capacity, although these must also take into account available staff and resources.



**Expanding the evaluation market** (e.g. CZ, PT, W-M), including through **greater involvement of academia** (e.g. CZ, FI, PT). **Warmińsko-Mazurskie** hopes that development of more methodologically innovative and challenging research questions and objectives will encourage more skilled and resourceful evaluators to apply. In **Portugal**, there are efforts to expand evaluation market in both the number and type of organisations. This also foresees greater engagement of academia – the above-mentioned Feasibility Studies and the Call to carry out Studies on M&E Methodologies (see Section 4.3) are among examples that demonstrate this attempt to diversify the evaluation market and strengthen cooperation with universities. Similarly in **Czechia**, the National Evaluation Unit intends to engage the academic sector more directly in the evaluation work, e.g. through cooperation with the OP TA and a project call for specific evaluations. In **Finland**, a new development is the establishment of a science panel which will include top-level academic experts to validate evaluations.



**Strengthening coordination and stakeholder engagement.** Coordination through bodies such as monitoring committees, supervisory committees (NL North), evaluation steering groups (FI, W-M) will continue or be strengthened. In **Finland**, the MC will continue with the previous practice of setting up a steering group for the evaluation, which will include representatives of the IBs across the different regions, as well as relevant ministries. In **Ireland**, cooperation between the MAs in planning and commissioning evaluations will be further reinforced, and closer work with the IBs pursued. More intense coordination across programme units is also foreseen in some cases – e.g. between the evaluation unit and the marketing team of the **Czech IROP**. In **Portugal**, the M&E Network will continue to be a crucial forum for cooperation and exchange.

### iv Evaluation methods and approaches

In many cases, the **balance between process and impact evaluation** is yet to be defined and will emerge as the EPs are finalised. Several programmes intend to pursue a balanced approach covering both process and impact evaluations (e.g. AT, PT), which is often the continuation of the approach adopted in 2014-20. **Some partners are also looking to recalibrate the balance between process and impact evaluations.** For instance while in 2014-20 **Portugal** had a very strong focus on impact evaluations, it now intends to have a greater mix of different types of evaluations, wherein process evaluations will help inform adjustments in





project implementation as well as to consolidate the preparation of impact evaluations. On the other hand, **some programmes foresee more emphasis on impact evaluations** compared to 2014-20 (CZ IROP2, NL, W-M). For example under the **Czech IROP2**, there will be practically no process-oriented evaluations as the internal structures of the programme are able to perform such analysis/evaluations by themselves.

**In terms of the methods for impact evaluation, only a few IQ-Net partner programmes have a degree of clarity** in relation to the approaches that they will adopt, including with regard to the relative weight between counterfactual impact evaluation (CIE) and theory-based impact evaluation (TBE). Where there is some more clarity on methods, plans vary.



In **Czechia**, for example, there will be further reduction of emphasis on CIE, as it revealed data and methodological limitations in the past, and there is the intention to incorporate methods of design thinking into evaluation work.



In **Denmark**, conversely, DBA and Statistics Denmark will build on the encouraging experience with CIE which has been developed since 2011. This approach will be applied to all priorities where data is available, presumably the vast majority of interventions in both ERDF and ESF+. Similarly, the JTF programme as a whole will be evaluated by means of CIE.



In **Finland**, the approach will be based on the theory of change, and can include different methods including content analysis, discourse analysis, narrative, ethnographic and participatory methods.

More broadly, several programmes foresee further **advances in terms of the employed methodologies, with anticipated positive impacts on the overall quality of evaluations** (e.g. CZ, NL, W-M). For instance the **Warmińsko-Mazurskie** MA plans to launch more complex studies, based on more methodologically innovative and challenging research questions and objectives. With the overall objective of increasing the quality of evaluators and evaluation studies, the MA has successively increased the weighting in selection criteria away from cost considerations to quality criteria.

**Efforts to collect additional data and evidence** to support evaluation work are also expected to contribute to its overall quality. These efforts are closely related to additional data gathering undertaken beyond data collection through the monitoring system, e.g. through via *ad hoc* surveys, field research and studies (see Section 3.3). For example in **Finland**, for evaluation purposes the information provided by EURA2021 will be supplemented by interviews, workshops, electronic surveys and other methods. In **Pomorskie**, there is increasing use of other types of analysis (e.g. survey studies), supportive of but organised outside of formal evaluations.

## v Communication and use of evaluation results

Although planning is still at early stages, some changes are being considered around the communication of evaluation results. For example in **Portugal**, improvements may be made in areas such as the language, design and length of reports, creation of more attractive







communication products (such as videos, animated infographics and posters), and more innovative communication actions, in order to reach a wider audience. In **Czechia**, the introduction of two different types of evaluation summaries is planned – a brief summary targeting the top management level, and a more comprehensive summary for the operational level staff. Such change in communicating evaluation findings aims to promote more active discussion and ultimately improve their take-up.

In addition, measures such as the **introduction of new formats for follow-up** (e.g. World Café, to provide environment for a wider debate about evaluation results), promotion of **deeper discussion between the evaluators and the 'clients'/users of evaluations**, more intense **cooperation between evaluation and communications teams**, and **allocation of additional human resources** for follow-up tasks, are all aimed at enhancing the take-up and use of evaluation findings (e.g. **AT, CZ, CZ IROP2**).

## 4.5 Regulatory changes: assessment, implications and open challenges

There is a significant degree of stability and continuity in terms of regulatory requirements around evaluation in 2021-27 compared to 2014-20. At the same time, changes introduced to the new evaluation framework (see Section 2) have a number of implications for ESIF programme authorities and require some adjustments.

In many cases, such adjustments are limited and do not raise major issues for IQ-Net programme authorities, particularly where the evaluation approach was already largely in line with the 2021-27 framework. **There is overall agreement with the logic of the new evaluation framework** (e.g. **CZ, DK, FI, Pom, PT, W-M**), **which is considered to support simplification and promote flexibility**. For instance both the **Pomorskie** and **Warmińsko-Mazurskie** MAs welcome the increased flexibility for the MA to target evaluations according to specific circumstances in the region, hoping that it will open up more space at regional level to use evaluation to generate relevant, region-specific knowledge and recommendations. It is also hoped that the new regulatory environment will create flexibility to design more complex and challenging but, at the same time, more interesting EPs that could attract higher quality evaluators. It is simultaneously acknowledged that additional effort, beyond what is required by the regulations, is required in order to achieve high quality evaluation.

