11th Evaluation Conference in Prague

Data in Action:

Evaluation as the Key to Effective Cohesion Policy 2028+

Impact of cohesion policy funds: evidence from the 14-20 ex post and 21-27 mid-term evaluation

Enrico Pesaresi
European Commission, DG REGIO

Prague, 13 November 2025

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EVALUATION UNIT NCA

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The views expressed in this presentation are solely those of the author and should not be considered as stating an official position of the European Commission

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Introduction

Overview – legal basis and purpose

Ex post evaluation of CF and ERDF 2014-2020 (Art. 57 of 2014-2020 CPR)

- *"evaluations must assess the **effectiveness**, efficiency and **impact** of the ESI Funds and their **contribution** to the targets under the EU strategy for **smart, sustainable and inclusive growth**"*

Evaluation of REACT-EU (Art. 2 of REACT-EU regulation)

- *based on analysis included in the 2014-2020 ex post evaluation (dedicated study)*

Mid-term evaluation of CF, ERDF and JTF 2021-2027 (Art. 45 of 2021-2027 CPR)

- *"examine the **effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence** and **Union added value** of each Fund"*
- *Support the mid-term review of the Funds*

Overview – Design and main takeaways

Ex post 2014-2020, ERDF and CF + REACT-EU:

- Implementation ended in 2023 (almost full data)
- Focus on impacts and thematic findings
- Call for evidence Jan 2022 -> 13 WPs and internal work -> RSB April 2025

Mid-term 2021-2027, ERDF, CF and JTF:

- Implementation considered until mid-2024, with updates from end-2024
- Focus on policy features and early implementation
- Call for evidence Sep 2023 -> Supporting study and internal work -> RSB Nov 2024

Cohesion policy has delivered sustainable growth for all territories and reduced inequalities across EU regions

The impact of the policy varies across regions and thematic areas

The effectiveness of the policy is conditional on certain factors

Evidence base and methodology

- 13 work packages – 12 tendered externally; thematic and cross-cutting
- Monitoring data at operation level (WP2 – Preparatory study):
- RHOMOLO-based macro-economic modelling (WP3 – Effects of funding)
- 5 Counterfactual impact evaluation studies and review of external studies
- Evaluation Library: synthesis reports of Member State evaluations (including Greece)
- Relevant academic and grey literature

Desk research

Surveys and interviews

Stakeholder consultation

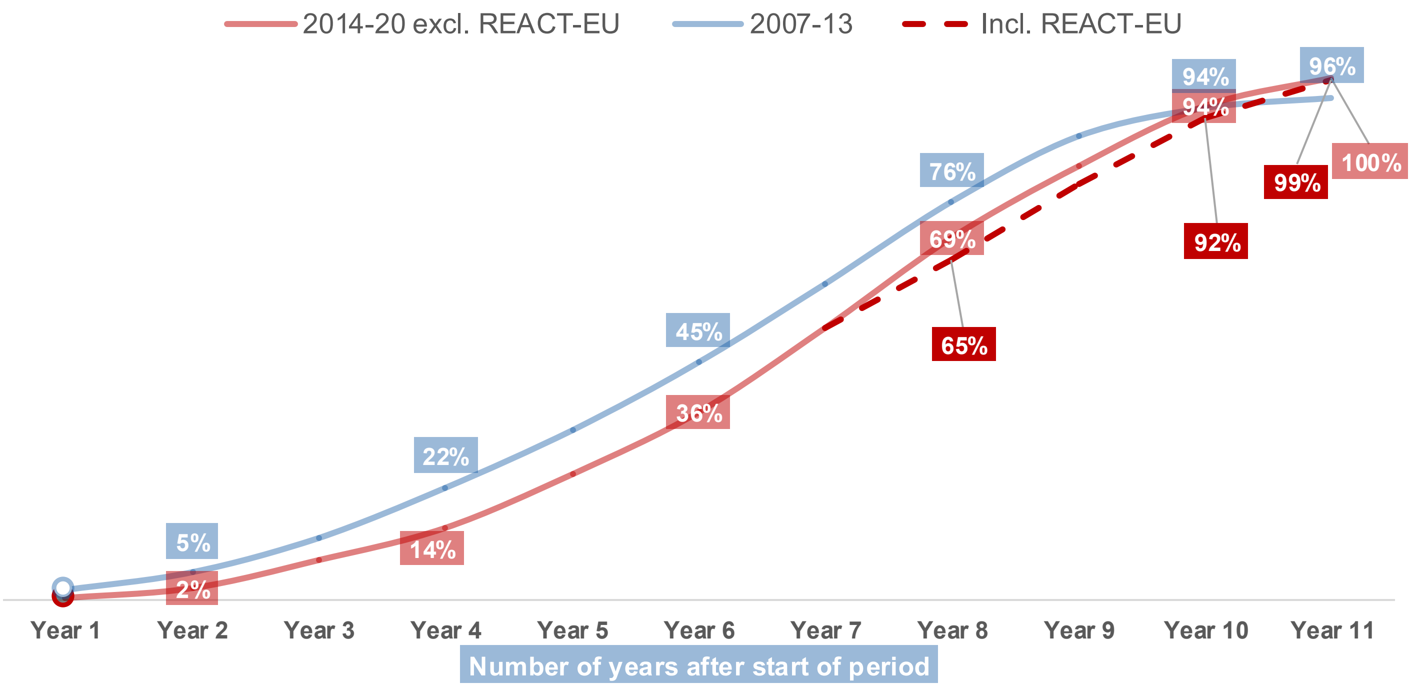
Case studies (matrix structure)

