



Enhancing the Impact of European Social Fund Operations through Trial-and-Adopt Impact Evaluations

Call for Expression of Interest for ESF+ Projects

European Commission – Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion
(DG EMPL)

World Bank – Development Impact Evaluation Department (WBG-DIME)

1. Background

The Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL) is responsible for EU policy on employment, social affairs, skills, labour mobility and the related EU funding programs, including the European Social Fund. The European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) is the EU's primary instrument for investing in people and implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights. It supports employment, social policies, education, skills development, structural reforms, and socio-economic recovery, particularly in reducing disparities between Member States and regions. The ESF+ has a budget of €142.7 billion for the period 2021-2027, including both a shared management strand implemented by Member States and overseen by management authorities (€142 billion) and an Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI) strand implemented by the European Commission (€762 million). These are critical initiatives for promoting sustainable development, enhancing social cohesion, and ensuring that all EU citizens can benefit from economic growth and social progress.

DG EMPL encourages evidence-based programming, promotes innovations, and supports actions to strengthen the impacts of ESF+ operations. DG EMPL has established a strategic partnership with the World Bank's Development Impact Department (DIME, see annex 1) to build capacity and identify opportunities to bolster the effectiveness of EU cohesion policy investments through improving the use of data, trialing alternative design options and implementation modalities to test innovations and learn what works best in practice, and rigorously documenting impacts.

As part of this partnership, some ESF+ projects will be supported on a pilot basis to embed trial-and-adopt impact evaluations and facilitate data system integration to better track outcomes and maximize impacts.

These initial pilots will enable knowledge-sharing, fulfilling important objectives of generating knowledge spillovers within and beyond the EU. For instance, they are expected to inform strategies to embed strategic trial-and-adopt impact evaluations in future funding cycles.



2. Purpose of the call

DG EMPL and the World Bank are looking for projects funded by ESF+ that are interested in collaborating to embed trial-and-adopt impact evaluation pilots in their roll-out. This follows discussions with the ESF+ technical committee and a consultation workshop organized in Brussels on 26 September 2024.

The call is open to all ESF+ themes. Relevant areas may include, for instance, (i) youth employment, (ii) public employment services, (iii) skills, (iv) vocational education and lifelong training, (v) education system management, (vi) health system management and care, (vii) Guaranteed Minimum Income (GMI) and activation, (ix) social inclusion, (x) integration of migrants, (xi) gender equality. Each member state is welcome to propose one or several projects for the workshop.

Following the call for expression of interest, up to 8 projects will be invited to a one-week workshop to design a trial-and-adopt impact evaluation strategy. The workshop is expected to take place on May 19-23, 2025. The workshop's objective will be to train selected Member States/ESF+ program management teams on methodologies to implement impact evaluations (IE), provide the latest actionable evidence in the priority policy area, and develop a prospective Trial-and-Adopt impact evaluation strategy to be embedded in future program implementation. The impact evaluations may test multiple interventions, delivery modalities, design features, and targeting mechanisms to identify effective strategies that increase project impact. Impact evaluations will include a measurement framework that captures outcomes along the theory of change. For instance, results on short-term impacts or intermediate outcomes can help steer policy decisions and encourage program adjustments to boost medium to long-term effects.

For each project, the delegation for the workshop is expected to include 4-5 people, including a representative from the managing authority, the project manager/coordinator or equivalent, and technical staff with in-depth knowledge of the project's design, implementation and of data aspects. Including someone from the Competence Centre for Social Innovation could also be an asset. Partners (such as DG REGIO, DG EAC or DG REFORM), World Bank staff, researchers, and other technical experts will also participate.

Following the workshop, up to 4 projects will receive dedicated technical support through June 2026 to finalize their trial-and-adopt impact evaluation strategy and launch implementation. WB-DIME will assemble an impact evaluation research team for those selected pilots with a principal investigator, one or more co-investigators, a field coordinator, and research assistants. The impact evaluation research teams will work closely with Member States to ensure that evidence is co-produced, i.e., that the project management team works closely with the impact evaluation team to ensure that the evidence produced through the collaboration is of high quality and policy relevance. ESF+ project management teams would continue to be upskilled through learning by doing throughout implementation.



3. Selection criteria

Projects will be selected to participate in the one-week workshop based on the following criteria: relevance, technical quality and maturity, scope, innovation and equity.

1. **Relevance:** The project addresses a critical policy challenges and knowledge gaps in relation to key ESF+ themes (e.g. see section 2).
2. **Technical quality and maturity:** The project interventions and implementation modalities are well defined, with clear timeline and targets.
3. **Scope:** The project has the potential to enhance the effectiveness of a program that represents a significant portion of the ESF+ budget.
4. **Innovation:** The project tackles a relevant policy challenge through a new or untested intervention.
5. **Equity:** The project benefits disadvantaged populations, promoting inclusivity.

After the workshop, pilot project proposals will be selected for dedicated technical support, based on the following additional criteria: impact evaluation design quality, implementation feasibility, data access and availability, and scalability for broader application. Support budget availability and needs per operation may also be considered and will co-determine how many projects can ultimately be supported.