### Box 15: Overall assessment of the 2021-27 regulatory framework for CP evaluation: insights from literature and perspectives of DG REGIO

It is emphasised by DG REGIO that the key focus of the new evaluation framework is on simplification, seen among other areas in a removal of certain evaluation requirements (e.g. around EAEs). **This simplification approach brings more freedom to MS but also gives them more responsibility** as they need to define their evaluation frameworks based on the assessment of needs and decide on any additional evaluation work aside from that required by the regulations.





It is also recognised that some concerns have been raised e.g. around potential weakening of commitment to carrying out non-mandatory evaluations.

For instance some studies<sup>91</sup> note that more succinct, and therefore more generic, rules and the **focus on simplification and flexibility run the risk of weakening evaluation standards** and reducing harmonisation of approaches, which can also imply a reduced coverage of evaluations. This also runs the risk that the benefits of evaluation would be concentrated in a limited number of MS and regions, with others neglecting this valuable tool – which contrasts with EC's efforts to develop evaluations across the board in the EU. Related to this, the simplifications proposed may not be sufficient to make a significant difference to administrative cost,<sup>92</sup> particularly as the regulations also maintain or (re)introduce different requirements (e.g. EP, mid-term evaluations).

At the same time, the DG REGIO experience so far has been that evaluation quality and culture is something that is built over time, and **stricter requirements around evaluation do not necessarily translate into greater evaluation quality**. It is DG REGIO's expectation that MS will be able to make the judgement themselves regarding the number of evaluations that should be carried out and the approach to be taken in order to best suit their needs.

Source: EC (2021); interview w/ DG REGIO B2; Naldini (2018) op. cit.; Pellegrin & Colnot (2020) op. cit.

While generally agreeing with the overall logic of the new framework, the IQ-Net programme authorities have differing assessments of its various elements.

#### 4.5.1 No compulsory EAE: a welcome change

As a simplification measure, there is no formal obligation for an EAE. Programmes are free to conduct EAE should they so wish, but some may judge that they already have extensive evidence on which to base their programming.

This can be understood in relation to the ineffectiveness of several MAs in carrying out EAEs during 2014-20 where EAEs, in some cases, were carried out merely to comply with the regulatory requirement. However, it can also be seen as a deviation from the model of evidence-based policy and an impediment for the evaluation approach the EC has promoted throughout the policy cycle, including to consider lessons learned from the past in preparing the programmes.<sup>93</sup>

The majority of IQ-Net programme authorities assess the removal of the EAE obligation in a positive or neutral light. For several partners (e.g. **CZ, PT**), this did not imply a change from the past, with the programmes conducting EAEs anyway, as these are seen as a useful tool for the design of the OPs. The fact that the EAEs are no longer mandatory for those programmes for which it is not deemed useful is broadly viewed positively (**AT, CZ, NL, Vla, W-M**). For **Austria, Netherlands** and **Warmińsko-Mazurskie**, EAEs would not add value as the experience and knowledge gained during the programming of the 2007-13 and 2014-20 perspectives was sufficient to comprehensively plan the intervention for 2021-27, and all relevant considerations that would be included in an EAE were covered during programming. In addition, EAEs were seen as becoming unnecessary in combination with RIS3 and extensive analysis of the intervention logic (**NL West, NL North**). On the other hand, there was some regret that EAEs are no longer compulsory e.g. in **Hungary** where, in the past, they had provided useful insights.





#### 4.5.2 Mid-term evaluation: concerns around timing

The EC is required to implement a mid-term evaluation in 2024, which is a new evaluation in comparison to 2014-20 requirements. This is considered useful to take stock of programme progress and is needed to support the mid-term review of the programmes in 2025, but may still be too early to assess resource spending as the available evidence is likely to be relatively scarce.<sup>94</sup>



The IQ-Net programme authorities almost universally echo the **concern regarding the timing of the mid-term evaluations** – most partners think that they are scheduled too early in the programme period when **no meaningful data is likely to be available yet and few to no milestones achieved** (AT, CZ, FI, HU, IE SRA, NL, Pom, PT, Vla, W-M). This is seen as particularly problematic given the delayed launch of the OPs (CZ, FI, HU, Pom), and it is expected that the range and number of projects that can be analysed at that point will be **insufficient to draw conclusions and make recommendations** that will have a meaningful impact on OP implementation (W-M). This is particularly relevant in **Hungary** where programmes cannot start implementation until issues around horizontal enabling conditions and the rule of law mechanism have been resolved. In some cases, this early timing of the mid-term evaluation raises concerns over a risk of undesirable shifting of funding from longer-term areas to those that can deliver more immediate results (NL West).

Options such as commented monitoring (CZ) or postponing the mid-term evaluations e.g. by one year (PT) are viewed as potentially more viable alternatives to the current requirement.

#### 4.5.3 Impact evaluations: focus and timing

**Timing.** The focus on impact evaluation will be maintained, with obligatory impact evaluation due in 2029. Some studies<sup>95</sup> argue that while this leaves more time for MAs to conduct impact evaluations as compared to 2014-20, it is still relatively early to assess the impacts of interventions, while yet too late to successfully inform the following programme period. At the same time, the use of interim evaluations is also strongly encouraged by the EC, as they are important for enabling continuous policy-learning throughout the policy cycle.

**Scope.** The focus of the evaluation passes from programme components (priority axes or specific objectives) to the whole programme. Some analysts<sup>96</sup> suggest that while potentially reducing the number of evaluations and increasing their quality, this may pose important methodological problems. A single OP can fund several types of interventions, which may make analysis difficult. When focusing on the impact of the entire OP, it may also be a challenge to distinguish the effect of ESIF from the effects of the broader mix of regional policies.



The IQ-Net programme authorities have **mixed views on the timing of the mandatory impact evaluations**. 2029 is viewed as being too late by **Austria** as, in order to have any impact, it would be required in 2027, or 2028 at the latest. For **Czechia**, on the other hand, it





might be too early, particularly given the delay in the launch of the new programme period and the necessity to start the process of this evaluation in 2028 at the latest.

In terms of the scope of analysis, IQ-Net partners' views are mostly positive (e.g. [AT](#), [Pom](#), [Vla](#), [W-M](#)). **The removal of the requirement to evaluate each Priority Axis is considered useful**, in the sense of alleviating the overload of evaluation demand ([Pom](#)) and increasing flexibility ([AT](#), [Pom](#), [W-M](#)). The new approach is thought to allow the more specific definition of evaluation questions while also taking stock of wider policy impacts. For instance in [Austria](#), this will allow the inclusion in the evaluations of considerations related to previous programmes. In [Warmińsko-Mazurskie](#), this will help address the constraints identified in the past, where results of evaluations for each OP priority were too narrow and it was difficult to get an overall picture of the OP's effects, especially against broader socio-economic trends in the region.

