

Evaluating with your target group

The potential of an inclusive approach to monitoring and evaluation

Synthesis note, January 2017



Introduction

Despite the large and sustained focus of policy efforts to Roma inclusion, results remain limited. Thorough evaluation of programs and projects is crucial to identify reasons for weak performance and should ideally lead to stronger project design.

The current evaluation practice usually leaves out the perspective of the final beneficiaries: their opinions and experiences remain invisible. The experience of ERGO Network and its member organisations is that programme and project evaluations, if they are available at all, often lack depth, fail to address shortcomings and in many cases present an image that does not correspond to the reality of those the project or programme aimed to support. This represents a missed opportunity for achieving structural improvements in policy approaches to Roma inclusion.

The present small-scale investigation explores how better use could be made of the involvement of final beneficiaries in evaluation. Based on a limited field research in four countries (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary and Romania), complemented by a review of participants' involvement in monitoring and evaluation of Roma-focused programming in Spain, it presents a number of exploratory conclusions about the value of systematic inclusion of the perspective of final beneficiaries to better evaluate the quality of projects, strengthen project design and review and encourage project implementers to adopt a stronger focus towards achieving results for their target groups.

Context

The views of final beneficiaries are not part of the current monitoring and evaluation framework of the European Social Fund¹. The implementation of EU-supported projects is usually monitored and measured by output indicators (numbers of training, numbers of participants etc.) and in some cases with a few result indicators (for ESF-supported projects often jobs created or found by participants). While this does not prevent managing authorities or implementers to involve the target group in the evaluation phase, it is our experience that in the case of Roma-focused projects this rarely, if ever, happens. The Spanish example presented here is the exception.

Foregoing the opportunity to collect the views of final beneficiaries may be justified for reasons of cost-effectiveness and objectivity. However, leaving them out from evaluations altogether has a number of likely consequences. Firstly, without recording and reviewing the views of the beneficiaries, it is hard to evaluate the

¹ European Commission (2015) Programming period 2014-2020. Monitoring and Evaluation of European Cohesion Policy, European Social Fund, June 2015
<http://ec.europa.eu/sfc/en/system/files/ged/ESF%20monitoring%20and%20evaluation%20guidance.pdf>

quality of, for example, training and social support projects. Recording only output indicators hides the underlying reality of a project, while outcome indicators are often very one-sided and too coarse to capture the value of a project for the target group, which is mostly part of a much more complex and contextual reality.

Secondly, when impact of projects and programmes is investigated as part of evaluations, this happens at a level of abstraction that obscures the effect on the actual lives of people. As an example, many ESF-supported training programmes, which include Roma as a target group, aim to increase their integration in the labour market. Whether these trainings actually contributed to changes observed, or whether these can be explained by contextual factors, cannot be properly established as long as final beneficiaries are not given a voice in evaluations.

Thirdly, evaluating without hearing the target group can lead to approaches being presented as 'good practice', whereas we sometimes actually know that they failed, were not as successful as claimed, or have (unintended) consequences that should normally invalidate the label 'good practice'.

The present investigation is a first step towards proposing a methodology and set of indicators that could guide the involvement of target groups in evaluation.

Research objectives

This investigation wanted to explore the value of recording the experience of beneficiaries in EU-supported projects and programmes in addressing the above mentioned shortcomings. It aimed:

- (i) to propose a methodology of evaluating 'quality' – from the explicit perspective of target groups;
- (ii) to refine impact evaluations, by explicitly investigating the trajectories of participants through and beyond an intervention;
- (iii) where relevant, revisit what other evaluations found to be good practice.

This research is explicitly not itself (primarily) an evaluation of projects or programmes: for that purpose a larger scale and more systematic approach would be necessary. Its main aim is to contrast an evaluation approach that explicitly gives a voice to beneficiaries with evaluations that hide these voices behind output indicators.

Methodology

The research consisted of two parts: (i) a desk study of selected projects in four countries and (ii) structured interviews or focus groups with (at least) 10 participants in each of the projects.

