



# Final Evaluation of the Employment and Social Affairs Platforms (Phases I and II)

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*Evaluation carried out on behalf of the European Commission*





*Lead company*

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**Final Evaluation of the Employment and Social Affairs Platforms  
(Phases I and II)**

**This evaluation was commissioned by European Commission, Directorate-General  
for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations**

*The opinions expressed in this document represent the authors' points of view  
which are not necessarily shared by the European Commission  
or by the authorities of the beneficiaries.*



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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

CoE	Council of Europe
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CSW	Centres for Social Work
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DG EMPL	Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion
DG NEAR	Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations
ESAP	Employment and Social Affairs Platforms project
EC	European Commission
ERP	Economic Reform Programmes
ESA	Employment Services Agency
ESRP	Employment and Social Reform Programme
ET	Evaluation Team
EU	European Union
EUD	European Union Delegation
EQ	Evaluation Question
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
HQ	Headquarters
IL	Intervention Logic
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IPA	Instrument for Pre-Accession
JC	Judgement Criteria
KII	Key Informant Interviews
MEL	Monitoring, evaluation, and learning
MCISP	Multi-Country Indicative Strategy Paper
MK	North Macedonia
MoF	Ministry of Finance
MoH	Ministry of Health
MoLSP	Ministry of Labour and Social Policy
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation

NEET	Share of youth not in employment, education, or training
NESC	National Economic and Social Council
NIPAC	National IPA Coordinator
NPAA	National Programme for Adoption of the Acquis
OPAs	Operational Action Plans
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PES	Public Employment Service
SAA	Stabilisation Association Agreement
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
ToC	Theory of Change
ToR	Terms of Reference
RCC	Regional Cooperation Council
UN	United Nations
UNEG	United Nations Evaluation Group
WB	Western Balkans



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Project / Programme Evaluation - Executive Summary

Evaluation data			
<b>Evaluation title</b>	Final Evaluation of the Employment and Social Affairs Platforms (Phases I and II)		
<b>Evaluation managed by</b>	European Commission	<b>Type of evaluation</b>	Final Evaluation
<b>CRIS ref. of the evaluation contract</b>		<b>EVAL ref.</b>	FWC SIEA 2018
<b>Evaluation budget</b>	128,972.00 EUR		
<b>EUD/Unit in charge</b>	DG NEAR	<b>Evaluation Manager</b>	Marco Emilio CHIAPUSIO
<b>Evaluation dates</b>	<b>Start:</b>	01/2024	<b>End:</b> 06/2024
Project data			
<b>Main project evaluated</b>	EuropeAid/138778/DH/SER/Multi Specific Contract N°300083049 (ESAP 1 and ESAP 2)		
<b>CRIS # of the evaluated project(s)</b>			
<b>DAC Sector</b>	Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations		
Contractor's details			
<b>Evaluation Team Leader</b>	Zehra Kacapor Dzhic	<b>Evaluation Contractor</b>	PLANET SOCIETE ANONYME FOR THE PROVISION OF CONSULTANCY SERVICES
<b>Evaluation expert(s)</b>	Blerta Perolli Shehu		

Project - Key information -			
<b>Domain (instrument)</b>			
<b>Zone Benefiting from the Action</b>	Western Balkans		
<b>Total EU Contribution</b>	ESAP 1- 3,450,000.00 EUR (VS-2016-002 for ESAP I - ILO grant and VS-2016-0054 for ESAP I - RCC grant) ESAP 2- 5,051,000.00 EUR (VS-2019-0347 for ESAP II - ILO grant and VS-2019-0348 for ESAP II - RCC grant)		
<b>Entity in charge</b>	DG NEAR		
<b>Operational Implementation Dates</b>	<b>Start:</b>	01/03/2016	<b>End:</b> 31/12/2023

## 1. Description of the project

### Background to the project

The Western Balkans, including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo\*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, have transitioned from centrally managed to market economies since the 1990s, focusing on economic growth, exports, and investments. These reforms have improved development rates and living standards, with average GDP growth rates reaching 5.5%. The region's service sector now represents 52% of GDP, while industry and agriculture account for 23% and 9% respectively. Despite progress, barriers to trade and technology lag hinder competitiveness, and unemployment remains high, especially among youth and vulnerable groups. Educational systems struggle with skill development, contributing to high emigration rates, exacerbated by COVID-19, which also slowed economic growth by 3.3% in 2020. Gender disparities and long-term unemployment are critical issues, with the region only achieving 35% of the EU average economic level, driving many to seek opportunities abroad.

Economic governance is central to the EU accession process for the Western Balkans, including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo\*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. This process began with the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) in 1999, aiming to stabilize the region and establish a free-trade area. Strengthened in 2003, SAP supported the region's EU integration efforts, enhancing political and economic reforms. The European Commission's Enlargement Strategy furthered these efforts by aligning candidate countries with EU policies through rigorous economic governance and targeted financial assistance. The European Semester, introduced in 2014, emphasized economic and social reforms through the Economic Reform Programmes (ERPs), enabling structured dialogue between the EU and candidate countries. In 2017, the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) established 20 principles for fair labor markets and welfare systems, which the Western Balkans committed to implementing as part of their reform agenda. To support these reforms, the EU provided significant financial aid through the Instrument for Pre-accession (IPA): EUR 11.5 billion (2007-2013), EUR 12.8 billion (2014-2020), and nearly EUR 14.2 billion (2021-2027). The 2023 Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, with EUR 6 billion in funding, aims to accelerate economic integration with the EU and regional convergence through the Common Regional Market, fundamental reforms, and increased financial support via the new Reform and Growth Facility for the period 2024-2027. This comprehensive approach is expected to boost economic growth and hasten EU membership for the region.

### Description of the project/programme and its objectives

In the context of the above-mentioned EU strategic priorities to support the Western Balkans, the EU put forward the action Employment and Social Affairs Platform (ESAP) which is funded by the Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA)<sup>1</sup>. The ESAP was implemented in two consequent phases, the ESAP-1 (2016-2019) and the ESAP-2 (2019-2023). Both phases of the project were jointly implemented by the RCC and the ILO. The ESAP Project aimed to enhance employment, labour markets, and social reforms.

Concretely, ESAP-I focused on establishing a regional platform, improving cooperation among Public Employment Services (PES), reviewing the Employment and Social Reform Programme (ESRP), strengthening labor administrations and inspectorates, and encouraging social dialogue institutions. The anticipated outcomes included enhanced regional cooperation related to ESRP and an improved PES network.

Building on ESAP-I, ESAP-II focused on transitioning from economic inactivity to employment, promoting youth employment, supporting long-term unemployed and vulnerable groups, and formalizing undeclared work through the Western Balkans' Platform Tackling Undeclared Work. Key actions included:

- **Combatting Undeclared Work:** Establishing the Western Balkans' Network Tackling Undeclared Work, modeled after the European Platform, aimed to enhance cooperation and develop a comprehensive compliance strategy.
- **Policy Innovation:** Promoting a holistic approach to undeclared work, involving mutual assistance projects and generating evidence-based strategies for better policymaking.
- **Data Enhancement:** Improving the availability and quality of data on informal employment by training statistical offices and Ministries of Labour.
- **EU Integration and Policy Engagement:** Supporting the Western Balkans' engagement in EU employment and social policies through bench-learning among Public Employment Services (PES), participation in EU PES Network meetings, and fostering collaboration in EU technical groups.
- **Capacity Building:** Assisting Ministries of Employment and Social Affairs in aligning with EU Acquis, organizing EU–Western Balkans high-level meetings, and reviewing performance on the European Pillar of Social Rights.
- **Preparation for EU Funds:** Preparing the region for potential future recipients of the European Social Fund by promoting alignment with the EU Acquis and implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights.

Overall, ESAP aimed to Engage the Western Balkans more deeply in EU employment and social policies; Coordinate bench-learning and mutual learning among regional PES; Encourage participation in EU PES Network meetings and EU technical groups; Support Ministries of Employment and Social Affairs with EU integration; Facilitate high-level EU–Western Balkans meetings in employment and social affairs; Review the region's performance on the European Pillar of Social Rights; Align the Western Balkans with the EU Acquis and prepare them as future recipients of the European Social Fund.

<sup>1</sup> Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA II) 2014-2020. Multi-Country EU support to the Employment and Social Affairs Platform (ESAP), Phase-1 and Phase-2.

## 2. Evaluation Methodology

### Purpose and scope of the evaluation

The evaluation followed a theory based, mixed-methods approach to evaluate ESAP I and ESAP II implementation and performance, covering the period between 2016 and 2023. The evaluation framework was organized around the six standard OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) evaluation criteria, namely: relevance, coherence, efficiency, effectiveness, sustainability, and impact. In addition, the evaluation assessed the intervention(s) through an EU specific evaluation criterion, which is the EU added value.