Potential weakening of focus on evaluations due to this change has also been noted, with the **overall commitment highly dependent on the degree of interest in evaluation** and evidence requested by the EC on the particular OP ([CZ](#)). Among other things, this may deepen divergence in evaluation capacity between Czech ERDF and ESF+ authorities as the EC's demands around the required evidence differ for these two Funds.

Some programmes consider that focus on programme level only will not be enough to gain sufficient insights into the effects of the policies, and priority-based evaluations will also be included for this reason, even if not required by the EC ([CZ](#), [DK](#), [HU](#)).

#### 4.5.4 Other regulatory provisions: limited change required



Other regulatory provisions around the 2021-27 evaluation framework do not raise major concerns across IQ-Net programmes and are not expected to have a significant impact on the evaluation implementation process. This relates, for instance, to the provisions concerning the classic evaluation criteria (as this is already largely in line with how programmes conduct evaluations), or increased emphasis on transparency of findings (as evaluations were already regularly published on relevant websites). Lack of a legal basis for the necessity of dedicating adequate capacity and resources to evaluation could potentially be detrimental to the evaluation exercise (e.g. [Pom](#), [W-M](#)), although the importance of evaluation capacity is highlighted in the Commission Staff Working Document on performance, monitoring and evaluation, and widely recognised by the national and regional IQ-Net authorities.

## 4.6 Challenges ahead: capacity, timing, and impact

While the new regulatory framework foresees a significant degree of continuity for evaluation compared to 2014-20 and does not necessitate profound changes in the IQ-Net programmes' approaches to evaluation, a number of issues remain. The difficulties that are faced in 2021-27 are closely related to those that have constrained progress over several programme periods





and were identified as weakness in 2014-20 (see Section 4.1). This demonstrates the **systemic and persistent nature of many constraints in the area of CP evaluation, limiting their quality, usability and take-up**. These are particularly limitations related to: evaluation culture, capacity and market; the timing of evaluation exercises; and communication, follow up, use and impact of evaluation results.

Positive changes in the area of public policy evaluation take time, and evaluation capacity is built over several consecutive programme periods. For this reason, in 2021-27 many IQ-Net programmes are still facing some unresolved issues, related to:

-  **Lack of strong evaluation culture.** This is expected to continue affecting CP evaluation in 2021-27 e.g. in **Austria, Czechia** and **Vlaanderen**. In Czechia, one of the key limiting factors in any improvements in the degree of take-up of evaluation findings is the fact that the society is not used to operating with any mechanisms of feedback, and there remain psychological barriers to work with evaluation findings as with the tool of learning – although improvements are also expected.
-  **Limited evaluation capacity and market.** Internal capacity issues, lack or limited pool of qualified external evaluators, and limited involvement of academia in CP evaluation remain relevant constraints also for 2021-27 (e.g. **AT, CZ, FI, IE NWRA, IE SRA, NL, Pom, PT, Vla, W-M**), although various measures are taken to improve this (see Sections 4.4 and 4.7). Lack of resources working full time on evaluation (**Vla**), limited separation of M&E tasks within MAs (**PT**), prioritisation of monitoring tasks over evaluation (**Vla**), staff turnover (**Pom**), decreased TA for 2021-27 (**FI**) and the small pool of evaluators (**AT, IE, PT**) are among the constraints. Reluctance of the evaluators to provide critical feedback (**FI**), and limitations of public procurement laws that do not prohibit evaluators that had previously failed to deliver quality studies from applying again (**W-M**) are also among open issues that are expected to affect evaluation quality and the utility of recommendations.
-  **Timing of evaluations.** As in the past, finding the most suitable timeline for conducting evaluations, particularly to analyse the impact of interventions, will be a demanding task (**AT, CZ, FI, IE SRA, Pom, PT, Vla, W-M**). It remains a challenge to find the right balance between 'too late' to reach conclusions in good time and allow impact on the next period and 'too early' for the interventions to have produced their effect (**AT, CZ, Pom, PT, Vla, W-M**). This will be particularly difficult due to the delayed start of the period. In addition, a trade-off between the need to plan evaluations well in advance and the fact that things are changing over time will not be easy to handle (**CZ**).
-  **Communication, use and impact of results.** As in the past, communicability of findings and identifying the best format for evaluation outputs, as well as ensuring that evaluation results are considered by policy-makers, followed up on and used in practice will remain a relevant issue (e.g. **AT, CZ, DK, HU, PT, W-M**). Sub-optimal quality of evaluations, the time lag between implementation and evaluation, lack of mechanisms for follow up, limited capacity to prepare different types of evaluation outputs, mismatch between evaluation outputs and target groups, and limited experience of working with mechanisms of feedback are among the constraints limiting the use of evaluations. In addition, well-functioning follow-up systems are very time and resource-demanding, and it is important to find ways to maintain and improve them while at the same time reducing the related administrative burden (**PT**).





## 4.7 Responses: building capacity through training & networking

Many of the changes that IQ-Net programme managers are introducing (see Section 4.4) are intended to mitigate the challenges they are facing with regards to evaluation. These include but are not limited to the efforts described above, including to:

- **Expand the evaluation market, attract higher quality evaluators, engage academia (CZ, FI, PT, W-M) and strengthen internal evaluation capacity.**
- **Advance methodologies (CZ, NL, W-M) and complementary evidence gathering (Biz, DK, FI, HU, IE, NL, Pom, PT)** to improve quality and usability of evaluations and findings.
- **Strengthen coordination and stakeholder engagement**, including through dedicated bodies such as MCs, supervisory committees, steering groups, evaluation networks, working groups, as well as other fora such as seminars, workshops, evaluation conferences and other knowledge exchange events.

In addition to these, support for strengthening evaluation capacity across CP programmes will (continue to) be provided through:



**Training**, e.g. through specific training sessions on different aspects of evaluation, evaluation summer schools and other networking events (see e.g. Box 16).



**Provision of guidance**, e.g. on data collection and evaluation methodologies, or sharing of international practices in the area of CP evaluation. For example in **Czechia**, the National Evaluation Unit prepared 'Guidance of Evaluator: Collection of Evaluation Tips and Recommendations'<sup>97</sup> to stimulate deeper debate between contractors and suppliers and the overall evaluation community in an effort to enhance evaluation quality.