The selection of projects, as well as the desk studies and field interviews, were carried out by ERGO Network member organisations in four countries. They can benefit from direct access to Roma communities in areas where they work. Because project promoters are not usually keen to share details of their final beneficiaries, the selection of projects parallels the links of these organisations with certain localities and prior reports of community members' participation in, or experiences with, these projects. The research was complemented by a review of final beneficiaries' involvement in project monitoring and evaluation in Spain.

A full description of the research methodology is in annex 1; the template for the desk study and interviews is in Annex 2. An overview of the projects that have been reviewed is in Annex 3.

Main findings

The following findings were relevant across the five countries covered in the research:

- Participants often have a very clear idea of the contribution a project has made to their economic chances and wellbeing (or the lack thereof). **Participants are reflexive actors**, not passive consumers of support measures, who can point to and explain shortcomings in project designs and take a generally balanced view of a project's objectives and merits.
- The field interviews point to the fact that projects can have **positive but intangible effects**, for instance in benefitting community life or boosting the self-esteem of participants. Such effects will usually be obscured in evaluations based on strict or narrow output and outcome indicators, even if complemented by stakeholder interviews. Without collecting the views of final beneficiaries, it is impossible to construct a contextually solid evaluation of a project.
- It is the exception that project evaluations are **available**; in most cases it is unclear whether projects have been evaluated at all. This makes it impossible to compare the views of final beneficiaries with the conclusions that project promoters or funders draw on the basis of the existing monitoring and evaluation framework.
- The field research shows how even a limited investigation can provide data on a project's implementation that helps **place output and outcome data in context**. From several examples it is clear how it can help to account for projects' disappointing results. The Romanian case in particular shows how external inclusive evaluation can contribute to **verification of output data**.
- In situations of economic hardship – which often characterize Roma communities - participation in trainings or social projects is sometimes motivated by **opportunism**, especially if the project follows a logic that has not sufficiently taken account of people's realities. The practice of offering participation fees or handing out certificates without strict attendance rules reinforces such tendencies and encourages rent-seeking behaviour of project promoters, negatively affecting project quality.

From the review of the Spanish experience, we can learn that structurally implemented involvement of the target group in monitoring and evaluation is not only feasible, but also makes significant contributions to participants' satisfaction, to project outcomes and to periodic reviews of projects and programmes. A crucial factor appears to be the involvement of an independent third party evaluator to conduct interviews or focus groups with final beneficiaries, to ensure that results are not being influenced by implementers.

In terms of the research objectives that had been formulated, the value of inclusive evaluation is clear in that it can (in certain cases) corroborate or disprove a project's impact. Some of the findings provide provisional pointers towards the formulation of a quality evaluation framework. However, while both the interview template and the Spanish experiences point to the contribution it can make, it is not possible on this basis only to develop an evaluation framework. To this end, additional research

would be needed, more systematically reviewing the role and value of inclusive evaluation for different types and sizes of intervention.

Country-specific findings

In addition to the main findings, the following findings were relevant in the countries included in this research.

- ***Bulgaria***

In Bulgaria, two projects supported by funding from the ESF were reviewed through focus groups. In both cases, the project's implementation was (is) suboptimal, among others because too little consideration had been given to the final beneficiaries' needs and context in the project design.

In one project, a temporary employment programme that was implemented alongside a housing scheme, returned participants into their previous situation as soon as it ended, without any perspective to systematic improvement of the labour market situation in the future. The accompanying social measures in the project were unknown to the interviewees – which points to either a lack of communication from the side of the implementers or poor implementation of envisaged activities.

In the other project (to encourage attendance of early childhood education) the research indicated barriers to participation that were not tackled in the project, effectively making it unsuccessful by design. The focus groups also indicated that little consideration was given to the needs of the community in the preparatory phase. As this project is ongoing, there is an opportunity to correct these shortcomings.

In both case, the less than positive experiences of the target group feed into already existing frustration about the manner they are approached by public authorities.

- ***Czech Republic***

The field research conducted in the Czech Republic points to important effects on the self-esteem and social wellbeing of the projects reviewed. Both projects (one focusing on social work, the other on social enterprise) were supported by the ESF. These effects are not usually included in evaluations, because they fall outside the indicator framework. This indicates the important role social work often plays for vulnerable communities, even though the results are largely intangible.