4. Submission details

The call for expression of interest is open for 4 weeks from **the 4th of February 2025, 18:00 CET**. Interested managing and implementing authorities or beneficiaries (in agreement with the Managing authority) can submit their expression of interest (Eoi) through the **application form** at [THIS LINK](#)¹ **by the deadline on Tuesday the 4th of March 2025, 18:00 CET**.

During the call, 2 informational webinars for potential applicants will be organized:

- **Friday the 14th of February 2025**, 14:00 CET: To register and participate use this [MICROSOFT TEAMS LINK](#) (Meeting ID: 236 533 007 862; **Passcode:** 9RS6MS7j)
- **Tuesday the 25th of February 2025**, 14:00 CET: To register and participate use this [MICROSOFT TEAMS LINK](#) (Meeting ID: 237 121 357 846; **Passcode:** UX62vv7u)

¹ https://survey.wb.surveycyto.com/collect/eoi_dg_empl_final?caseid=



Representatives of interested public authorities/agencies can request further information by contacting Susanne Hoffmann (Susanne.HOFFMANN@ec.europa.eu) and Patrick Premand (ppremand@worldbank.org).



Please complete and submit this form electronically by pressing [THIS LINK](#)

1. Information about the Applicant	
1.1 Member State	
1.2 Name of managing and implementing authorities or beneficiaries submitting project	
1.3 If beneficiary, indicate contact person at the Managing authority	Name, Last Name
	Job title
	Phone (e.g. +32-000000000)
	Email
1.4 Contact person for this application	Name, Last Name
	Job title
	Phone (e.g. +32-000000000)
	Email
2. Project description	
2.1 Name of project	
2.2 Brief description of the project (Objectives, target population, intervention components, implementation modalities, etc,...)	<i>(no word limit; suggested length – 300-500 words)</i>
2.3 (optional) Additional documents with project information	<i>(optional; you can upload additional project documents here)</i>
2.4 Amount of ESF+ funding allocated to this project	
2.5 What is the planned implementation period for this project, and its current status?	<i>(please describe planned implementation period, if the project is at design stage, approved, whether it has already started,...)</i>
2.6 Please provide any available information on the project's geographic scope (covered regions, municipalities, etc.) and target	



number of participants (individuals, households)?									
2.7 What are the main potential impact evaluation questions that you would like to answer for this project?									
2.8 Is there another agency involved in program implementation?	<i>(select one answer)</i> <table border="1"> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> <td>Yes</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> <td>No</td> </tr> </table>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No				
<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes								
<input type="checkbox"/>	No								
2.9 What are the main other agencies involved program implementation?									
2.10 Main contact person at the agency leading program implementation?	<table border="1"> <tr> <td>Name, Last Name</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Job title</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Phone (e.g. +32-000000000)</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Email</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	Name, Last Name		Job title		Phone (e.g. +32-000000000)		Email	
Name, Last Name									
Job title									
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3. Data Linkages									
3.1 Administrative data collected by government information systems can enable low-cost evaluation of program impacts in real-time without requiring additional survey data collection. Do administrative datasets exist for tracking outcomes for individual program participants or firms in your program(s)? If yes, please name or briefly describe potential data sources, explain if you already have access to these datasets or would be willing and able to facilitate access for the purpose of the impact evaluation.	<i>(select one answer)</i> <table border="1"> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> <td>Yes</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/></td> <td>No</td> </tr> </table> <p><i>(please briefly describe potential data sources that could be explored, max 300 words)</i></p>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No				
<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes								
<input type="checkbox"/>	No								



Annex 1: WB Development Impact Group (DIME)

In the last twenty years, the World Bank’s Development Impact Group ([DIME](#)) has demonstrated that investing in, and building local capacities for, data, impact evaluation and artificial intelligence can help boost the impact of public policy investments. DIME works with governments and international organizations to deliver data products and impact evaluations that increase the effectiveness of public policies. Its mission is to foster evidence-based and data-driven planning, programming, and implementation throughout the policy cycle. DIME’s approach to establishing and delivering joint impact programs delivers at the highest standards of transparency, quality, and rigor in generating evidence actionable for policy.

Figure 1 provides an overview of DIME’s “Trial-and-Adopt” Impact Evaluation (IE) approach, broken down into an iterative workflow that continuously supports evidence-based decision making. Each step in the workflow involves close coordination with policymakers and program implementers to directly shape public policy based on rigorous evidence. The partnership between WB-DIME and DG EMPL will tailor this approach to embed it into a subset of ESF+ operations on a pilot basis.



Figure 1. DIME’s Approach to Inform Policy

Collaboratively, DG EMPL and the WB-DIME seek to transform ESF+ design and implementation to become more evidence-based and results-driven. The partnership will start with a pilot phase to establish the foundations of a joint Trial-and-Adopt IE program. The pilot phase will provide opportunities for capacity-building, joint learning, and direct support to a subset of ESF+ operations to initiate a Trial-and-Adopt IE process, with the objective to inform a mainstreaming of this technology in the next ESF+ funding cycle (2028-2035).

By emphasizing continuous learning, administrative efficiency, and a learning-centric culture, this partnership strives to identify opportunities to strengthen the effectiveness of the ESF+ and its innovation components. The initiative will be built on co-creation with Member States opting to participate in the pilot. External researchers will be engaged as partners in the delivery of activities in collaboration and coordination with World Bank and DG EMPL staff.