### Evaluation Questions

The Evaluation team reconstructed the ILs as basis for refinement of Evaluation Questions (EQs) presented in the ToR as the basis for assessing the contribution of the projects to their stated goals.. The evaluation team in close consultation with the EU (DG NEAR and DG EMPL) reassessed the evaluation questions to capture the complexity of the EU support and to examine its effects. This process resulted in slight refinement of the EQs that were presented in the TOR to ensure that the evaluation process does not result in fragmented responses.

### Methodology

The evaluation followed a theory based, mixed-methods approach, including both collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data. Data was collected through an extensive desk review, and a broad range of stakeholders engaged in each ESAP implementation. The inception and desk phase were conducted remotely during the period of January-February 2024, while the primary data collection process was conducted through field missions to all six Western Balkans economies during the period between March - April 2024, whereby the evaluation team conducted face-to-face interviews and group interviews. The primary data collection included the field missions, within which interviews with a range of stakeholders from implementing partners, EUDs, key government stakeholders, beneficiaries of the project, other government counterparts, donors and o, implementing partners and CSOs were conducted. Additional meetings were organised remotely as preferred by key informants. Specifically, 117 persons (47M, 70F) were interviewed for the purpose of the evaluation. A total of 2 institutions declined interviews in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2 institutions in Montenegro, 2 institutions in Macedonia, and 3 institutions in Kosovo. Furthermore, two of the EUD Offices (Albania and Montenegro) did not respond despite repeated attempt to schedule interviews.

### Limitations

The evaluation faced no major limitations or risks. The Evaluation Team's flexibility in conducting online interviews allowed for high coverage of planned institutions. Institutions that declined or did not respond were contacted four times via email and phone. Some cited employee turnover as a reason for non-participation. The evaluation's success was further supported by the cooperative attitude of key stakeholders and continuous coordination, enabling timely completion.

### 3. Key findings

#### Answers to the evaluation questions and findings

##### **Relevance**

ESAP's strategies were grounded in thorough analysis of the social, political, and economic context of the Western Balkans, addressing pertinent employment and labor market challenges. The project's regional approach effectively targeted sector weaknesses, aligning with beneficiaries' needs and priorities through participatory needs assessments and dialogue. ESAP fostered good relationships with national actors, including Labour Inspectorates and Ministries responsible for Employment, ensuring their involvement from project onset. However, while indicative of harmonization, there's limited evidence on how ESAP ensured synergy with other stakeholders' interventions.

##### **Efficiency:**

Despite operating within a relatively tight budget, ESAP effectively allocated financial resources and delivered relevant, high-quality outputs. Despite the inherent complexity of regional-level implementation, ESAP successfully delivered planned outputs, mitigating delays and resource challenges. Contextual factors contributed to some delays, necessitating a one-year non-cost extension. However, ESAP demonstrated flexibility in adapting to changing circumstances by adjusting activities or postponing them as needed, resulting in increased delivery rates and some overlaps in subsequent project phases.

##### **Effectiveness (Regional Cooperation):**

ESAP served as a catalyst for regional cooperation in employment and social affairs, bringing together regional actors and fostering collaboration. Its multifaceted approach, spanning technical programs, policy development, and the establishment of networks, significantly strengthened stakeholder capabilities. Tangible outcomes included improved policies and practices in beneficiary institutions, highlighting ESAP's potential to drive lasting sectoral advancements. ESAP's role in advancing policy reforms is evident through collaborative efforts to align strategies and legal frameworks with international labor standards.

##### **Effectiveness (Institutional Capacity Building):**

The ESAP project has substantially strengthened the institutional capacities of national partners, employing a multi-faceted approach encompassing strategic frameworks and operational tools to enhance governance and policy effectiveness in the labor market. Ongoing technical assistance is vital to sustain and expand upon these achievements. Additionally, ESAP has notably improved monitoring in labor market and social affairs, with tangible outputs, yet achieving substantial policy changes and implementation improvements depends on continued commitment and effective resource application.

##### **Effectiveness (Bipartite and Tripartite Social Dialogue):**

ESAP's support, particularly in developing monitoring tools and facilitating knowledge exchange and collective bargaining discussions, has laid a foundation for enhancing social dialogue in the Western Balkans. However, this evaluation reveals significant challenges in the effectiveness of tripartite and bipartite social dialogue, including political, legal, and institutional complexities. ESAP's interventions have established a groundwork for improving collective bargaining in the region, with potential to enhance working conditions and living standards. Positive outcomes in Serbia demonstrate ESAP's support in amicable settlement mechanisms for labor disputes, offering models for replication in other countries.

##### **Transformative effects:**

While ESAP aimed to foster overall employment growth, there were no direct links found between ESAP's interventions and regional employment rate changes. However, ESAP's investment in improving working conditions, particularly in occupational safety and health, was evident. Although ESAP intended to address challenges faced by vulnerable groups, such as women, youth, and people with disabilities, no outcomes for these groups were identified. ESAP actively aligned regional employment and social policies with EU standards and built awareness and capacity on the European Pillar of Social Rights and Employment and Social Reforms, yet enhancing social partner involvement in the process remains an area for improvement. While ESAP facilitated the adoption of EU labor practices in the Western Balkans, direct impacts on employment opportunities and working conditions were unclear. Despite unclear immediate impacts, stakeholders remain optimistic about ESAP's long-term potential to benefit vulnerable populations.

**Sustainability:** While programming documents outlined strategies for ensuring sustainability of tools, practices, and mechanisms beyond the project's end, this was only partially realized, leading to skepticism among stakeholders regarding the ability to maintain results without external support. Although ESAP successfully built capacities of national actors and introduced operating mechanisms in national institutions, prospects for national ownership of these successes are mixed.

#### 4. Conclusions

##### Conclusions

C1	<p><b>Relevance:</b> The ESAP project strategically aligns with regional objectives and Western Balkan economies' aspirations for EU integration. Leveraging the expertise of the ILO and the RCC, it facilitates substantive regional cooperation in labor and employment reforms. By focusing on critical areas like enhancing employment opportunities and fostering social dialogue, the project addresses key regional needs, demonstrating its high relevance. However, gaps exist in ensuring consistency between regional and beneficiary-specific engagement, as well as in effectively monitoring and adapting project strategies to evolving political and social dialogues within individual economies.</p>
C2	<p><b>Efficiency:</b> The project showed commendable efficiency in managing resources and operations across multiple countries, despite facing challenges such as remote management complexities and overlaps between project components, particularly during COVID, necessitating a project extension. However, the project successfully navigated these difficulties.</p>
C3	<p><b>Effectiveness:</b> While the ESAP project delivered significant regional and institutional benefits, operational inefficiencies and a one-size-fits-all approach limited its full potential. To maximize outcomes, future initiatives should prioritize deeper stakeholder engagement, improved participatory mechanisms, and ongoing adaptation of strategies to the evolving political and economic contexts of the Western Balkans.</p>
C4	<p><b>Effectiveness (Regional Cooperation):</b> The ESAP project utilized regional collaboration to enhance EU accession readiness in Western Balkan economies. Through networks like the Network of Labour Inspectorates, CEELEX, and the PES network, ESAP facilitated exchanges of expertise and aligned regional practices with EU standards, catalyzing policy reforms and legislative advancements to elevate employment and labor standards. The ESAP Online Platform sustained these networks, serving as a resource repository and fostering continuous dialogue on regional labor migration issues. However, operational challenges like high institutional turnover rates and inconsistent participation hindered full realization of cooperative endeavors, exacerbated by internal political instability and administrative changes in some economies.</p>
C5	<p><b>Effectiveness (Institutional Capacity Building):</b> The ESAP project significantly strengthened national partners' capabilities in developing, monitoring, and evaluating labor market and social affairs policies. Initiatives such as pilot measures implementation and database creation improved policy evaluation and enforcement, empowering State Labour Inspectorates to manage undeclared work effectively. Web platforms, e-learning modules, and peer-learning exchanges enhanced transparency and capacity building. Despite advancements, variable engagement levels across institutions underscored challenges in applying standardized methodologies, potentially hindering consistent policy execution.</p>
C6	<p><b>Effectiveness (Bipartite and Tripartite Social Dialogue):</b> While the ESAP project aimed to improve tripartite and bipartite social dialogue, outcomes varied. Initiatives like the CEE Network of Agencies for Peaceful Settlement of Labour Disputes and the regional Performance Benchmarking Framework showcased commitment to dialogue enhancement. However, generalized approaches limited transformative potential, highlighting the need for more tailored and contextually aware strategies in future endeavors.</p>
C7	<p><b>Transformative potential:</b> The ESAP project implemented key reforms and provided capacity-building, legislative development, and peer learning opportunities to enhance employment and labor conditions in the Western Balkans. However, the direct influence of these interventions on measurable employment outcomes, especially for vulnerable groups, remains unclear and is subject to broader economic trends and political will. This highlights the need for a more realistic intervention logic and strong impact measurement mechanisms to refine project strategies and objectives.</p>
C8	<p><b>Sustainability:</b> The sustainability of ESAP initiatives is uncertain due to the absence of comprehensive exit strategies and reliance on external support. While project outputs are significant, ongoing commitment and support from external stakeholders are necessary for sustainability, posing challenges related to limited capacities, ownership, and political will to maintain results.</p>