At the same time, the research also shows the frustration of the target group about the ad-hoc and isolated nature of employment initiatives, which are highly valued by the final beneficiaries in themselves, but do not bring any structural change in their exclusion from the labour market.

- ***Hungary***

In Hungary the review showed largely positive opinions of two ESF-supported projects, although in one case (an employment-oriented skills training) it largely lost its value when the accompanying social enterprise fell off the drawing board. The training, in the memories of the participants, became a nice, but largely useless and forgotten experience.

This points to the value of inclusive evaluation in uncovering the wider contextual setting of projects. Such data is often also collected in stakeholder interviews, but can be verified by interviewing final beneficiaries, who do not have a direct interest in painting a rosier picture.

The other project in the eyes of the participants made small but important positive changes in their lives. The digital literacy focus in particular helped women gain more independence in their everyday roles. The value of inclusive evaluation here is clear in bringing across significant but intangible results.

- **Romania**

In Romania two ESF-supported projects were reviewed, one focusing on women empowerment, the other on employment support. Both projects target a socially excluded area, where potential final beneficiaries of the project are concentrated geographically.

The review of both projects reveals the limited or even non-existent impact the projects have made, despite formally having been implemented in the area. The interviewees, all of whom would have been potential beneficiaries of the projects, have no recollection of the projects at all.

In the case of the employment support project, some of the interview data suggests that participation in training sessions took place on paper only and that certificates were handed out regardless of attendance. Here the value of inclusive evaluation in terms of verifying output reports is clearly shown.

Conclusions and recommendations

The participation of target groups in the evaluation phase is the logical complement of seeking their views in the stage of project development and implementation. However, while these have been a benchmark recommendation² for actions targeting Roma, the latter has been slow to follow.

This research makes the case for inclusive evaluation, in which members of the target group are given a clear voice in evaluating programmes and projects. On the basis of this small-scale investigation, our preliminary conclusions are that inclusive evaluation

- is a key tool to establish project quality and to corroborate or disprove claimed outcomes or impacts;
- can help identify intangible benefits of interventions beyond the scope of existing indicator frameworks;
- can make a particular contribution to identifying contextual factors behind a project's success or failure;
- can contribute to project design and is a useful instrument in project monitoring.

As the present investigation shows, many projects take little account of the perspective and needs of its target groups, let alone present a valid analysis of the underlying structural circumstances. As long as the target group remains absent from

² see Common Basic Principles on Roma inclusion and the many official national and international documents that have reiterated this recommendation.

the monitoring and evaluation framework, a strong incentive for implementers to focus on achieving the best outcome for the target group – instead of narrowly satisfying output and outcome criteria - is lost.

Inclusive evaluation can be done in a limited or more systematic manner. While the costs of conducting a representative survey of final beneficiaries will only be justified for large programmes, this investigation shows that even collecting anecdotal evidence can help to formulate caveats to be presented alongside evaluation results. In evaluations that (partly) rely on stakeholder interviews, a review of the perspective of final beneficiaries would provide valuable additional information against modest costs.

This leads us to the following **recommendations**:

1. Support the development of inclusive evaluation as a complementary methodology that can strengthen current evaluation approaches.
2. Ensure that inclusive evaluation is conducted by a third party that is independent from both funder and implementer.
3. Encourage managing authorities to include the direct involvement of final beneficiaries in programme and project evaluations for the ongoing programming period; communicate this clearly to project implementers, so they can where necessary adapt their approaches to more closely match the context of target groups.
4. For the next programming period, explore the possibility of making inclusive evaluation obligatory for (certain types) of ESF-supported programmes.

Justification

The field research was carried out in October and November 2016. Country research data is not published, but can be made available on request. For all enquiries please contact info@ergonetwork.org

Partners



Bulgaria: Integro Association
Czech Republic: Slovo 21
Hungary: Butterfly Development
Romania: Nevo Parudimos
Spain: Fundación Secretariado Gitano

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The information contained in this note does not necessarily reflect the official position of the European Commission.