**Strengthening capacity through Roadmaps for Administrative Capacity Building (ACB)**. Some MSs and regions pursue a comprehensive approach to strengthening capacity in the area of evaluation, notably through elaborating and implementing ACB Roadmaps.<sup>98</sup> **Portugal** is one notable example where the ACB Roadmap is at the heart of ESIF capacity-building measures for 2021-27 and integrates a wide range of actions specifically targeting the areas of monitoring and evaluation (Box 17).

### Box 16: EC support for strengthening monitoring & evaluation capacity in MS

The Commission supports the MS in strengthening their capacity to carry out high-quality evaluations. This support includes methodological guidance, expert reviews, tailored assistance and discussion fora to exchange experience.

- **Evaluation Network** (managed by DG REGIO) and **ESF+ evaluation partnership** (managed by DG EMPL) are the main platforms for exchanging experiences in CP M&E. They bring together evaluation experts from the national authorities and meet two to four times a year to share experience and good practice.
- **CP Evaluation Helpdesk** experts collect, categorise, summarise and analyse evaluations carried out by MSs, which are uploaded to the evaluation library. It also provides customised support to MSs on specific evaluation issues.





- **Evaluation summer schools** for MAs and other public bodies involved in ERDF/CF evaluation provide practical training in the areas requested by MSs.
- Other (ESF+ specific) support mechanisms include the [ESF Data Support Centre](#), providing methodological support and guidance on monitoring requirements; and methodological support on counterfactual impact evaluations (CIE), such as [guide on CIEs](#), use of [advanced methods](#), [use of administrative data](#) and [practical examples](#).

Source: European Commission (2019b) *op. cit.* and EC (2023) *ESF+ monitoring and evaluation*

### Box 17: Strengthening monitoring & evaluation capacity through ACB Roadmap in Portugal

In Portugal, implementation of the [Roadmap for Capacity-Building of the CP Funds Ecosystem for 2021-27](#) is one of the main tools for building the capacity of various CP actors in the area of M&E. It includes a large number of strands specifically seeking to improve capacities in these areas, on both the demand and supply side, including:

1. **Capacity-building for evaluation and result-orientation.** Key actions include:
  - Masters and Doctoral courses in evaluation of projects, programmes and public policies, to increase the number of highly qualified HR in this area;
  - Specific capacity-building actions in: evaluation of programmes and projects; integration of the results-oriented approach into project selection criteria; construction and monitoring of result indicators;
  - Manuals and studies on evaluation methodologies and their application, regular meetings to share evaluation results, and Evaluation Summer School, in partnership with academic entities, on specific themes or evaluation methods.
2. **Academy of Funds** to improve qualifications and instruments in the areas of CP programming, management, monitoring and control. Capacity-building actions cover e.g. information systems and result-oriented contracting of indicators.
3. **Capacity-building for the operationalisation of the territorial approach.** Actions include: collaborative digital platforms for sharing experiences and information between entities involved in implementing and monitoring territorial instruments; capacity-building in planning, management, monitoring and evaluation of territorial instruments and projects; postgraduate courses; and others.
4. **Capacity-building for the operationalisation of smart specialisation strategies.** Actions include: collaborative digital platforms for knowledge exchange; training actions; summer school for smart specialisation, and include monitoring aspects.
5. **Demand qualification programme** to promote capacity building of beneficiaries of the Funds, including in the areas of information systems, monitoring procedures and mechanisms, and result-oriented contracting of indicators.

Source: IQ-Net research; *Roteiro para a Capacitação do Ecosistema dos Fundos da Política da Coesão para o Período 2021-2027*





## 5 OVERALL ASSESSMENT: TENSIONS BUT ALSO OPTIMISM

*Reflecting on the new M&E regulatory framework overall ...*

Providing **an overall assessment of the 2021-27 regulatory framework and guidance on monitoring and evaluation**, a number of IQ-Net programme managers highlighted its relevance in terms of supporting simplification, flexibility, and result-orientation. At the same time, the tension between the new requirements particularly around monitoring and increased administrative burden has also been noted.



**Promoting flexibility** (AT, Biz, DK, FI, HU, IE NWRA, IE SRA, NL South, Pom, W-M) and **supporting simplification** (Biz, FI, IE NWRA, IE SRA, NL North, NL South, W-M).

Some of the elements of the new regulatory framework are viewed as particularly relevant in this regard. In monitoring, these include the extended list of common indicators, the removal of the obligation to include impact indicators, elimination of AIR, and specific elements of the reformed PF (e.g. greater flexibility in considering the entire OP and removing the pressure linked to the performance reserve). In evaluation, the entire logic in 2021-27 is broadly seen as supporting simplification and promoting flexibility, while changes such as the removal of the requirement to evaluate each Priority Axis or carry out EAE are considered particularly relevant. Among other things, this increased scope for flexibility is seen as favouring an overall focus on a needs-based approach, as opposed to a more compliance-oriented or 'tick-box' approach, particularly in the area of evaluation.



**Promoting greater result-orientation of Cohesion Policy** (Biz, DK, FI, HU, IE NWRA, IE SRA, NL West, Pom, W-M).

Many programmes have already been pursuing a result-oriented logic over several consecutive periods. The further increase in the focus on result-orientation in 2021-27 is not only the consequence of regulatory changes but a reflection of domestic dynamics and needs. In terms of specific views on this, Bizkaia for example foresees overall more emphasis on results, impacts and conditionalities, and a shift of focus from financial and budgetary control and monitoring to the efficiency and efficacy in the use of EU funding with an important role for evaluation.



**Requiring a more significant monitoring and evaluation effort by programmes** (Biz, DK, FI, HU, IE NWRA, IE SRA, Pom, W-M).

While the new framework may be promoting simplification in some areas, it is also viewed as demanding additional effort, particularly in the area of monitoring. This especially concerns areas such as: definition and monitoring of new result indicators, particularly some indicators under PO2; climate tracking; and more frequent reporting.

It is also acknowledged that in many cases, further effort, beyond what is required by the regulations, is needed in order to achieve high quality M&E results. Examples include







complementary data gathering or conducting more frequent or more targeted (e.g. mid-term or priority-level) evaluations on top of the mandatory impact evaluations.

### ... And over partners' own approach to M&E

While many programmes are still in very early stages of implementation and it remains to be seen how the **overall approach to monitoring and evaluation adopted for 2021-27 at national and regional level** will evolve, many IQ-Net programme managers are positive/optimistic, particularly regarding:



**Organisation and planning of CP monitoring and evaluation** (AT, Biz, DK, FI, HU, IE NWRA, IE SRA, NL North, NL South, Pom, W-M). This is seen to be designed in a way that will support effective M&E processes, and the improvements introduced in 2021-27 are expected to address the key issues identified in the past and make the overall approach more systematic and coherent.