Lessons learned	
L1	<b>Regional cooperation and dialogue:</b> The evaluation highlights a critical lesson about the importance of a thorough consideration of regional and economy contexts in the project planning. Further project iterations will need to invest in defining initial assumptions reflecting diverse political landscapes and varying individual economies commitment levels to avoid potential weakness in project effectiveness and sustainability.
L2	<b>Gender mainstreaming strategy:</b> ESAP evidences a gap in the practical implementation of gender equality despite the project's theoretically stated commitment to it. Future project cycles need to develop a structured and comprehensive gender mainstreaming strategy at the operational level to ensure its genuine integration across project objectives, outcomes, and activities.
L3	<b>Sustainability strategy:</b> The evaluation points out a reliance on certain outputs, such as knowledge exchange and regional platforms, which have a potential to remain in the long utilization by the beneficiaries, rather than developing a concrete sustainability plan. Future project iterations will need a more robust and diversified sustainability strategy is essential to ensure the lasting impact of the project.
L4	<b>Collaboration with relevant international stakeholders:</b> The evaluation revealed that despite a few relevant collaborations, ESAP's engagements with similar initiatives of other international actors were rather sporadic. The absence of a concrete collaboration and synergy framework suggests a need for more structured and systematic approaches to foster joint efforts in the advancement of regional employment policies

5. Recommendations			
No.	Recommendation	Main implementation responsibility	Main associated actors:
R1	<p><b>Recommendation 1: Invest efforts to integrate more strongly and consistently the regional and individual/targeted support.</b></p> <p>Consider developing a balanced approach that combines regional strategies with tailored, economy-specific support to address unique challenges and needs effectively. Harmonizing these efforts can help maximise impact and ensure consistent alignment with regional goals while providing targeted assistance to beneficiaries.</p> <p><u>Operational Recommendations:</u></p> <p>1.1. Enrich regional networking and peer exchange activities by efforts to consistently build local expertise by implementing/supporting training programs to enhance the skills of local personnel and facilitating institutional/IPA beneficiary level peer exchanges.</p> <p>1.2. Consistently support institutional development of all IPA beneficiaries and avoid piecemeal approach by providing ongoing technical assistance to strengthen institutional frameworks necessary for the sustainable implementation of labour market reforms.</p>	<i>ILO, and RCC</i>	<i>EU, all engaged partner institutions</i>
R2	<p><b>Recommendation 2: Strengthen Systemic Integration of Project Initiatives</b></p> <p>Strengthen Systemic Integration of Project Initiatives by developing guidelines and frameworks and promote their adoption by beneficiaries to facilitate the integration of ESAP initiatives into national legislation and policy, ensuring alignment with broader economic and social goals.</p> <p><u>Operational Recommendations:</u></p>	<i>ILO, and RCC</i>	<i>EU, all engaged partner institutions</i>

	<p>2.1 Form a Working group (or a task force) comprising representatives of the ESAP project, key government agencies, and key sector experts dedicated to promoting the adoption of these integration frameworks across all beneficiary economies.</p> <p>2.2 Prepare comprehensive communication and advocacy materials that highlight the benefits and importance of adopting these frameworks for achieving sustainable economic and social development.</p> <p>2.3 Initiate and maintain ongoing dialogue with policymakers and influencers to encourage and facilitate the formal adoption of these guidelines and frameworks into national legislation and policy.</p>		
R3	<p><b>Recommendation 3: Strengthen mechanisms for sustainable stakeholder engagement and information sharing on project plans and activities to promote ownership over the project interventions and results.</b></p> <p>Consider establishing regular, structured forums and digital platforms that facilitate continuous dialogue and feedback between ESAP and its stakeholders to enhance transparency and collaboration.</p> <p><u>Operational Recommendations:</u></p> <p>3.1 Establish more formal engagement channels to ensure consistent and structured dialogue and information sharing with all relevant stakeholders.</p> <p>3.2 Deliver information sessions or similar events to enhance stakeholders' understanding of project goals, methodologies, and their roles, increasing their capacity and willingness to contribute effectively.</p>	ILO, and RCC	EU, all engaged partner institutions
R4	<p><b>Recommendation 4: Strengthen project's engagement strategy by ensuring deep local context understanding, robust intervention logic and strong M&amp;E protocols.</b></p> <p>Invest in comprehensive local context analyses to tailor the project's engagement strategy effectively, ensuring that interventions are culturally and socio-politically relevant. Additionally, implement robust monitoring and evaluation protocols that continuously assess and adjust the intervention logic based on real-time feedback and changing local dynamics, to enhance the project's impact and relevance.</p> <p><u>Operational Recommendations:</u></p> <p>4.1 Enhance ESAP's engagement strategies by developing a deeper understanding of the local and national contexts of the countries it operates in. This involves tailoring approaches to better align with the specific social, political, and legislative environments of each country, and in particular ensuring that social dialogue mechanisms are not only established but are also effective and sustainable.</p>	EU, ILO, and RCC	All engaged partner institutions

	<p>4.2 Refine and establish a robust and pragmatic intervention logic for the project, which outlines a series of targeted interventions. This logic should recognise the realistic scope and influence that a regional project can exert, ensuring that the objectives are attainable and align with the overarching regional capacities and constraints.</p> <p>4.3 Create detailed monitoring and evaluation protocols that include robust and realistic indicators, methods for assessment, and schedules for regular review.</p> <p>4.4 Strengthen monitoring and evaluation frameworks to better track the impact of ESAP interventions on employment generation and the improvement of working conditions, in particular for vulnerable groups. This would involve developing more robust indicators that can capture both the direct and indirect effects of the project's initiatives aimed at vulnerable groups.</p> <p>4.5 Ensure that findings from monitoring are systematically used to adapt and refine project strategies and interventions, enhancing responsiveness to on-the-ground realities.</p>		
R5	<p><b>Recommendation 5: Promote and ensure consistent support and advocacy for social dialogue mechanisms.</b></p> <p>Consider developing a targeted advocacy plan that consistently promotes the benefits and importance of social dialogue mechanisms to government bodies and key stakeholders. Ensure that there is sustained support by providing training and resources to those involved in social dialogue, helping to maintain momentum and effectiveness over the long term.</p> <p><u>Operational recommendations:</u></p> <p>5.1 To improve the effectiveness of tripartite and bipartite social dialogue, advocate more strongly for government support and the active participation of all relevant stakeholders. This could include lobbying for legislative changes that favour the promotion of social dialogue, as well as providing more robust support for stakeholder engagement in dialogue processes.</p>	ILO, and RCC	EU, all engaged partner institutions
R6	<p><b>Recommendation 6: Develop a Comprehensive Exit Strategy</b></p> <p>Such strategy should include guidelines for national stakeholders to continue the implementation of the processes and tools developed by the project. This strategy should focus on transferring knowledge, scaling up successful practices, and ensuring that all project outcomes are fully integrated into national systems.</p>	ILO, and RCC	EU, all engaged partner institutions



## 1 INTRODUCTION

This report presents key findings, conclusions and recommendations of the Final Evaluation of the Employment and Social Affairs Platforms (ESAP) Phases I and II financed by European Union and implemented by Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and International Labour Organisation (ILO). This evaluation is commissioned by the European Commission.

### 1.1 Scope and objectives of the evaluation

The Terms of Reference (ToR) set out that the main objective of the evaluation is to provide an independent assessment of the ESAP project's performance, examining its outcomes in relation to expected objectives and delineating the factors underlying these results. Additionally, the evaluation aimed to extract key lessons, draw conclusions, and provide recommendations to enhance future interventions, particularly a potential third phase of ESAP. As outlined in the ToR, this evaluation aimed to play a crucial role in decision-making for future project phases and thematic priorities. It will also provide insights into the potential project exit strategy, ensuring the sustainability of results achieved. The evaluation framework was organized around the six standard OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) evaluation criteria, namely: relevance, coherence, efficiency, effectiveness, sustainability and impact. In addition, the evaluation assessed the intervention(s) through an EU specific evaluation criterion, which is the EU added value. The evaluation devised an approach to assess the extent to which 1) gender, environment and adaptation to climate change were mainstreamed; 2) the relevant SDGs and their interlinkages were identified; 3) the principle of Leave No-One Behind and the rights-based approach methodology was followed in the identification / formulation documents and the extent to which they have been reflected in the implementation of the intervention, its governance and monitoring.