Data & econometric analysis (financial & indicator data)

2014-2020 *Ex post* evaluation

Absorption rate of ERDF/CF 2014-20

- **99%** payment rate (reference to end of 2023 as of December 2024)
- Successful implementation, despite major shifts in macroeconomic conditions
- Indicator targets also on track to be met.



Achievements and effectiveness findings

- Improved SME survival rates; improved revenues
- Improved key transport networks and removed bottlenecks
- Positive contribution to water quality, nature protection, but remaining short on GHG reduction commitments
- Administrative capacity limited effectiveness; further need to invest in skills shortages
- Several large-scale infrastructure projects delayed - public procurement bottlenecks
- ICT investments linked to increased high-speed internet access.

2.5 million SMEs supported

Over **370 000** jobs created
24 million ECEC places

8 million households better broadband access
20 501 km of transport networks built, restored or upgraded

€ 66 billion in climate investments
11.2 million ha conservation status

Effectiveness: macroeconomic impact

Sustained long-term impact

Positive, significant, and sustained effect on **EU GDP (+0.7%** at the end of the period, concentration in LDRs), stimulating convergence. ERDF was most effective in **high-value sectors** and CF on **unemployment and long-term growth.** (Synthetic control method)

Reduced regional disparities

Higher **EU GDP +0.6%** (+3.4% in LDRs) at the end of implementation compared to no policy. **Lower regional inequality**: the GDP per capita gap between the top and bottom 20% of regions was reduced by **3.5%**. (RHOMOLO)