**Integration between monitoring and evaluation** (AT, Biz, DK, FI, HU, IE NWRA, IE SRA, NL (West, North, South)). The link between the two processes is viewed to have improved across several programmes, e.g. through organisational changes, increased coordination and additional data gathering. The importance of working on M&E in a joint / coordinated manner is emphasised as the two processes are closely interrelated, e.g. with monitoring data feeding evaluation exercises. At the same time, the importance of allocating specific resources dedicated exclusively to evaluation tasks as opposed to combining M&E work is emphasised. For example in Portugal, this is already implemented at level of the national CP coordinating authority, although is not necessarily the case at the level of the MAs. This could be beneficial for allowing evaluation experts to focus fully on evaluation-specific tasks such as cross-referencing of information, triangulation of sources, and additional information-gathering to collect data that cannot be provided by monitoring – as opposed to gathering basic data which should be provided through monitoring.



**Approach promoting the use of M&E findings** (Biz, DK, FI, HU, IE NWRA, IE SRA, NL (West, North, South), Pom, Vla, W-M). While this remains challenging across many programmes, some improvements are also evident. Pro-active use of M&E findings promotes an evidence-based approach to policy-making and allows continuous learning. As an example, in Denmark, both the DBA directors and the Danish Executive Board for Business Development and Growth have a keen interest in the results produced by the programmes, and this instals a learning perspective at the centre of the programme development process.



**Approach favouring result-orientation of CP** (AT, Biz, FI, HU, IE NWRA, IE SRA, NL North, NL South, Pom, W-M). Among other things, this is achieved through result-oriented monitoring, assessing actual impacts and putting them at the centre of decision-making – although, as mentioned, focus on result orientation has been pursued across programmes over several consecutive periods.





## 6 CONCLUSIONS AND QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Most IQ-Net partners are still setting up their monitoring arrangements and defining the approach to evaluation in 2021-27, so the extent of change compared to the 2014-20 is not yet fully evident. It is clear, however, that a significant degree of continuity is foreseen in both dimensions, although important adjustments are also being made – driven by a combination of new regulatory obligations and practical experiences from the past.

At this point, the impact of the new regulatory framework on such adjustments is more evident in the area of **monitoring** – not least due to the restructuring of the indicator system and new provisions around the monitoring of climate impact of CP interventions. Based on the lessons drawn from 2014-20, IQ-Net programme managers are also introducing other changes which aim to achieve improvements in data quality, availability, reliability and usability, and in the overall effectiveness of monitoring processes. These, apart from supporting effective project and programme management and implementation, are also expected to enable the realisation of quality evaluation. Overall, despite some persistent issues, including around indicator setting and the availability and quality of data, monitoring arrangements have seen significant improvement over time, and are expected to be further perfected in 2021-27.

Changes in the area of **evaluation** have so far been relatively less pronounced – although many IQ-Net programmes are not yet at very advanced stages of planning their evaluations for 2021-27 and the full degree of change remains to be seen. There is overall agreement with the logic of the new regulatory provisions on evaluation, promoting simplification and flexibility – although some concerns have also been raised with regards to the potential weakening of overall commitment to evaluation. At the same time, past experience has shown that more rigid regulatory requirements around evaluation do not necessarily translate into greater evaluation quality across MS and regions. Notwithstanding the evolution of wider framework conditions and internal adjustments, many of the challenges constraining progress in the area of CP evaluation demonstrate a systemic and persistent nature. These are particularly limitations related to evaluation culture, capacity and market, as well as follow up, use and impact of evaluation results – all of which have constrained progress over several programme periods. Building evaluation capacity and changing the mindset of CP stakeholders in the direction of working with evaluation findings as a valuable tool of learning takes time and effort, and change is therefore more incremental.

In the light of the new regulatory obligations and outstanding difficulties, IQ-Net authorities are investing resources and efforts to improve processes and strengthen M&E capacity across programmes. At the same time, it remains to be seen how effective these measures will be and to what extent they will result in an improved understanding of the progress, achievements and impacts of Cohesion Policy.

Against this background, some questions for discussion can be suggested:





- Overall, do you feel that there has been a progressive **improvement in M&E practice** over successive periods and that a positive culture/approach is becoming embedded in your programme(s)? What are your expectations regarding 2021-27 – do you anticipate major improvements compared to the past, and in what areas in particular?
- Do you consider the **regulatory changes around M&E** to be supportive of your efforts to improve M&E arrangements and processes? What are the elements that you value most, and where do you experience/foresee the main difficulties?
  - To what extent is the adaptation to the new regulatory provisions problematic? Would greater continuity in regulatory framework around M&E be preferable or is the degree of change introduced considered adequate/necessary?
  - In what areas of regulatory changes do you require more guidance or support (e.g. by the EC)?
- What are the **main challenges** you are facing and key constraints to improving M&E processes? (How) have these evolved compared to the last period, and how do you plan to address them?
  - What are the areas where progress is more visible, and what are the areas where problems are more persistent (e.g. remain unsolved over consecutive programme periods)?
  - Where challenges persist over time: What has failed in past programme periods in this respect? What would be useful measures to address these shortcomings?
- What **capacity-building measures** do you consider most effective for improving M&E processes? What other measures (not currently planned) would be desirable?





## Notes

<sup>1</sup> European Commission (2023) Role of Monitoring and Evaluation in the Policy Cycle. European Network for Rural Development.

<sup>2</sup> McLellan T (2021) Impact, theory of change, and the horizons of scientific practice. *Social Studies of Science*, 51 (1), 100-120; UNICEF (2021) A UNICEF Guide for Monitoring and Evaluation – Making a Difference.