Annex 1

ESIF Beneficiary research Research approach

Note, 12 September 2016



Context

In evaluations of projects and programmes that target Roma, the beneficiaries mostly remain invisible. The implementation of EU-supported projects is usually monitored and measured by output indicators (numbers of training, numbers of participants, etc.) and in some cases with a few result indicators (for ESF-supported projects often jobs created or found by participants). Evaluation of such projects is generally done towards the end of programme periods, and involves a review of project documentation and interviews with stakeholders, sometimes complemented by field visits. But the perspective of the target group and the direct beneficiaries is usually absent. Their experiences are neither recorded nor taken into account.

The reason why beneficiaries are not interviewed as part of evaluations is probably twofold: Firstly, it will be considered too great an effort to include thorough or systematic review of beneficiaries' views. Secondly, some may argue that the results will not be 'objective' and are therefore of little use. While interviews with stakeholders are as likely to produce subjective results, leaving out beneficiaries from evaluations has a number of consequences.

Firstly, without recording and reviewing the views of the beneficiaries, it will be very hard to evaluate the quality of, for example, a training or other social support project. Recording only output indicators hides the underlying reality of a project, while outcome indicators are often very one-sided and too coarse to capture the value of a project for the target group.

Secondly, the real impact of projects is not evaluated. As an example, many ESF-supported training programmes, which include Roma as a target group, aim to increase their integration in the labour market. Whether these trainings actually helped the beneficiaries to be employed or to find a better job due to their improved skills remains unknown.

Thirdly, it leads to some approaches being presented as 'good practice', whereas we sometimes actually know that they failed - or at least, were not as successful as is made to believe.

Objective

With the proposed 'ESIF beneficiary research', we want to explore the value of recording the experience of beneficiaries in EU-supported projects and programmes in addressing the above mentioned shortcomings of current evaluation approaches. By recording the experiences and views of direct beneficiaries of such interventions, this research aims:

- (iv) to propose a methodology of evaluating 'quality' – from the explicit perspective of target groups;
- (v) to refine impact evaluations by explicitly investigating the trajectories of participants through and beyond an intervention;
- (vi) where relevant, review what other evaluations found to be good practice.

Since we only have the resources for a small-scale investigation, the research is not in itself (primarily) an evaluation of projects or programmes: for that purpose a larger scale and more systematic approach would be necessary. Its main aim is to contrast an evaluation approach that explicitly gives a voice to beneficiaries, with evaluations that hide these voices behind output indicators.

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Scope

In each of the participating countries, the research will cover two projects or programmes that received support from the EU Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF)³. In order to be able to compare results and to relate closely to the ERGO Network Annual Work Programme, the selected projects should (have) receive(d) support from the ESF (European Social Fund) and focus on human resource development.

For each project, the research comprises a desk study and a field study: the latter involves interviews with no less than five individuals (see below, Methodology)

The selection of the projects to be researched is up to the national partners, taking into account the following criteria:

- Does (did) the project receive ESF support?
- Are Roma (implicitly or explicitly) mentioned as a specific target group?
- Is the stated objective of the project relevant to your organisation and ERGO Network? (Does it aim to support Roma to exercise their equal rights, or to overcome disadvantages of earlier discrimination?)
- Is the project actually (being) implemented?

Furthermore, in the selection of projects you should take into account:

- Availability of project documentation: is it public? can you obtain it through contacts or requests?
- Identification of beneficiaries: how do you identify and reach participants in the projects?
- Practical feasibility: can you easily reach beneficiaries for interviews?

Finally, we should consider whether we select current or past projects. There are arguments for both. Selecting current projects will increase the immediate relevance of the research: it can connect to ongoing programme cycles and produce direct recommendations for project promoters and managing authorities. On the other hand, it may be more difficult to obtain project documentation and be considered sensitive and unwelcome by the implementers. Selecting past projects has the advantage that we may contrast our findings with earlier evaluations, highlighting the differences or nuances that come out when we record beneficiary experience. On the downside, it may be more difficult to identify beneficiaries to interview, and our audience may feel we revisit closed cases.

Taking the above considerations into account, we suggest that each partner, if possible, selects one current (or very recent) and one finished project. Ideally, an evaluation is available for the latter (even if this only is an announcement in the media or a brochure).