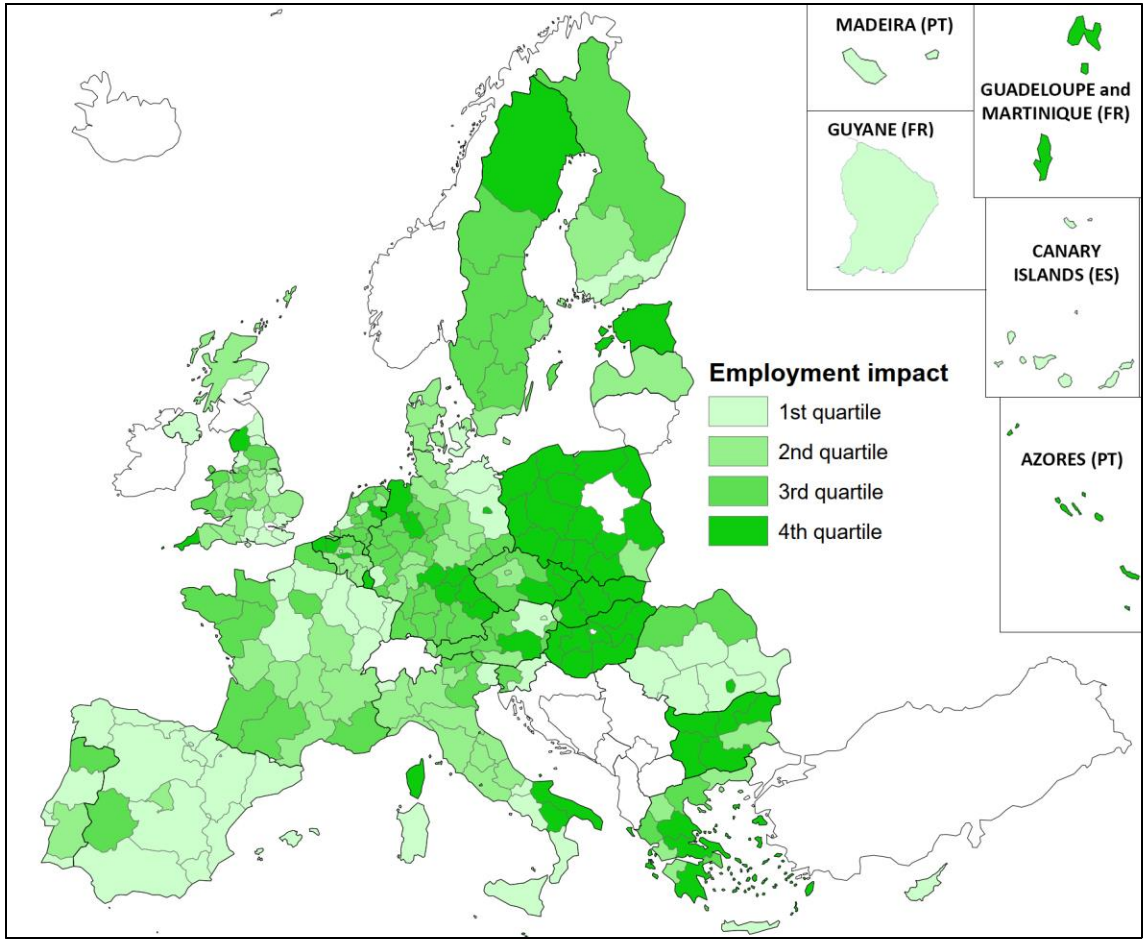
Positive impact on key indicators

Higher **EU GDP per capita (+5.3% over 10 years cumulatively,** higher in LDRs**)** than it would have been without the funding. Over the same period of 2014-2023 this resulted in higher **employment (3%) and labour productivity (5.3%).** (Machine learning control method)

Heterogeneous impact

Effects not always proportional to aid intensity. Significant impact disparities owing to economic, institutional, and administrative characteristics. (Heterogeneity study)