<sup>3</sup> Bachtler J and Wren C (2006) Evaluation of European Union cohesion policy: Research questions and policy challenges. *Regional Studies*, 40(2), 143-153.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Bachtler J and Michie R (1995) A New Era in EU Regional Policy Evaluation? The Appraisal of the Structural Funds, *Regional Studies*, 29(8), 745-752; Bachtler J (2001) *Quod erat demonstrandum? The Evaluation of Regional Policy*, in Eckey H-F, Hecht D, Junkernheinrich M, Karl H, Werbeck N and WINK R (Eds.) 'Ordnungspolitik als konstruktive Antwort auf wirtschaftspolitische Herausforderungen', Lucius & Lucius, Stuttgart, 3-20; Bachtler J and Wren C (2006) Evaluation of European Union cohesion policy: Research questions and policy challenges. *Regional Studies*, 40(2), 143-153; Mendez C, Kah S, & Bachtler J (2012) The Promise and Perils of the Performance Turn in EU Cohesion Policy. IQ-Net Thematic Paper, Vol. 31, No.2, European Policies Research Centre, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow; Polverari L (2015) The Monitoring and Evaluation of 2014-20 EU Cohesion Policy Programmes. IQ-Net Thematic Paper, Vol 36, No 2. European Policies Research Centre, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow; Polverari L (2016) 2014-2020 EU Cohesion Policy: Results-orientation through better Monitoring. *European Structural and Investment Funds Journal*, 4(1), 26-34; Polverari L (2016) The New Ambitions for 2014-2020 European Structural and Investment Funds Evaluation. *European Structural and Investment Funds Journal*, 2016 (2), 59-67; McMaster I and Kah S (2017) The performance framework in Cohesion policy: Expectations and reality. IQ-Net Thematic Paper, 41st IQ-Net Conference. EPRC Delft.

<sup>6</sup> European Commission (2022) Study on the monitoring data on ERDF and Cohesion Fund operations, and on the monitoring systems operated in the 2014-2020 period. Final report. Prognos, CSIL, PPMI Contract N° 2019CE16BAT214/2020CE16BAT075. Brussels.

<sup>7</sup> Bachtler J and Wren C (2006) *op. cit.*; and Naldini A (2018) Improvements and risks of the proposed evaluation of Cohesion Policy in the 2021–27 period: A personal reflection to open a debate. *Evaluation*, Vol. 24(4) 496-504.

<sup>8</sup> Bachtler J, Mendez C and Wishlade F (2013) EU Cohesion Policy and European Integration: The Dynamics of EU Budgetary and Regional Policy Reform, *Aldershot*, UK: Ashgate.

<sup>9</sup> Gal F and Kah S (2020) Real Costs or Real Simplification? Financial Management in Cohesion Policy. IQ-Net Thematic Paper 46(2), European Policies Research Centre Delft.

<sup>10</sup> Polverari L (2015) The Monitoring and Evaluation of 2014-20 EU Cohesion Policy Programmes. IQ-Net Thematic Paper (2). European Policies Research Centre, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow.

<sup>11</sup> Bachtler J and Wren C (2006) *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> UNDP (2011) Results-Based Management Handbook. Harmonizing RBM concepts and approaches for improved development results at country level. United Nations Development Group.

<sup>13</sup> Polverari L (2016) The New Ambitions for 2014-2020 European Structural and Investment Funds Evaluation. *European Structural and Investment Funds Journal*, 2016 (2), 59-67; Dahler-Larsen P (2007) Evaluation and Public Management, in Ferlie E, Lynn L. E. and Pollitt C. (2007) *The Oxford Handbook of Public Management*.

<sup>14</sup> E.g. Downes R, Moretti D and Nicol S (2017) Budgeting and performance in the European Union: A review by the OECD in the context of EU budget focused on results. *OECD Journal on Budgeting*, vol. 2017/1; OECD 2011, 2008 and 2005 quoted in Van Ongevalle and Huyse H (2014) Dealing with complexity through actor-focused planning, monitoring and evaluation (PME), *Evaluation*, 20.4, 447-466, and UNDP (2009) *Handbook on Planning, Monitoring and Evaluating for Development Results*.

<sup>15</sup> Naldini (2018) *op. cit.*; Pellegrin J and Colnot L (2020) The role of evaluation in cohesion policy, Research for REGI Committee, European Parliament, Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion





Policies; and European Commission (2019a) Synthesis of the findings of the evaluations of European Structural and Investment, Funds Programmes, SWD(445).

<sup>16</sup> Pellegrin J and Colnot L (2020) *op. cit.*

<sup>17</sup> European Commission (2021) Performance, monitoring and evaluation of the ERDF, the CF and the JTF in 2021-27. Commission Staff Working Document. SWD(2021) 198 final. 8 July, Brussels.

<sup>18</sup> Some common indicators from 2014-20 have been reclassified in 2021-27 as common result indicators.

For ESF+, overall continuity with the 2014-20 period is pursued. ESF+ common indicators are a limited set of output and result indicators, listed in Annexes I, II and III of the ESF+ Regulation.

<sup>19</sup> European Commission (2021). Common Provisions Regulation (EU) No 2021/1060.

<sup>20</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/2021-2027\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/2021-2027_en);  
[https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/sources/evaluation/performance2127/performance2127\\_swd.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/evaluation/performance2127/performance2127_swd.pdf);  
[https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/sources/evaluation/2014/guidance\\_monitoring\\_eval\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/evaluation/2014/guidance_monitoring_eval_en.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Note that countries/regions/programmes can undertake these should they so wish. E.g. some programmes have undertaken similar types of exercises to support their 2021-27 programming.

<sup>22</sup> Naldini (2018) *op. cit.*; and Pellegrin and Colnot (2020) *op. cit.*

<sup>23</sup> European Commission (2019b) Synthesis of the findings of the evaluations of ESIF Programmes. Commission Staff Working Document. SWD(2019) 445 final. 17 December 2019, Brussels.

<sup>24</sup> Pellegrin J and Colnot L (2020) *op. cit.*; European Commission (2022) Study on the monitoring data on ERDF and Cohesion Fund operations, and on the monitoring systems operated in the 2014-2020 period.

<sup>25</sup> Mendez C, Bachtler J and McMaster I (2019) Research for REGI Committee - The Agenda for Cohesion Policy in 2019-2024: Key issues for the REGI Committee, European Parliament, Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies, Brussels.

<sup>26</sup> Pellegrin J and Colnot L (2020) *op. cit.*

<sup>27</sup> European Court of Auditors (2017a) 'Ex ante conditionalities and performance reserve in cohesion: innovative but not yet effective instruments'; European Court of Auditors (2017b) 'Special report: The Commission's negotiation of 2014-2020 partnership agreements and programmes in cohesion: spending more targeted on Europe 2020 priorities, but increasingly complex arrangements to measure performance'.

<sup>28</sup> European Court of Auditors (2017a) *op. cit.*; European Court of Auditors (2017b) *op. cit.*

<sup>29</sup> McMaster I and Kah S (2017) The performance framework in Cohesion policy: Expectations and reality. IQ-Net Thematic Paper, 41<sup>st</sup> IQ-Net Conference. EPRC Delft.

<sup>30</sup> European Court of Auditors (2017a) *op. cit.*

<sup>31</sup> McMaster I and Kah S (2017) The performance framework in Cohesion policy: Expectations and reality. IQ-Net Thematic Paper, 41<sup>st</sup> IQ-Net Conference. EPRC Delft.