The scope of the evaluation included ESAP Phases 1 and 2 as presented below. The cut-off date for the evaluation was 31 December 2023.

TABLE 1. OVERVIEW OF PROJECTS IN SCOPE OF THE EVALUATION

Title of the Intervention to be evaluated	Budget	Reference number	Dates of Intervention to be evaluated
ESAP I	3,450.000 EUR	VS-2016-002 for ESAP I - ILO grant VS-2016-0054 for ESAP I - RCC grant	1 March 2016 -31 December 2023
ESAP II:	5,051,000.00 EUR	VS-2019-0347 for ESAP II - ILO grant VS-2019-0348 for ESAP II - RCC grant	

### 1.2 Evaluation users

The main users of this evaluation were relevant EU services and implementing partners.

Purpose and structure of the Evaluation report

The purpose of this report is to present (i) findings at judgement criteria level to the evaluation questions (ii) key conclusions; and (iii) recommendations.

The Report (Volume I) includes the following sections:

- Section 2 describes the background to the evaluation
- Section 3 presents key methodological elements of the evaluation.

- Section 4 presents the findings for each evaluation question.
- Section 5 presents the conclusions.
- Section 6 presents the recommendations, and
- Section 7 presents the key lessons learned.

The report also contains the following annexes: Annex 1: ToR; Annex 2: Evaluation matrix; Annex 3: List of people interviewed in the field phase; Annex 4: Interview guides; Annex 5: List of consulted documents; Annex 6: ESAP's Theory of Change.

## 2 CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

### 2.1 Political and socioeconomic context in the region

The Western Balkans, consisting of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo\*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, with a collective population of approximately 20 million, have experienced a transition from centrally managed to market economy since 1990s, undertaking comprehensive reforms aimed at economic growth, prioritizing the creation of value-added goods and services, enhancing exports, and attracting investments through an improved business climate. These reforms also included efforts to integrate into global markets and a regional approach to economic development. These reforms have revitalized respective economies, resulting in increased development rates and higher living standards. The average annual GDP growth rate across these six economies reached or surpassed 5.5%, evolving into largely service-oriented economies, though there has also been modernization and expansion in certain manufacturing sectors. For instance, the service sector now accounts for 52% of the regional GDP, led by trade, while tourism is the most significant in Montenegro and Albania. The industry contributes 23% to GDP, with manufacturing and construction being prominent, though their share is much lower in Montenegro (4%) and Albania (6%). The agriculture sector's contribution to GDP has decreased from about 15% in 2000 to roughly 9% in 2020. Reforms removed some barriers to trade and investment and contributed to the integration of the region into global value chains and markets, and increased economic growth. This led to a doubling of the size of their economies and a six-fold increase of their export volumes. However, there are still non-tariff trade barriers and regulatory restrictions, which continue to hamper full access to regional, European and global markets. Many industries in the Western Balkans are lagging behind when it comes to technology and innovation and their products are not sufficiently competitive outside the region. Limited business opportunities are a cause of high unemployment, pressing young, highly skilled and talented people to search for better opportunities abroad. Despite reforms, unemployment continues to be of major concern throughout the region, along with labour rights, the prevalence of the informal sector and undeclared work, especially among most vulnerable groups in the Western Balkans. Official unemployment rates vary widely, from 9% in Serbia to 26% in Kosovo. A notable portion of the unemployed are long-term unemployed (LTU), having been without work for over 12 months. Official records often show that LTUs account for more than half of the total unemployment figures. Youth unemployment is particularly severe, with rates close to 50% in Kosovo and between 27% and 36% in the other economies. This high rate of youth unemployment is a driving force behind the trend of young individuals seeking employment outside their home region. Gender disparities in unemployment are also evident, with higher rates consistently reported among females. The share of women in the Western Balkans' labour market is significantly lower than the share of men (male activity rate 62.4% vs. female 42.1%), a trend reproduced in the employment (male 52.8% vs. female 35.8%) and self-employment rates (male 27.9% vs. female 16.1%). Vulnerable groups, including ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, and other marginalized populations, face even greater obstacles in employment, exacerbating social inclusion challenges.

The transition challenges extend to the functioning of labour markets and the effectiveness of educational systems. The education system faces significant challenges in delivering desired learning outcomes and equipping individuals with the essential skills required for the contemporary job market. The public expenditure shortages in education are major factors contributing to the quality of learning and skills acquisition systems. This slow pace of reform of educational structures contributes to skill shortages, which in turn impedes the strategic planning and execution of productive investments across various economic sectors, such as agriculture. Besides, despite efforts to improve conditions, significant regional and ethnic disparities in access to education persist. This highlights the ongoing need for targeted measures to address these inequalities.

The COVID pandemic has worsened the already existing structural challenges, with the regional GDP having declined by 3,3% on average (and in Montenegro by 15,6%) in 2020, as the result of restrictions that affected all production and especially service sectors (mainly tourism). The fiscal stimulus measures taken by the governments in supporting particularly affected sectors and horizontally the labour market and employment have somehow mitigated the negative impact.

The slow pace of transition and the substantial development disparity with other European nations persist as factors motivating citizens of the Western Balkan economies to pursue employment and educational opportunities beyond their home region. Over the past ten years, the rate of emigration from these countries has risen by 10%, resulting in approximately one-fifth of the population across the Western Balkans now living abroad.

The lack of convergence is a major issue for the region; it is currently at around 35% of EU average level. This translates into a limited revenue base to fund the accession process and related reforms, and it also contributes to large-scale outward migration.

## **2.2 Relevant EU strategies for the region in the reference period**

Economic governance is one of central elements of the EU accession process. It was an integral part of the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP), the policy towards the Western Balkans, that was established in 1999 with the aim of stabilising the region and establishing a free-trade area in view of an eventual EU membership. The SAP was strengthened at the Thessaloniki European Council Summit in June 2003, taking over elements of the accession process and supporting the future of the region as an integral part of the EU. Since then, the European perspective of the region has helped the countries to achieve overall political and economic reforms with improved democratic processes.<sup>2</sup> These commitments were reiterated in the **EC Enlargement Strategy**<sup>3</sup>, which aimed to foster economic and social convergence among candidate countries by implementing rigorous economic governance measures, aligning them with EU policies and standards, and providing targeted financial assistance and support.

Further EU efforts to assist the accession partners to mirror the internal economic policy coordination and multilateral surveillance mechanisms of the EU through the European Semester, included emphasis on employment and social reforms, achieved through enhanced monitoring of pertinent policies embedded within the Economic and Reform Programmes (ERPs), which were introduced in 2014 by the European Commission, and submission by the candidates and potential candidates began in 2015. The ERPs provide space for joint direct discussions between the EU and the candidates and potential candidates on the structural reform agenda of those countries and economic coordination procedures.

Introduced as a major political initiative in November 2017, the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) emanates from a joint proclamation by the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council of the EU during the Gothenburg Social Summit for Fair Jobs and Growth. Comprising 20 principles and rights deemed indispensable for the operation of fair and effective labour markets and

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<sup>2</sup> A Credible Enlargement Perspective for and Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans, Strasbourg, 6.2.2018 COM (2018) 65 final, page 3

<sup>3</sup> Eastern Partnership Roadmap 2012-2013 and the European Enlargement Strategy: Main Challenges to the Conditionality and Differentiated Integration Principles. By Agnes Nicolescu, Istituto Affari Internazionali, November 2013.

welfare systems in 21st-century Europe, the EPSR is structured into three main areas. These areas encompass equal opportunities and access to the labour market, fair working conditions, and social protection and inclusion.<sup>4</sup> The Western Balkans committed to the implementation of the EPSR in their economies, serving as a concrete framework for their reform endeavours to advance the realization of social rights.

To assist the accession partners to boost economic growth and accelerate reforms, the EU allocated through its Instrument for Pre-accession (IPA) EUR 11.5 billion over the period between 2007-2013 (IPA I) EUR 12.8 billion through IPA II (2014-2020) and almost EUR 14.2 billion through IPA III (2021-2027)<sup>5</sup> Most recently, to boost socio-economic convergence, the EU adopted the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans in November 2023 that will deliver EUR 6 billion to the region.<sup>6</sup> This ambitious plan aims to bring some of the advantages of EU membership to the region prior to accession, thereby propelling economic growth and expediting much-needed socio-economic convergence. The Growth Plan rests on four pillars: enhancing economic integration into the EU single market, fostering economic integration within the Western Balkans through the Common Regional Market, accelerating fundamental reforms, and augmenting financial assistance to support these reforms. This comprehensive approach is anticipated to significantly expedite the enlargement process and stimulate robust economic growth in the region.<sup>7</sup> The plan will be implemented through a new financial instrument, the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans, which has been proposed for the period 2024-2027.<sup>8</sup>

### 2.3 Employment and Social Affairs Platform Project

In the context of the above-mentioned EU strategic priorities to support the Western Balkans, the **EU put forward the action Employment and Social Affairs Platform (ESAP)** which is funded by the Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA)<sup>9</sup>. The ESAP was implemented in two consequent phases, the ESAP-1 (2016-2019) and the ESAP-2 (2019-2023). Both phases of the project were jointly implemented by the RCC and the ILO. The ESAP Project aimed to enhance employment, labour markets, and social reforms. Concretely, ESAP-I focused on establishing a regional platform, improving cooperation among Public Employment Services (PES), reviewing the Employment and Social Reform Programme (ESRP), strengthening labor administrations and inspectorates, and encouraging social dialogue institutions. The anticipated outcomes included enhanced regional cooperation related to ESRP and an improved PES network.