Example: impact on employment



- Share of employment over population increased by around 3% overall and 4.25% in LDRs (Machine learning control method)
- Largest employment effects (+0.46% vs +13.86%) in regions that spent over 15.20% on transport **and/or** more than €2,950 per capita (Heterogeneity)

Key factors for strengthening impact of the funds

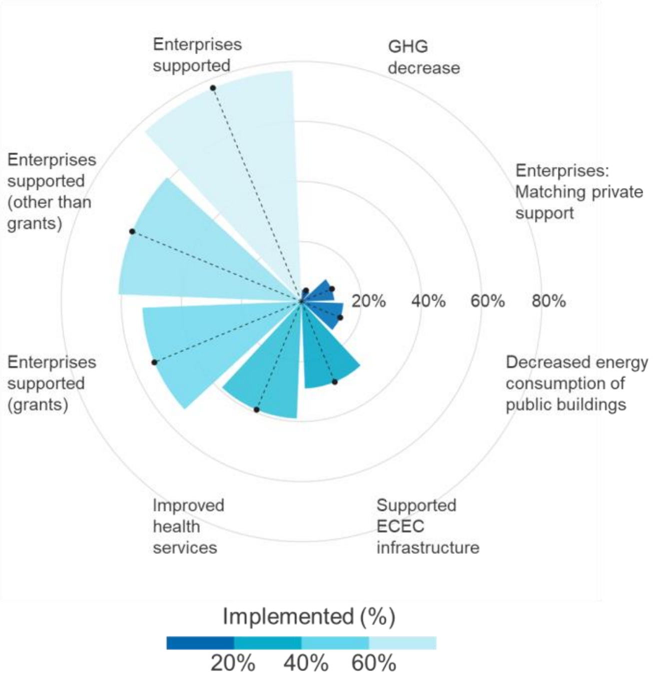
- Cohesion policy has positive effects on macroeconomic outcomes and contributes to reducing regional disparities.
- Effectiveness is conditional on a few key factors, including:

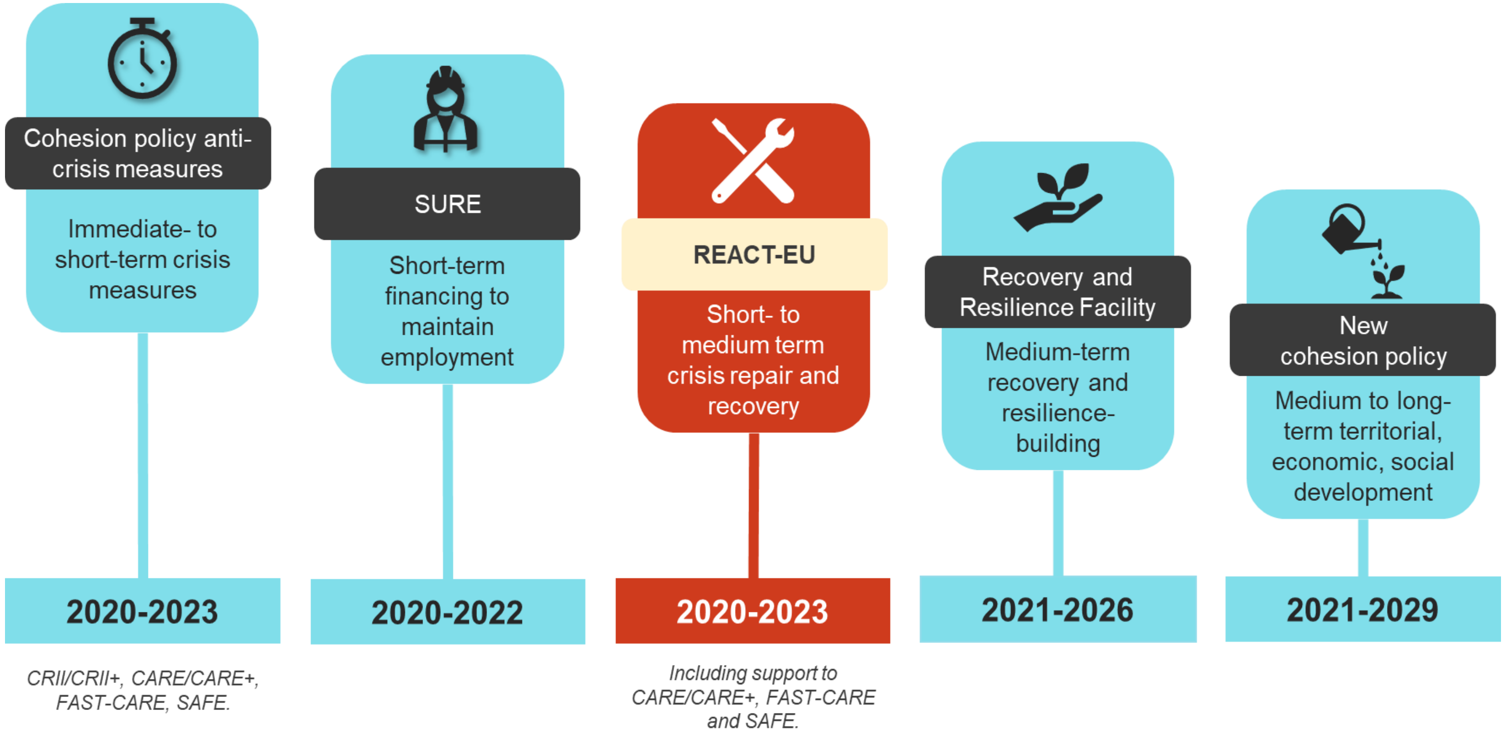
Main thematic and horizontal findings

- **Scale of funding** and ability to **crowd-in private investment** are major added values
- **Continuity of funding** was a key added value, but **barriers to entry** need to be tackled to ensure inclusive access to support
- The funds' **ability to adapt** allowed the policy to remain relevant and responsive despite major context changes
- **Uneven administrative capacity and institutional quality,** in some cases, limits effectiveness of investment
- **Administrative costs relatively modest**, but more simplification needed (expanding scope of SCOs and FNLC, streamlining public procurement rules)