Methodology

The research consists of two parts:

I Desk study

For each of the projects selected:

- Explore the stated objective, precise target group and actions undertaken. Indicate relevance of the project, as above.
- Verify if the project was actually implemented / is being implemented and note relevant project details (ESF support / Operational Programme support, duration, size (foreseen or realized) number of participants, gender focus, trainings, actions, etc), location of activities, geographical scope, etc);

³ ESIF is an umbrella term that covers ESF and ERDF, as well as the Cohesion Fund and the Agricultural and Fisheries Funds.

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- Identify who implemented the project (NGO, public authority, corporation) and which were the other stakeholders involved. Where relevant, include how the project proposes to select or reach out to its beneficiaries;
- Verify how the project is / was supposed to be evaluated, according to the project documents. If available, review existing evaluations.

Draft a brief project fiche based on your desk study, using annexed template.

II Field Study

For each of the projects you selected, you conduct (semi)-structured interviews with 5 -10 Roma individuals who were included in the projects. For the selection of interviewees, there are two possible approaches, depending on the availability of and your level of access to project documentation:

- (i) If you can obtain access to participation lists, make a random selection of all participants to interview.
- (ii) In all other cases, identify (likely) participants through your local contacts.

The interviews should cover:

- Participation: verify if the respondent participated in the project. Keep in mind that they may not remember very well, or that they refer to the project under different titles or terms. If the respondent states he/she did not participate, while his/her name is on a participant list, double check.
- Relevance: ask if, according to the respondent, the project matched any of their needs or preferences.
- Involvement: ask if the respondent was asked for their input or views during the project to possibly improve or refine the project activities. Ask if the respondent participated in the entire foreseen trajectory, or whether he/she dropped out. In the latter case, ask for the reason.
- Results (I): ask if, according to the respondent, the project realised its stated objective. Specify (i) for him/herself and (ii) possibly for others, in the opinion of the respondent.
- Results (II): ask if the respondent or the community benefited from the project in other ways than the stated objective of the project.
- Quality: ask the respondent for their opinion about the quality of the project, using a 0 – 10 scale (: no not at all – yes, very much) for three statements covering:
 - level (do you feel the project's activities matched your level?)
 - benefit (do you feel the project has been positive for you?)
 - appraisal (overall, do you feel the project was good?)

Following the annexed interview guide, research partners need to formulate the questions into simple and easy language. For instance, take care to translate the stated objective(s) of the project into terms that are understandable for the beneficiaries: they may not know the project title, or the objectives themselves.

Reporting

The report consists of three parts for each project: the project fiches (desk study), the interview fiches, and the conclusions. The conclusions should present your main findings and reflect the scale of the research: if the interviews did not point to any clear direction (for instance: the project was very bad, all respondents said so), formulate cautiously. Your conclusions should be supported by the findings from the interviews. Try to be concise: the conclusions need not be longer than 1/2 to 1 page.

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In case you have selected a project for which an evaluation was already made, the conclusions need to include a comparison with your own findings. The main question here is whether your findings confirm, refine or refute the findings of the evaluation.

Workload

The foreseen workload is as described in the note of January 2016.

Earlier evaluations

As mentioned above, it is an option to consider selecting projects that have already been evaluated. These should not lie too far in the past, but the advantage is that we can clearly contrast our findings with those of evaluations that do not include the perspective of the beneficiaries.

Research partners could see which evaluations are available in their countries of relevant projects under the current or previous programme period. One possibility is to consider the projects investigated by the EU Court of Auditors: their report⁴ is based on quite thorough investigations, but also lacks the beneficiary perspective.

Another possibility is to select a project that is being presented as a success by your (local) government, even though there is no proper evaluation. In that case, too, it will be easier to contrast your findings with the 'official reading' of a project.

⁴ Covered Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania and Spain. An overview of the projects it covered is attached. Report available at: <http://www.eca.europa.eu/en/Pages/DocItem.aspx?did=36850>

Annex 2

II – Field study: Interview guide

(copy findings sheet for each respondent)

The **aim** of the interviews is to establish whether the respondent's participation in the project has helped him / her directly or indirectly as was envisaged in the project. In other words: has the project, from the perspective of the participant, achieved its aims. We aim to look at the level of 'results' or 'outcomes' here: so not only, did the respondent *participate* in the training or other activity, but did his/her participation have a real positive effect.