<sup>32</sup> A mandatory performance reserve of around €20 billion (or 6 % of Cohesion spending), which could be released for successful priority axes, or had to be re-allocated to other priority axes of the same programme or to other programmes in the same Member State. See:  
<https://op.europa.eu/webpub/eca/special-reports/performance-24-2021/en/>

<sup>33</sup> An example of this is the Cohesion Data platform: <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/>

<sup>34</sup> European Commission (2022) *op. cit.*

<sup>35</sup> European Commission (2022) *op. cit.*; Pellegrin J and Colnot L (2020) *op. cit.*; European Commission (2019b) *op. cit.*

<sup>36</sup> DG REGIO B2 – European Semester & Evaluation: Annual Implementation Reports (AIR) 2012. A progress report on 6 years of activity: <https://slideplayer.com/slide/16753009/>

<sup>37</sup> Pellegrin J and Colnot L (2020) *op. cit.*; Polverari L (2015) *op. cit.*





<sup>38</sup> Davies R, Alstrom J, Helliwell, K and Smithson T (2017) Learning from ESF Evaluation in Wales, European & Structural Investment Funds Journal, Vol 5, No 2 pp.155-160.

<sup>39</sup> Frontoni E and Palloni R (2018) Data Visualization of European Regional Operational Programmes: Unleashing the Informative Potential of Open Data for Performance Assessment; Pellegrin and Colnot (2020) *op. cit.*

<sup>40</sup> ESIF funding is distributed by the MA to lead partners (government departments, agencies, local authorities), applications for funding are made to these partners by individual projects and organisations. There are over 40 lead partners.

<sup>41</sup> Pellegrin and Colnot (2020) *op. cit.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Portal 'Mais Transparência': <https://transparencia.gov.pt/pt/>

<sup>45</sup> The EURA2021 enables (at the time of writing) the publishing of the call information and the submission of the project application. As of 21 March 2023, the EURA2021 systems was further progressed to enable funding decision to be registered by the ELY-Centres, Regional Councils and the Finnish Food Authority (note that business aid decisions by the ELY-Centres have been possible to process in EURA2021 since the Autumn 2022). The funding decisions apply to ERDF and ESF+ co-financed projects and only to projects with a single project implementer. However, the processing of payments is still not fully functional. Payments are expected to be possible in phases from June 2023 onwards, and fully functional by the end of 2023. Rakennerahastot.fi (2023) EAKR- ja ESR+ -hankehakemuksia koskevia tukipäätöksiä voidaan tehdä EURA 2021 -järjestelmässä, news item of 21 March 2023 <https://rakennerahastot.fi/-/eakr-ja-esr-hankehakemuksia-koskevia-tukipaatosia-voidaan-tehda-aura-2021-jarjestelmassa>

<sup>46</sup> Among other things: (i) feedback from quadruple helix agents is being considered in translating S3 into regional and local impacts, and for monitoring and assessment of these impacts (feedback gathered by REPs); (ii) S3 alignment with ERDF is specifically considered in monitoring; (iii) Reports will be used to track progress and make adjustments as needed; (iv) Implementation Group will provide regular updates on RIS3 development at national and regional levels.

<sup>47</sup> An estimated 50-60% of ERDF/CF resources were covered by common indicators in 2014-20; this figure now stands at over 80% (Source: EC (2021) *op. cit.* and Interview with DG REGIO, Evaluation & European Semester Unit)

<sup>48</sup> European Commission (2021) *op. cit.*

<sup>49</sup> Dozhdeva V and Fonseca L (2021) A Green Transition: Making the new programmes sustainable. IQ-Net Thematic Paper 49(2), European Policies Research Centre Delft.

<sup>50</sup> <https://klimakompasset.dk/klimakompasset/>

<sup>51</sup> European Commission (2021) *op. cit.* and Interview with DG REGIO, Evaluation & European Semester Unit (REGIO B2)

<sup>52</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/en/policy/evaluations/guidance/#1](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/evaluations/guidance/#1)

<sup>53</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/sources/policy/evaluations/guidance/2021/transport-indicators/method1\\_support\\_indicators\\_post\\_2020\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/policy/evaluations/guidance/2021/transport-indicators/method1_support_indicators_post_2020_en.pdf)

<sup>54</sup> O44: Energy efficiency renovation or energy efficiency measures regarding public infrastructure, demonstration projects and supporting measures

<sup>55</sup> O45: Energy efficiency renovation or energy efficiency measures regarding public infrastructure, demonstration projects and supporting measures compliant with energy efficiency criteria

<sup>56</sup> European Commission (2022) *op. cit.*

<sup>57</sup> CPR Annex XVII establishes the data to be recorded and stored electronically on each operation.

<sup>58</sup> Pellegrin J and Colnot L (2020) *op. cit.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*