- **Ex ante conditionalities** contributed to the funds' coherence and improved governance
- **CSRs** a key tool for **directing investment towards reform needs**
- Coherence other funds present but uneven; **more strategic coordination needed**

REACT-EU report

- Commission Report on the outcome of evaluation work, covering both ERDF and ESF
- REACT-EU was rapid and given its scale, effective in addressing the health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis while bridging the two programming periods





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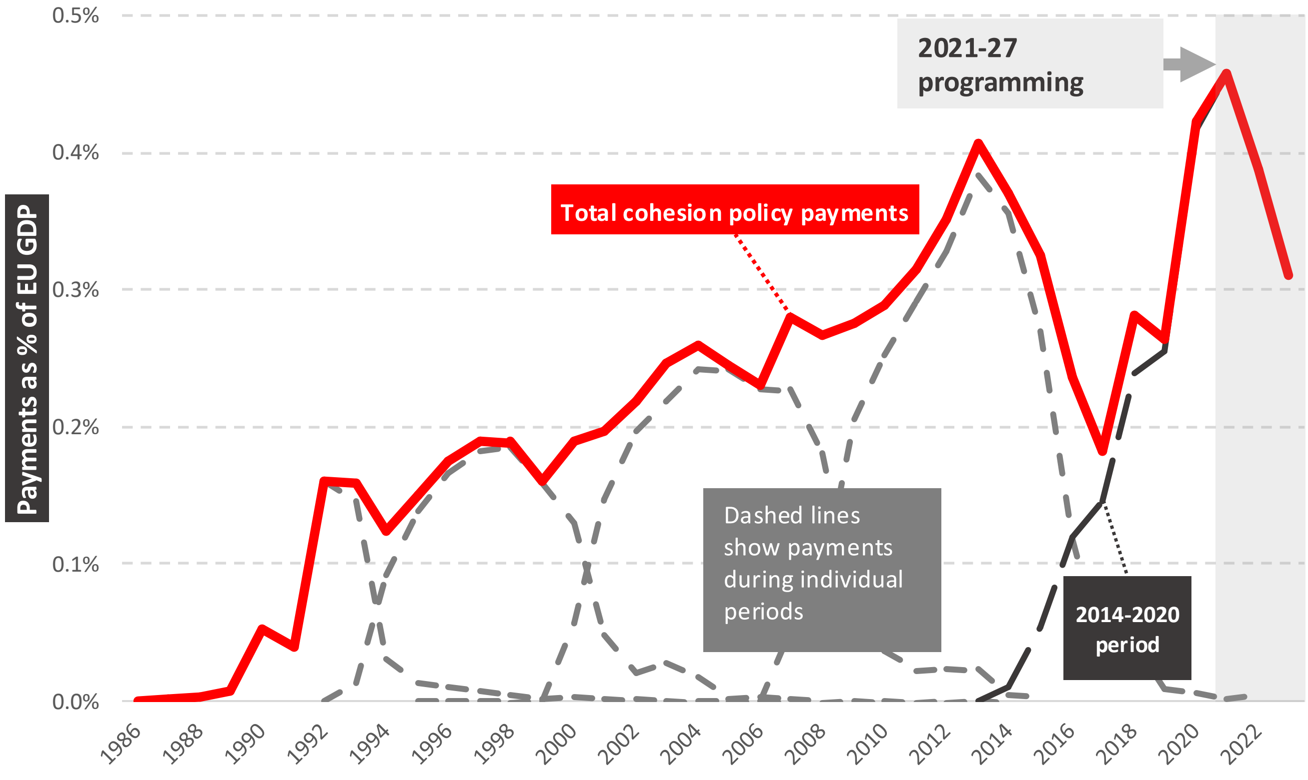
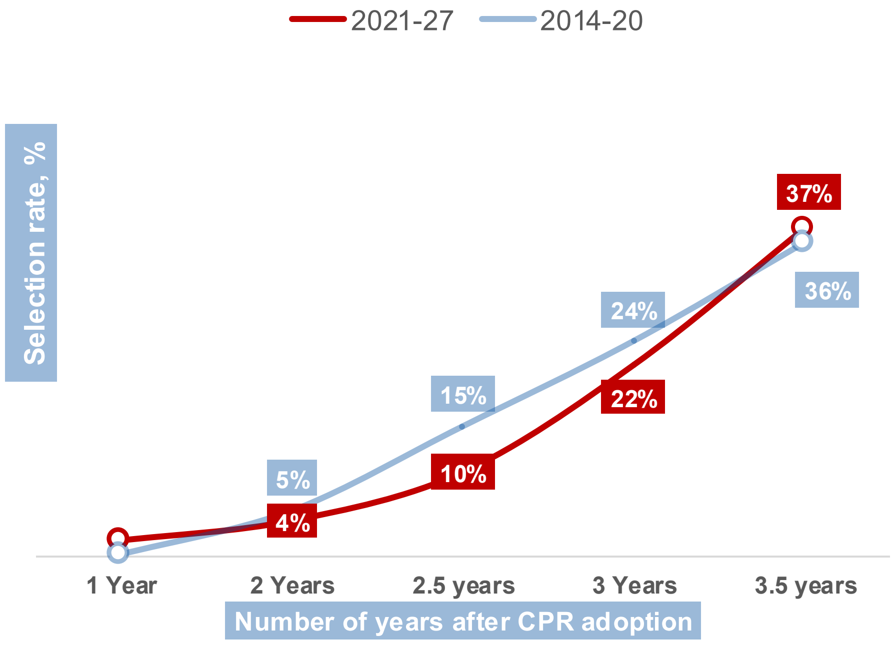
2021-2027 Mid-term evaluation

