

# **Towards An Evidence-Based Learning Cycle of EU Cohesion Policy: Combining Ex-ante Assessments and Ex-post Evaluations through Meta-analyses**

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Over the past 20 years, thinking about EU cohesion policy and how its effectiveness is assessed has undergone a remarkable transformation. Early evaluations, such as Ederveen et al. (2002) and Ederveen et al. (2006), viewed effectiveness as a question of whether EU transfers delivered measurable economic convergence. Their findings emphasized that the success of cohesion policy was conditional, dependent on institutional quality, governance capacity, and openness of recipient economies, thus defining effectiveness largely in terms of context-specific economic performance. These findings were strongly aligned with the emerging World Bank view on effective development aid which was heavily inspired by the seminal empirical work of Burnside and Dollar (2000).

The Barca (2009) report marked a conceptual shift towards a more place-based understanding of cohesion, emphasizing the mobilization of local potential, the importance of multilevel governance and the role of evaluation as a tool for strategic learning and accountability rather than control. It had a huge impact on the development of regional policies in the domains of DG Regio. This shift was consolidated in the methodological agenda set out in Barca et al. (2011), which redefined effectiveness in terms of results and outcomes, making a clear distinction between inputs, outputs, outcomes and impacts, and promoting the use of well-being based outcome indicators and systematic monitoring to support more evidence-informed policy learning. Together, these contributions offer a view of cohesion policy as an evidence-based, adaptive system, in which lessons learned are directly incorporated into the design of future programmes. As such, it can be seen as a precursor to the call of, amongst others, the Dutch Science Council (Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid, 2015) in their publication ‘Naar een lerende economie’ (Towards a learning economy) and Stiglitz and Greenwald in their book ‘Creating a learning society: A new approach to growth, development and social progress’ (Stiglitz and Greenwald, 2014).

The shift towards an evidence-based and adaptive approach to cohesion policy design implies a dual role for evaluation. *Ex post* evaluation can help to identify the causal impacts of implemented interventions and potential conditionalities and provides accountability, while *ex ante* assessment anticipates potential effects and informs the design of future policy measures. Crucially, the Barca report emphasised that these evaluations must be connected: *ex post* analysis should generate empirical evidence on how regional economies respond to policy interventions, and this information should feed directly into *ex ante* assessments and (re)design of new policies. Creating this connection, however, requires bringing together *ex post* findings that are typically dispersed, heterogeneous, and highly context-dependent.

Meta-analysis constitutes a useful bridging mechanism. By synthesizing available findings from existing primary studies and assessing heterogeneities in outcomes to identify the conditionalities and contextual determinants of policy effectiveness (see Florax et al., 2002), it can produce generalisable insights about the likely effects of interventions across different settings. Because meta-analysis aggregates quantitative effect estimates, its outputs can also be translated into the behavioural parameters and elasticities required for forward-looking simulation tools. For EU cohesion policy, this includes regional computable general equilibrium (CGE) models such as RHOMOLO, whose contribution to an iterative, evidence-based policy cycle depends on their calibration to reliable evidence on past policy responses. Integrating meta-analytic evidence into CGE-based *ex ante* simulations would enhance their empirical grounding and thereby strengthen the coherence between model projections and evidence from realised interventions. And as such, it can deliver on the ambition to learn and improve policy practices over time.

Because both *ex post* and *ex ante* evaluations rely, in different ways, on the availability of primary impact assessments, this study conducts an extensive literature search for primary impact studies on European policies. The search does not explicitly target cohesion policy itself. Rather, it focuses on EU policies and initiatives that generate implicit or explicit spatial effects. Many of these policies explicitly cite cohesion as an objective. It is therefore essential to understand their spatial impacts and whether they support, are neutral towards, or potentially undermine cohesion policy goals—especially as some of these policies (such as the Common Agricultural Policy) have far larger budgets than the cohesion funds themselves.

Our review shows that the overall evidence base is very sparse, unevenly distributed across policies, and highly heterogeneous in methods and outcome measures. A number of *ex post* evaluations provide meaningful insights into the effects of specific EU programmes, such as generally positive regional GDP and employment effects for the European Fund for Strategic Investments and the InvestEU Programme, the Common Agricultural Policy, and the TEN-T policy and the Connecting Europe Facility, while others show mixed and sometimes substantial distributional effects that are inconsistent with cohesion objectives in the case of research and agricultural funding. This sparse evidence based limits the possibility of conducting a systematic meta-analysis and, more importantly, constrains the cumulative learning process envisaged in the Barca report. The mismatch between the conceptual ambition of an evidence-based evaluation cycle and the limited empirical

foundation available to support it therefore remains substantial.<sup>1</sup>

## References

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<sup>1</sup>Smismans (2015) already identified a substantial mismatch between the EU's ambition to establish an integrated, evidence-based evaluation cycle and the empirical realities of its evaluation system, noting that *ex post* evaluations lacked the systematic and comparable evidence needed for *ex ante* assessments, that regulatory policies in particular suffered from scarce and uneven data, and that institutional mechanisms to channel retrospective findings into impact assessments were only weakly developed.