Building upon ESAP-I, ESAP-II targeted the transition from economic inactivity to employment, promoted youth employment, addressed the needs of long-term unemployed and vulnerable groups, and formalized undeclared work through the Western Balkans' Platform Tackling Undeclared Work. Over the entire period of implementation of the project, the ESAP invested in refining **policies to combat undeclared work**, emphasizing enhanced cooperation and the operationalization of a comprehensive compliance strategy. Key actions within this framework included establishing the

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<sup>4</sup> These three key areas and their targets to be achieved by 2030 include: (i) equal opportunities and access to the labour market with ample rights for education, training and life-long learning, gender equality and active support to employment; (ii) fair working conditions accompanied by secure and adaptable employment, wages, information about employment conditions and protection in case of dismissals, social dialogue and involvement of workers, work-life balance, healthy, safe and well-adapted work environment and data protection; and (iii) comprehensive social protection and inclusion that covers childcare and support to children, social protection, unemployment benefits, minimum income, old age income and pensions, health care, inclusion of people with disabilities, housing and assistance for the homeless, as well as access to essential services.

<sup>5</sup> [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance_en)

<sup>6</sup> [https://commission.europa.eu/news/new-eu6-billion-growth-plan-bring-western-balkans-closer-joining-eu-2023-11-08\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/news/new-eu6-billion-growth-plan-bring-western-balkans-closer-joining-eu-2023-11-08_en)

<sup>7</sup> [https://commission.europa.eu/news/new-eu6-billion-growth-plan-bring-western-balkans-closer-joining-eu-2023-11-08\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/news/new-eu6-billion-growth-plan-bring-western-balkans-closer-joining-eu-2023-11-08_en)

<sup>8</sup> European Commission (2023); New growth plan for the Western Balkans, COM (2023) 691 final

<sup>9</sup> Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA II) 2014-2020. Multi-Country EU support to the Employment and Social Affairs Platform (ESAP), Phase-1 and Phase-2.

Western Balkans' Network Tackling Undeclared Work, modelled after the successful European Platform Tackling Undeclared Work. The immediate goal was to boost cooperation in addressing undeclared work, with a longer-term vision of expanding its scope similar to the European Labour Authority (ELA).

Furthermore, ESAP aimed at promoting a holistic approach to innovative **policy development on undeclared work**, involving mutual assistance projects which generated evidence on effective strategies, thereby contributing to improved policymaking. The initiative also focused on generating reliable quantitative evidence regarding the effectiveness of various measures that facilitate the transition to formality, experimenting with interventions to combat informality.

In addition, ESAP aimed at enhancing the availability and quality of data on informal employment in the Western Balkans. This involved providing training and guidance to statistical offices and Ministries of Labour, to improve the collection and processing of additional data on informality. The overall objective was to foster evidence-based decision-making and advance the understanding of effective measures to address undeclared work in the region.

The Project also sought to support an increased **engagement of the Western Balkans in EU employment and social policies** through several key activities. This included coordinating bench-learning exercises among Public Employment Services (PES) in the region, facilitating mutual learning opportunities, and promoting good practices. Additionally, it looked to promote the active participation of Western Balkan economies in EU PES Network meetings and other relevant EU networks, fostering collaboration in technical groups focused on employment and social affairs. The Project additionally looked to assisting and providing input to the Ministries of Employment and Social Affairs in the Western Balkans, supporting the organization of joint EU–Western Balkans high-level meetings in the field of employment and social affairs. Furthermore, it entailed an annual review of the performance of Western Balkan economies on the European Pillar of Social Rights. Finally, ESAP aimed to promote the alignment of Western Balkan economies with the EU Acquis, the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights in the region, and their preparation as potential future recipients of the European Social Fund (See reconstructed ToC in the Annex 6).

### 3 EVALUATION DESIGN

The methodological framework for this evaluation followed the Better Regulation guidelines on evaluations introduced by the Commission in 2015 and revised in 2017, the DG NEAR's methodological guidelines on linking planning/programming, monitoring and evaluation<sup>10</sup>, the DG DEVCO's evaluation approach and methodology<sup>11</sup>, the methodology and evaluation criteria of the **DAC** acting under the auspices of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (**OECD**) (i.e. the so-called OECD DAC methodology and criteria), as well as other international best practice and guidance in evaluations. The evaluation applied following evaluation criteria: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, impact, and the EU specific criteria of EU added value.

The evaluation followed a theory based, mixed-methods approach, including both collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data. The inception and desk phase were conducted remotely during the period of January-February 2024, while the primary data collection process was conducted through field missions to all six Western Balkans economies during the period between March - April 2024, whereby the evaluation team conducted face-to-face interviews and group interviews. Additional meetings were organised remotely as preferred by key informants. The overview of consulted stakeholders is presented in Annex 3.

The evaluation process started with an in-depth review of documents, and first rounds of interviews with selected stakeholders from EU (DG NEAR and DG EMPL) as well as the implementing partners (RCC and ILO). The evaluation inception period was used to conduct a comprehensive stakeholder

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<sup>10</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/financial\\_assistance/phare/evaluation/2016/20160831-dg-near-guidelines-on-linking-planning-programming-vol-1-v-0.4.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/financial_assistance/phare/evaluation/2016/20160831-dg-near-guidelines-on-linking-planning-programming-vol-1-v-0.4.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/evaluation-approach-and-methodology\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/evaluation-approach-and-methodology_en).

analysis to inform the preparation of a Theory of Change (ToC) and the design of the evaluation. The evaluation scope was also fine-tuned in close consultation with the the key stakeholders. An evaluation matrix was prepared (Annex 2) around evaluation questions (EQ) and judgment criteria, indicators, data sources, and data-collection techniques.

The primary data collection included the field missions, within which interviews with a range of stakeholders from implementing partners, EUDs, key government stakeholders, beneficiaries of the project, other government counterparts, donors and o, implementing partners and CSOs were conducted. Specifically, 117 persons (47M, 70F) were interviewed for the purpose of the evaluation. A total of 2 institutions declined interviews in Bosnia and Herzegovina,<sup>12</sup> 2 institutions in Montenegro,<sup>13</sup> 2 institutions in Macedonia,<sup>14</sup> and 3 institutions in Kosovo<sup>15</sup> (See Annex 3 for detailed overview of interviewed persons). Furthermore, two of the EUD Offices (Albania and Montenegro) did not respond despite repeated attempt to schedule interviews.

**TABLE 2. OVERVIEW OF INTERVIEWED STAKEHOLDERS PER BENEFICIARY/EU**

	F	M	Total
Albania	12	5	17
Bosnia and Herzegovina	13	15	28
Montenegro	10	5	15
Serbia	16	4	20
Kosovo	3	6	9
North Macedonia	8	5	13
EU (DG NEAR, DG EMPL)	2	2	4
EUDs	4	2	6
Implementing partners	2	1	3
EU Agencies	0	2	2

Evaluation was based on principle of participation, so an interactive process was maintained throughout the evaluation. A number of operational briefings were conducted across the evaluation, notably the inception report presentation in February 2024; end-of field mission debriefing in May 2024, and a dissemination event (to be) held in June 2024.

Evaluation findings were triangulated, both within sources and between different data collection sources. An internal database of interview notes and additional evidence has been used to identify answers to each of the EQs, the report being structured to provide answers to each of the key questions. The evaluation followed the EU’s evaluation guidelines as well as the 2020 United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) Ethical Guidelines and Code of Conduct and Guidance on Human Rights and Gender Equality in Evaluation. The Evaluation Team ensured ethics at all stages of the evaluation through detailed protocols for interviews and field visits. Ethical issues, risks and safeguards were identified in the inception report for each phase of the evaluation and were adhered to throughout the evaluation.

The evaluation did not encounter any significant limitations and risks. This was mainly due to Evaluation Team's flexibility to accommodate for online interviews for those who could not meet in person during the field missions, which resulted in the high coverage of institutions that were planned. Moreover, the institutions that declined/not responded were contacted 4 times by email and also by phone, and in several cases the response was that due to employee fluctuation they are reluctant to respond to the list of questions presented. Besides, the evaluation's success was also attributed to the open and cooperative attitude by the key stakeholders/users of the evaluation and ongoing coordination, which helped to finalise the evaluation in due time.