Early implementation and context

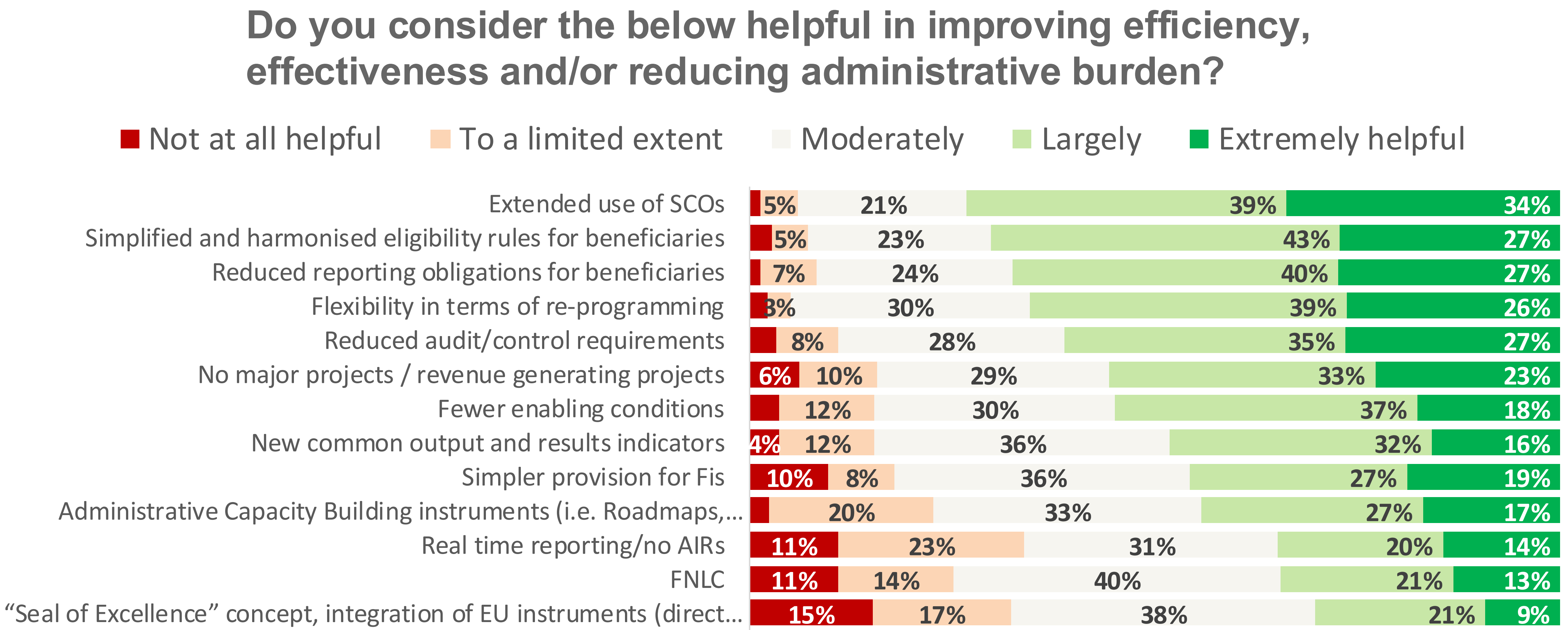
- Cohesion policy as a continuous source of funding across programming periods
- For 2021-2027, implementation started late but accelerated and caught up with 2014-2020 levels. Initial delays were largely due to exogenous factors.



Figures for programming periods correspond to effective implementation span (i.e. not commitments)



Simplification and reforms



Relevance and EU added value

The funds are highly relevant to achieving the EU's policy objectives

- Strong alignment with the Council's Strategic Agenda and the Commission president's Guidelines
- The 2025 mid-term review offers a valuable opportunity to further align programmes with emerging needs and areas to boost growth identified in the Draghi report

EU added value through

- Provision of European public goods
- Long-term strategic perspective and place-based approach
- Improving national investment framework and administrative capacity

Conclusions

Key conclusions and lessons learned

Territoriality

Territorial needs met through the targeting of funds, shared management, and multi-level governance

Need for greater flexibility and adaptation to unforeseen challenges.

Simplification

Administrative costs are relatively low, also thanks to simplification measures.

Gold-plating is still an issue, scope for further simplification for beneficiaries and greater take-up of SCOs and FNLC

EU added value

EU public goods, long-term strategy, place-based approach, improving national investment framework and administrative capacity.

Room for greater reforms-investment link and targeting.

Relevance

The funds are key to achieving the EU's policy objectives.

Flexibility remains important to maintain relevance. (performance review, mid-term review).

Capacity building

Adequate administrative capacity is crucial for effective fund implementation, as testified by case studies and econometric evidence.

Limited capacity hindered management on some instances.

Monitoring system

Performance orientation: progressively better access to micro- and beneficiary-level data for monitoring and evaluation (e.g. CIE) purposes.

Where to access the evaluations?

The material presented here is available online under the following links:

- Inforegio - Ex post evaluation of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the Cohesion Fund for the programming period 2014-2020
- Inforegio - Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the evaluation of REACT-EU
- Inforegio - Mid-term evaluation of the cohesion policy programmmes 2021-2027 financed by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the Cohesion Fund and the Just Transition Fund (JTF)

Inforegio is currently being redesigned to improve to improve its modernity and appeal for readers. Please share any suggestions.

In addition to SWDs and EC Report, the supporting studies will be published by the end of October 2025. Some of them will feature ad hoc content, while most will include:

- final study report,
- country fiches,
- case studies.

Thank you