- <sup>60</sup> Darvas Z, Collin A M, Mazza J, Midoes C (2019) Effectiveness of cohesion policy: Learning from the project characteristics that produce the best results. Budgetary Affairs. Study requested by the CONT Committee. European Parliament. PE 636.469 - March 2019. IP/D/ALL/FWC/2015-001/LOT2/C6.
- <sup>61</sup> European Commission (2021) Performance, monitoring and evaluation of the ERDF, the CF and the JTF in 2021-27. Commission Staff Working Document. SWD(2021) 198 final. 8 July, Brussels.
- <sup>62</sup> Pellegrin and Colnot (2020) *op. cit.*
- <sup>63</sup> Kupiec T, Wojtowicz D, & Olejniczak K (2020) Between compliance and systemic change-Evaluation practice in eight CEE countries. In S. Mazur (Ed.), Public administration in Central Europe. Ideas as causes of reforms (pp.129-146). London and New York: Routledge.
- <sup>64</sup> Pellegrin and Colnot (2020) *op. cit.*
- <sup>65</sup> European Commission (2022) Study on the monitoring data on ERDF and Cohesion Fund operations, and on the monitoring systems operated in the 2014-2020 period.
- <sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*; Naldini (2018) *op. cit.*; European Parliament (2019a), Cohesion policy: The European Parliament's role since the Treaty of Lisbon. European Parliament. Study requested by the REGI Committee. Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies. July 2019, Brussels.
- <sup>67</sup> European Commission (2021) Performance, monitoring and evaluation of the ERDF, the CF and the JTF in 2021-27. Commission Staff Working Document. SWD(2021) 198 final. 8 July, Brussels.
- <sup>68</sup> European Commission (2021) *op. cit.*
- <sup>69</sup> Pellegrin and Colnot (2020) *op. cit.*
- <sup>70</sup> Polverari L and Bachtler J (2004) Assessing the Evidence: The Evaluation of Regional Policy in Europe, EoRPA Paper 04/05, European Policies Research Centre, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow; Pellegrin and Colnot (2020) *op. cit.*; Bachtler J and Wren C (2006) *op. cit.*
- <sup>71</sup> Pellegrin and Colnot (2020) *op. cit.*
- <sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>74</sup> Pellegrin and Colnot (2020) *op. cit.*; and European Parliament (2019a) Cohesion policy: The European Parliament's role since the Treaty of Lisbon. European Parliament. Study requested by the REGI Committee. Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies. July 2019, Brussels.
- <sup>75</sup> ÖROK, <https://2014-2020.efre.gv.at/allgemeines/evaluierung>
- <sup>76</sup> Pellegrin and Colnot (2020) *op. cit.*; and European Commission (2023) European Structural and Investment Funds 2022 Summary report of the programme annual implementation reports covering implementation in 2014-2020. Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. COM(2023) 39 final. 30.01.2023, Brussels.
- <sup>77</sup> Pellegrin and Colnot (2020) *op. cit.*; Kah S, Mendez C, Bachtler J, Miller S (2015) Research for REGI Committee - Strategic coherence of Cohesion Policy: comparison of the 2007-13 and 2014-20 programming periods, Directorate General for Internal Policies - Policy Department B: Structural and Cohesion Policies - Regional Development, Brussels.
- <sup>78</sup> Agger A (2012) Towards tailor-made participation: how to involve different types of citizens in participatory governance. *The Town Planning Review*, 83(1), 29-45.
- <sup>79</sup> Pellegrin and Colnot (2020) *op. cit.*
- <sup>80</sup> See the European Structural and Investment Funds Programmes in Scotland: 2022 case studies booklet: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/european-structural-investment-funds-programmes-scotland-2022-case-studies-booklet/documents/> and the European Structural and Investment Funds 2021 case studies booklet: <https://blogs.gov.scot/european-structural-and-investment-funds/2021/12/21/2021-case-studies-booklet/>
- <sup>81</sup> The library of evaluation is accessible at (in Czech only): <https://www.dotaceeu.cz/cs/Evropske-fondy-v-CR/Narodni-organ-pro-koordinaci/Evaluace/Knihovna-evaluaci>





<sup>82</sup> Pellegrin and Colnot (2020) *op. cit.*

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> As Orientações para o Acompanhamento da Implementação das Recomendações das Avaliações do Portugal 2020 (follow up) [Guidelines for monitoring the implementation of the recommendations of the Portugal 2020 evaluations (follow-up)]: <https://portugal2020.pt/resultados/avaliacao/>

<sup>87</sup> Pellegrin and Colnot (2020) *op. cit.*

<sup>88</sup> <https://portugal2020.pt/boat-lanca-aviso-para-estudos-sobre-metodologias-de-monitorizacao-e-avaliacao/>. OP Technical Assistance 2020 launched the Call for 'Studies on Monitoring and Evaluation Methodologies' in 2021, primarily aimed at higher education institutions. The operations to be supported consisted of the development of studies, pilot projects or research work, aimed at the development and/or testing of tools and methodologies that can be applied in an innovative way in the M&E of EU funds in Portugal.

<sup>89</sup> The four studies focus on Evaluability of policies co-financed by European Funds: (i) R&I Policies; (ii) Education & Training Policies; (iii) Climate Action Policies; (iv) Employment Policies.

<sup>90</sup> Polverari L (2015) The monitoring and evaluation of the 2014-20 Cohesion policy programmes. IQ-Net Thematic Paper 36(2), European Policies Research Centre, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow.

<sup>91</sup> Naldini (2018) *op. cit.*; and Pellegrin and Colnot (2020) *op. cit.*

<sup>92</sup> Mendez C, Bachtler J, & McMaster I (2019) Research for REGI Committee – The Agenda for Cohesion Policy in 2019-2024: Key issues for the REGI Committee, European Parliament, Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies, Brussels.

<sup>93</sup> EC (2021) *op. cit.*; Pellegrin & Colnot (2020) *op. cit.*; Naldini (2018) *op. cit.*

<sup>94</sup> EC (2021) *op. cit.*; Naldini (2018) *op. cit.*; Pellegrin & Colnot (2020) *op. cit.*

<sup>95</sup> Pellegrin & Colnot (2020) *op. cit.*; Naldini (2018) *op. cit.*

<sup>96</sup> Naldini (2018) *op. cit.*; Pellegrin & Colnot (2020) *op. cit.*

<sup>97</sup> [https://www.dotaceeu.cz/getmedia/3ce5f6b9-24cc-4ac1-80d9-9eb769203f5a/Pruvodce-evaluatora\\_final\\_202007.pdf.aspx](https://www.dotaceeu.cz/getmedia/3ce5f6b9-24cc-4ac1-80d9-9eb769203f5a/Pruvodce-evaluatora_final_202007.pdf.aspx)

<sup>98</sup> See e.g. OECD (2020) Strengthening Governance of EU Funds under Cohesion Policy: Administrative Capacity Building Roadmaps: <https://www.oecd.org/publications/strengthening-governance-of-eu-funds-under-cohesion-policy-9b71c8d8-en.htm>; European Commission: Roadmaps for Administrative Capacity Building: [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/policy/how/improving-investment/roadmap-admin\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/policy/how/improving-investment/roadmap-admin_en); and European Commission (2020) The use of technical assistance for administrative capacity building in the 2014-2020 period: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/d09f6ed6-fed5-11ea-b44f-01aa75ed71a1/language-ga>

<sup>99</sup> Some examples of issues persisting over time may relate e.g. to:

- Consistent definition and interpretation of data
- Finding the appropriate time to measure and report on implementation progress
- Administrative burden associated with continuous monitoring work
- Limited evaluation market and capacity, with impact on evaluation quality
- Broader evaluation culture and impact of evaluation. E.g. How to make CP actors used to working with mechanisms of feedback? How to make sure policymakers take into account evaluation findings and implement recommendations?
- Timing of evaluation: challenges to find the right balance between 'too early' and 'too late'. When is the right moment to conduct evaluations, so that it is not too early (so that there is sufficient evidence available) and not too late (so that there is still time to inform new policy cycle; or there interest in findings is still fresh).
- Methods: How to address the key methodological difficulties? How to find the right balance of evaluation methods?