<sup>12</sup> Ministry of Civil Affairs of BiH, Economic-Social Council of Republika Srpska

<sup>13</sup> Ministry of Finance, Federation of Trade Unions

<sup>14</sup> Secretariat for EU affairs, Employees Federation

<sup>15</sup> Two trade unions, Kosovo Chamber of Commerce

## 4 KEY FINDINGS

### 4.1 Relevance

#### 4.1.1 EQ 1. Was the intervention logic and the project's assumptions and strategies appropriate for achieving the expected results and to ensure their sustainability over time? Which lessons learned can be drawn for the design of a future phase of the project and to an exit strategy?

Recognizing the ongoing need for external support across the sections within employment, labour market and social policies in the Western Balkans economies, EU Commission, in partnership with ILO and RCC designed and implemented the ESAP project with the overall objective to assist the Western Balkan economies in adopting and implementing reforms in the areas of employment and labour market and social policy needed in the context of their EU accession process. The Project focused on strengthening sub-regional cooperation and institutional capacity of the individual economies governments and social partners for developing and implementing policies and programmes in line with ILO's and the EU standards. To ensure this, the project activities were designed around six overall themes – Social Dialogue, Labor Disputes, Labor Inspection, CEElex, Employment Strategy and Policy Making and Benchmarking among PES, which were (in the second project phase, ESAP II) somewhat adapted, while keeping the same thematical focus, to Component 1: Informal Employment and Undeclared Work, Component 2: Labour Inspection, Component 3: Social Dialogue, Component 4: Employment Policies and Measures, and Component 5: Western Balkans Engagement in EU Employment and Social Policies.

The evaluation findings for the ESAP point to a solid design with clear elaboration of needs and how these needs are responded to by the intervention. One notable strength lies in the project's deep understanding of the Western Balkans' realities, achieved through the long-term, in-region presence of implementing partners ILO and RCC, complementing their overall expertise and experience in the sector. The choice of implementing partners, ILO and RCC, further reinforces the project's appropriateness, leveraging their unique advantages to respond adequately to identified challenges. Joint project bringing together ILO, RCC and EU also helps synchronise efforts and ensure synergies and coordination in their work.

The regional nature of ESAP's strategic approach underscores the importance of collaboration among the six economies, fostering mutual learning and growth, and enhancing overall employment policies and practices quality. However, the findings of the previous evaluation were confirmed by this evaluation relative to a lack of an elaborated Theory of change/intervention logic with clear assumptions and risks. Moreover, certain support strategies, including those aimed at enhancing social dialogue, did not achieve their intended objectives due to various factors. These included political complexities, the varying conditions of social dialogue in each economy, and the limited scope of the project, which, being regional, lacked sufficient resources to effectively engage at the beneficiary level.

When it comes to gender equality, the project's design included some general statements related to the promotion of gender equality. The project's interventions in this regard included reports such as studies on youth employment, employment of women, policies and measures for employment of persons with disabilities, progress in implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), etc. Gender equality was also minded in trainings, meetings, awareness raising campaigns, etc.

**Assumptions and strategies are appropriate for achievement of sustainable results (JC1.1)**

**Finding 1. The ESAP's strategies and assumptions were appropriate for the context, based on sound analysis of social, political, and economic realities in the Western Balkans, including current employment and labour market challenges. The backbone of the project was the regional approach across its components and individual activities, which appropriately manages to respond to the region's main weaknesses in the referring sectors.**

As per ESAP's programming documents, economies in the Western Balkans are still in the need of support to the strengthening of their social and economic sector. The persisting challenges related to a weak social dialogue and collective bargaining mechanisms; high unemployment and informal employment rates; weak labour policies; ineffective application of existing legislation and weak performance of labour inspections,<sup>16</sup> were tackled by an appropriate set of project strategies.

With a strong reliance on the regionality in its overall project strategy, ESAP's main strategic approach to implementing project components was based on a comprehensive and all-inclusive collaboration and cooperation between national governments, social partners and other relevant stakeholders in the region. The project's assumption was that such close interaction can lead to long standing relationships and ensuring a sustainability of the activities. In alignment with that, the Action's methodology included technical assistance activities, capacity building efforts such as training workshops on social dialogue-related topics, peer reviews, study trips, knowledge-sharing events including sub-regional political and technical level meetings, set up a virtual platform for knowledge sharing, etc.<sup>17</sup>

The appropriateness of the initiative's strategy is additionally reiterated through the choice of the implementing partners. Namely, both ILO and RCC have a long-term involvement in the strengthening labour and employment opportunities in the Western Balkans and are very well acquainted with the region's as well as single economies' dynamics, capacities and institutions as well as stakeholders' commitment to progress. For this purpose, good synergies between their activities were important, since they both had their specific advantages: ILO, as a specialized, technical UN Agency possess accumulated in-house and outsourced expertise which was utilized and was crucial for a number of project activities; while RCC, being developed as a political project (operates under the auspices of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP)) ensures political access to relevant decision-makers in the region. The project design strength was found in complementarity and synergy between implementing partners, which helped avoid overlaps which would have happened should individual actions have been chosen instead of a joint project.

Evaluation of ESAP I indicates that project assumptions could have better reflect realities on the ground, since, for instance the project's implicit Theory of Change implies that the elements such as good relations among stakeholders, institutional strengthening, and regional cooperation are alone sufficient to ensure new policies and reforms, while completely ignoring political context and a (lack of) decision-makers willingness to collaborate.<sup>18</sup> This had repercussions in the extent to which some project activities, such as the support to social dialogue had a chance to bring desired results. Namely, this project component was challenged by political complexities and state of play in social dialogue in each IPA beneficiary. Another important aspect raised consistently in interviews related to the strong regional focus of the ESAP project, which effectively facilitated connections, communication, and collaboration among sister institutions across borders. However, stakeholders frequently noted a deficiency in this regional approach vs. the national level. Most interlocutors shared that they had expectations for the project to enhance coordination among national institutions and improve information sharing with partners on a domestic scale. For instance, it was observed across all participating countries that Inspectorates were often uninformed about ESAP's activities with Public

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<sup>16</sup> IPA II Annual Multi-country Action Programme 2015, Grant Application Form, p.3

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p.6

<sup>18</sup> ILO Evaluation, Employment and Social Affairs Platform 2019, p.23, Logical Framework Matrix, ESAP I



Employment Services (PES), social partners, or government entities, and vice versa. The project tended to engage with each entity independently, lacking a cohesive national/regional coordination strategy. Nevertheless, stakeholders were generally informed about regional initiatives within their respective sister institutions, especially in ESAP I. This disparity highlights the need for the ESAP project to establish more efficient channels for national/regional coordination and information exchange, mirroring its successful regional networking efforts.

The evaluation also found that the ESAP I Logframe set unrealistic expectations, lacking clear definitions of Activities, Expected Results, and Indicators, which are the main tool to track project changes, gaps, and progress.<sup>19</sup> These findings were corroborated by this evaluation, for purpose of which the Project's intervention logic was reconstructed (See Annex 6).

**Finding 2. The EU, ILO and RCC relied on their previous experiences and lessons learned from the earlier interventions.**

Some project components, such as, for instance Component 1 (social dialogue) were based on the earlier ILO assistance in the region. Namely, this component was developed due to recommendations of the 2010 sub-regional Tripartite Conference on the role of ESCs in the Western Balkans and Moldova at the time of crisis, stating the relevance of a joint governmental and social partners' efforts in the social dialogue, with the notion of an advanced inclusion of national tripartite bodies in negotiating the economic recovery through better job prospects.<sup>20</sup> The ESAP also aimed to continue the efforts of previous IPA Multi-beneficiary programme which included a significant regional approach emphasizing knowledge exchange and harmonization of policies on employment and labour practices; utilization of regional forums; and advancement of the integration of the regional perspective. Emphasizing the regionality in a similar manner, the learnings from the final evaluation of the ILO improved labour dispute settlement project: „*Enhancing collective bargaining and amicable settlement of labour dispute mechanisms in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Moldova*” also shaped the ESAP's design. In addition, an important lesson drawn from the ESAP I related to the need for a more comprehensive cooperation with the EU Member States and inclusion of their expertise and experience in the field - was integrated in ESAP II - since, on the one hand it differs from the Western Balkans experience, on the other hand, increasing the exposure to the EU good practices.<sup>21</sup>

Regarding development and implementation of the exit strategy, ESAP did not initially develop any plan which would ensure sustainable impact and promote local ownership but indicated that such a system will be developed during the implementation phase (See also EQ 9 below). However, this document was developed and submitted as a part of the project extension.<sup>22</sup> As for the exit strategy after the ESAP II implementation, although programming documents describe that it would be developed prior to the finalisation of ESAP II, it not was not developed over the course of project implementation.<sup>23</sup> As the project continues with the ESAP III phase, an exit strategy is warranted to ensure sustainable impact and promote local commitment and ownership towards enlargement processes.