The interview doesn't need to take long, maybe 10 – 15 minutes. If the respondent has relevant additional observations, you can of course extend the interview.

Cover at least the following aspects in your interview. Prepare a questionnaire that matches the projects you have selected. The section {between curly brackets} need to be specific for your project.

1. Personal details

Record age, gender, level of education (highest level finished), labour market status (employed, self-employed, unemployed).

2. Participation: verify if the respondent participated in the project you have selected.

Q: [Did you take part in {the project / any of the activities of the project} in {implementation period of the project}?]

or

Q: [Do you remember that you participated in {any of the activities of the project} in {implementation period of the project}?]

→ yes no

Q: [Did you stay for the whole project / did you participate in all {the activities}? Or did you take part in only a the first few {activities}?]

→ whole trajectory no, because _____

Q: *For verification, to ensure you are talking about the same project.*

[Do you remember where the {activity/ies} took place?] or [similar question]

Mark when verified:

→ yes

Keep in mind that they may not remember very well, or that they refer to the project under different titles or terms. If the respondent states he/she did not participate, while his/her name is on a participant list, double check.

3. Relevance

Q: [Were {the activities} important for you? Did {the activities} match your needs? Did you have good expectations of the {activities} before you started?]

→ Very much so a bit not so much not at all / **don't know**

4. Involvement

Q: [Could you give your opinion about {the activities} during the project? Did the organisers ask for you input or opinion?]

→ Very much so a bit not so much not at all / **don't know**

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5. Results

Q: [Did {the activities} help you yourself {achieve the objective(s) of the project}?]

→ *Very much so* *a bit* *not so much* *not at all* / **don't know**

Q: [Do you think {the activities} helped others {achieve the objective(s) of the project}?]

→ *Very much so* *a bit* *not so much* *not at all* / **don't know**

Q: [Do you think {the activities} were useful for you and others in {their community, neighbourhood} in other was?]

→ *Very much so* *a bit* *not so much* *not at all* / **don't know**

→ If positive, how: _____

6. Quality

Q: [Do you agree with the following statement?: "{the activities} / {the project} matched my level of skills and understanding very well"]

→ *very much* 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 *not at all*
neutral **don't know**

Q: [Do you agree with the following statement?: "{the activities} / {the project} have been positive for me"]

→ *very much* 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 *not at all*
neutral **don't know**

Q: [Overall, do you feel, this was a good project /{activities}?]

→ *very good* 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 *not good at all*
neutral **don't know**

7. Other remarks

Any other remarks of the respondent relevant to the research objective

III Conclusions

Formulate a concise conclusion (3 - 4 paragraphs) about the project you investigated in relation to the research objectives and based on your findings (research approach note, p.1 and p.4): what did the interviews tell us about the value and results of the project, and how does this contrast with more standard evaluations of the project?

Annex 3

Overview of projects investigated

Bulgaria

1. "Early socialization through successful educational integration" – Tetovo (Russe municipality)
August 2016 – December 2018.
2. "Integrated life for children and disadvantaged individuals from the community of the Municipality of Devnya" – Devnya (Varna region)
October 2013 – October 2015.

Czech Republic

1. Forest works – Social enterprise of equal opportunities – Malé Svatoňovice, Region Hradec Králová
April 2011 – March 2013.
2. Support of Roma integration in region Usti 2 – Usti Region
February 2013 – June 2015.

Hungary

1. Complex anti-segregation settlement programme (providing access to complex human services) – Mátraverebély village (Northern Hungary, Nógrád county)
December 2013. – November 2015.
2. Development of digital competence in order to boost labour market activity – Northern Hungary, Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County, Edelény small region.
December 2010 – October 2013.

Romania

1. BARRABARRIPEN – an inter-regional model of social inclusion for the Roma women – Resita and two other regions.
January 2011 – October 2012.
2. Support for the unemployed persons of the Caras-Severin county for integration on the labour market – Resita and Caras-Severin.
Finalized September 2015.