**ESAP's strategies are appropriate to respond to the needs and priorities of its beneficiaries (JC1.2)**

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<sup>19</sup> Logical Framework Matrix, ESAP I

<sup>20</sup> IPA II Annual Multi-country Action Programme 2015, Grant Application Form, p.6

<sup>21</sup> RCC ESAP Final Report 2020, p.28

<sup>22</sup> ILO Evaluation, Employment and Social Affairs Platform 2019, p.28

<sup>23</sup> IPA II Annual Multi-country Action Programme 2019, Grant Application Form, p.25

**Finding 3. There is evidence of ESAP's alignment with the beneficiaries needs and priorities, that was ensured through participatory needs assessments and dialogue with relevant actors across the Western Balkans.**

Evaluation reveals that significant effort was invested in understanding and prioritizing needs and priorities of the beneficiary economies during the design and inception stages of the project. For instance, in its inception phase, ILO and RCC jointly organized consultations with the beneficiaries in all six economies, presenting them project objectives and activities and ensuring its alignment with their needs and priorities.<sup>24</sup> In addition, through a kick-off conference, implementing partners gathered a number of high level policy makers, social partners, and technical experts ensuring a knowledge exchange and generation of inputs relevant for the policy priorities for employment and labour markets in the Western Balkans. The project integrated individual economy approaches with regional ones, ensuring that the single economy challenges are appropriately addressed. For instance, ILO developed two Performance Benchmarking Frameworks (PBFs) and respective web applications: one for ECS and one for ASLDs. The regional PBF for ESCs was tailored to each institution according to their legislative and functional set up, while preserving the methodological soundness for aggregating data at a regional level and conducting cross-institutional analysis. The project supported Republika Srpska ASLD with the development of a case management system that mainstreamed their workflow and improved their effectiveness and efficiency of case recording, reporting, etc. This ECMS also supplies the PBF with data for performance assessment and benchmarking. However, all other ASLD institutions were individually supported to on how to enter and use data. Additionally, the ESAP project has been widely recognized by most interviewed PES and LI stakeholders across all countries for its remarkable agility and flexibility. It has consistently demonstrated an ability to adapt swiftly to the evolving realities within the participating countries, as well as to the emerging requirements of the beneficiary institutions. This adaptability has enabled the project to maintain its relevance in addressing the dynamic challenges faced by National Institutions. On the other hand, the project's approach was not considered adequate by most social partners, who raised the need for more tailored country-specific approach, which would have been more appropriate in light of specific complexities.

The project was also aligned with the ILO's global as well as regional strategic objectives and is fully aligned with the EU priorities (notably, with the IPA II Annual Multi-country Action Programme 2015 and the Multi-country Indicative Strategy Paper, 2014–2020). In addition, relevant RCC-lead project activities are reflected in the RCC's Strategy and Work Programme 2017-2019 and RCC's Strategy and Work Programme 2020-2022. Project interventions also responded to the necessity of the IPA II beneficiaries to develop their human capital, combat informal economy and increase the level of employment and self-employment, with the special emphasis on women and minorities, through provision of a technical support for policies development, i.e., those challenges that were laid out in the Multi-Country Indicative Strategy Paper 2014-2020.<sup>25</sup>

### **ESAP's mainstreaming of gender and equity (JC1.3)**

**Finding 4. ESAP has integrated gender equality considerations by investing different individual events, capacity building trainings, reports and gender segregated data provision. Although the project is lacking a gender mainstreaming strategy ensuring the integration of gender perspective across its activities and outcomes, these investments have contributed to raising awareness of gender lens of social and employment policies.**

Across the implementation period, there were several activities implemented to make visible and address gender gaps in the labour market. One notable such activity was the HOTAM pilot measure framework, within which efforts were invested to ensure gender lens of registration of formerly

<sup>24</sup> ILO ESAP I Annual Progress Report, 2017, p.2

<sup>25</sup> IPA II Annual Multi-country Action Programme 2015, Grant Application Form, p.4

undeclared or under-declared workers. For illustration, between July – September 2022, 17 businesses operating 26 hospitality establishments (cafes, restaurants, and small and big hotels) contracted 136 people, 68 female and 68 males, that were either undeclared or declared for a lower number of days and declared to the Employment Agency within the Pilot measure framework. Of 136 participants, 105 undeclared workers were registered as seasonal workers with fix-term contracts working full time, 40 hours per week; 20 participants declared as part time were registered as full-time workers, 40 hours per week; eight unregistered participants were registered as seasonal workers with fixed term contracts working 20 hours per week; two registered workers received an increase of 10 hours per week (previously undeclared), and in case of one participant the employer reported a higher salary than the minimum wage previously declared.<sup>26</sup>

The project also produced a number of reports, including a policy paper on female employment in the Western Balkans, studies on youth employment, employment of women, policies and measures for employment of persons with disabilities, progress in implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), etc. Besides it has supported the implementation of the EPSR which enables to equal access to employment. In addition, ESAP reports provide for gender desegregated data relative to some training sessions (such as, trainings concerning management and risk assessment system conducted with the Albanian State Inspectorate of Labour and Social Services (ASILSS) staff, which included 52% of female participants;<sup>27</sup> trainings in the North Macedonia (Economic and Social Council Work Programme, Ministry of Labour and Social Policy) with an equal distribution of male and female participants;<sup>28</sup> virtual training “How to Conduct a Peer Review of Labour Inspectorates” included 11 female and 11 male participants,<sup>29</sup> etc).<sup>30</sup>

In addition, there were some awareness raising activities on gender-based discrimination, and also several labour inspection campaigns that highlighted the situation of women and migrant workers.<sup>31</sup> Other efforts to this matter refer to inclusion of unemployment data segregated by gender in the regional database of labour market indicators, development of methodology for the bench learning initiative entailing gender segregated quantitative indicators as well as Report on Women’s Employment in the Western Balkans.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> ILO ESAP 2 Third Progress Report, 2022, p.10

<sup>27</sup> IPA II Multi-country Action Programme 2019, Employment and Social Affairs Platform (ESAP) 2, p.4

<sup>28</sup> IPA II Multi-country Action Programme 2019, Employment and Social Affairs Platform (ESAP) 2, p.5

<sup>29</sup> ILO ESAP 2 Third Progress Report, 2022, p.14

<sup>30</sup> Other seminars and workshops which included the note of the male and female participants number, such as “Labour Market Statistics and Informality”, 05 – 06 July 2022 (9 female, 12 male); 15 labour inspectors (8 female and 7 male), from Albania and Kosovo participated in two-day virtual workshop on undeclared work developed for the Labour Inspectorate of Moldova and adapted for the LI of Albania and Kosovo; one session of the regional meeting of the ESCs on technical support in online performance monitoring in 2022 included 18 female and 15 male representatives, the second one (13 female and 8 male); “Promoting Collective Bargaining and Improving the Performance of Economic and Social Councils in the Western Balkans”, 5-6 May 2022 (18 female, 15 male).

<sup>31</sup> ILO ESAP I Evaluation, Employment and Social Affairs Platform 2019, p.30

<sup>32</sup> RCC ESAP I Final Report, 2020, p.7; [https://www.esap.online/women\\_and\\_work/?action=women\\_and\\_work](https://www.esap.online/women_and_work/?action=women_and_work)

4.1.2 EQ 2. Was ESAP complementary, promoted co-ordination and engagement and avoided duplication with other stakeholders' interventions at national and regional level and with EU bilateral actions in the six economies? Which lessons learned can be drawn for the design of a future phase of the project?

The evaluation suggests that the ESAP has played a convener and coordination role in the region, effectively engaging with national entities, fostering collaborations with various stakeholders, and contributing to shared goals in the labour and employment sectors. Positive relationships were established with national actors, including Labour Inspectorates, Ministries, Tax Authorities, and Social Partners, emphasizing their inclusion in planning processes from the project's onset. Collaborations with national stakeholders extended throughout the project stages and activities, with notable instances, such as collaborations with Labour Inspections on implementing pilot measures and Tax Offices on information and data exchange in various economies. Pilot measures were conducted also with Employers Organization in N. Macedonia and the Ministry of Finance in Montenegro.

Effective coordination mechanisms were evident only among implementing partners, the EU, RCC and ILO. The Steering Committee, comprising representatives from DG EMPL, DG NEAR, ILO, RCC, and ETF, played a role in ensuring coordination, ongoing information exchange, and mutual technical support, resulting in a harmonized approach and avoiding duplication. While programming documentation references ILO National Coordinators based in each of the beneficiary countries as the actors responsible for the overall coordination of ESAP activities with national as well as international stakeholders and initiatives in individual economies; stakeholder interviews revealed that their role was not so pronounced. Interviews with stakeholders did not yield any systematic coordination mechanism for the cooperation with the international actors in the individual economies, as they attributed this mostly to national governments and institutions. Also, stakeholder interviews revealed that the project did not coordinate closely with the EUDs in respective IPA beneficiaries, which was considered as a shortcoming.

ESAP demonstrated good coherence and complementarity with other EU-funded, ILO-, and RCC-implemented initiatives in the same sectors. However, the evaluation indicates that such collaborations with similar initiatives of other international actors seem to be rather sporadic (Sida, UNDP, European Training Foundation, World Bank), lacking more concrete collaboration and synergy actions.

**ESAP's convener role assisted coordination with bilateral and multilateral interests towards a more productive policy dialogue (JC2.1)**

**Finding 5. Document reviews shows that ESAP managed to establish a good relationship with the national actors in the Western Balkans economies (Labour Inspectorates, Ministries responsible for Employment, Tax Authorities, Social Partners) keeping them involved from the project onset. While this is indicative of harmonization of their engagements, there is no specific evidence on how ESAP ensured the synergy and complementarity with other stakeholder's interventions.**

Throughout its work, ESAP implementing partners (RCC and ILO) were proactively engaging relevant national actors such as **Labour Inspectorates, Public Employment Offices, relevant Ministries, Tax Authorities, Social Partners**, in their planning processes. This approach fostered further cooperation and potential synergies in their work. For instance, during the ESAP kick-off conference in 2016 in Sarajevo, up to 74 high level policy makers, social partners and technical experts from the employment, human capital and social policies sectors (e.g., Employers' Organisation, Workers' Organisation, Labour Inspectorates, Ministries of Labour, Education, Finance, Public Employment Services (PES), Statistical Offices) were invited to give their inputs on employment and labour markets in general, and especially regarding the youth employment and labour market governance. However,

some interlocutors shared their interest to be more proactively engaged in the conceptualisation of the project activities, beyond information sharing. Another issue raised by Montenegro and North Macedonia government officials was a decline in regional information sharing from ESAP I to ESAP II. As shared by most interviewed stakeholders, ESAP 1 was focused and had concrete results and activities, but the ESAP 2 was considered more general and diffuse, and did not take into account the country specificities or advancements made. There was no information from ESAP on what was happening in other countries. ESAP II started well, but during and after COVID, the information on the project was minimal. Most interlocutors also mentioned that their ownership of the ESAP II was very low and declining. In light of that, several interlocutors (specifically the majority of social partners, two labor inspectorates and two PESs). contacted or interviewed noted that their familiarity with the project was minimal and they had nothing much to share, which is also an indication of the level of involvement or information on ESAP II.

The evaluation still found multiple examples of joint efforts between ESAP and the national stakeholders. As a part of the ESAP II Component II (Labour Inspection), ILO worked closely together with labour inspectorates in the region to develop labour inspection guidelines in detecting undeclared work. This resulted in the adoption of guidelines by seven inspectorates in Sarajevo, BiH. In Albania, ILO and Albanian State Labour Inspectorate and Social Services (ASLOSS) collaborated over a longer time period on designing an extensive pilot measure, Risk Assessment System (RAS), whereas some of the joint activities included data preparation, development of a Terms of Reference for the development of the RAS and opening of the procurement process, visit to the Hellenic Labour Inspectorate in Greece.<sup>33</sup> In North Macedonia, within the same pilot measure focused on detecting and addressing informal work, the ILO collaborated, on the one hand with the Labour Inspectorate (*“More Effective Labour Inspections in Detecting and Addressing Informal Work”* component), on the other hand, with HOTAM, the Association of Hotels, Restaurants, and Cafes (*“Make Declared Work Attractive for Employers and Employees”* component). Notably, this pilot measure was a result of the four rounds of the consultations between the Employers’ Organization of North Macedonia, the Hotel and Tourism Association (HOTAM), Federation of Trade Union, the National Employment Agency, and the Labour Inspectorate, to decide on the feasible pilot version. This approach helped set healthy grounds for further implementation. In addition, in Montenegro, ILO ensured a collaboration with Revenue and Customs Administration, Statistical Office of Montenegro, Ministry of Labour, Labour Inspectorate, and Employment Agency which provided ILO with data input necessary for the baseline studies, namely evaluation of the fiscal reform. Within the Output on training and capacity building of PES officials in benchmarking, RCC organized meetings and further consultations with the national representatives of the Public Employment Services to jointly decide on the steps for the implementation of the benchmarking exercise and consequently on the possible individual economy specific approach. Meetings to a similar matter were organized specifically with the Statistics Officials from the PES.

There is also evidence of ESAP’s involvement in specific activities initiated by other stakeholders, where ILO and RCC provided their technical input and supported advancement of the employment sector. For instance, in Montenegro, ESAP contributed to the strengthening of the ESC while it was involved in commenting on a new Labour Law, in Northern Macedonia, it supported ESC in designing the first ILO Youth Guarantee Scheme, in Serbia it contributed, though with scarce resources, to ILO’s work on child labour. In Kosovo, ESAP supported the Labor Inspectorate to develop the Electronic Case Management System (though main funding came from SIDA) as well as joining SIDA efforts to finance capacity building of LI). Bringing relevant stakeholders together, RCC organised a meeting in Brussels and ensured a joint discussion between representatives of Ministries of Labour and Public Employment Services from the Western Balkans on the main regional employment and labour markets challenges and priorities.

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<sup>33</sup> ILO ESAP II Third Progress Report, 2022, p.6

**The Project complemented/contributed to achievement of results of other EU support interventions in the sectors (JC2.2)**

**Finding 7. As stated and foreseen within programming documentation, there is some evidence of the ESAP's collaboration with other international actors (e.g., Sida, UNDP, European Training Foundation, the World Bank) through different collaboration modalities, though this collaboration was rather sporadic. The ESAP Project did not sufficiently collaborate or coordinate with EUDs in IPA beneficiaries. The Project also did not sufficiently collaborate with other SP initiatives in the region or with networks such as European Social Policy Analysis Network, which is considered by stakeholders as a shortcoming.**

Among other joint initiatives mentioned above, other examples of sporadic joint efforts aimed and strengthening of employment and labour market in the Western Balkans include ESAP work with the UNDP on “Promoting Inclusive Labour Market Solutions in the Western Balkans (ILM)” regional project, aimed at targeting Public Employment Services, where RCC team has shared information on the PES benchmarking initiative, ensuring the activities streamlining to the benefit of the beneficiaries.<sup>34</sup> In addition, ILO gave its contribution to the same project, supporting the ILM’ effort on the national training on youth employment and on the lessons learned from the Youth Guarantee 2017.<sup>35</sup> Other cooperation partners include the European Training Foundation (RCC and ILO) in relation to work based learning and apprenticeships and World Bank (RCC) with whom ESAP ensured a regular knowledge and information exchange.<sup>36</sup> However, some stakeholders shared criticism of the Project's limited networking or coordination efforts with other related Social protection initiatives or reform interventions, or with European or other regional networks, notably with networks such as European Social Policy Analysis Network.

**Finding 8. ESAP implementing partners (RCC and ILO) cooperated closely ensuring synergies with other ongoing ILO and RCC initiatives in the same sectors, ensuring a good level of synergies and complementarity in their initiatives.**

Although programming documents (ESAP I, ESAP II) note that ILO local network of National Coordinators was envisioned to help ensure overall coordination and synergies with other related EU and other international actors funded initiatives, stakeholder interviews in all countries noted coordination mechanisms for the cooperation with non-EU international actors in the individual economies were handled more by national governments and institutions. National coordinators' role was considered minimal by most interviewed stakeholders.

The coordination role within ESAP (especially relevant since it has been implemented by two separate entities, RCC and ILO) has been entrusted to the Steering Committee which ensured an effective cohesion among ESAP’s interventions and was composed of representatives of the DG EMPL, the Directorate-General for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR), the ILO, the RCC and the European Training Foundation (ETF).<sup>37</sup> ILO’s Chief Technical Advisor and RCC Team Leader collaborated on a regular basis (weekly/bi-weekly basis) exchanging information, coordinating specific activities and related documents and sharing relevant reports, ensuring harmonized approach and avoiding the overlapping of their activities.

As for the other EU-funded, ILO and RCC implemented initiatives in the same sectors, there is evidence that ESAP, and more precisely the ILO National Coordinators,<sup>38</sup> managed to establish a good coherence with several same-focused initiatives. For instance, ILO implemented a project “*Improving labour market governance through effective social dialogue over labour reforms*” in Montenegro, aimed at the increase of effectiveness of tripartite social dialogue over labour law reform, where ESAP

<sup>34</sup> RCC ESAP I, Final Report 2020, p.36

<sup>35</sup> ILO ESAP II Second Progress Report, p.26.

<sup>36</sup> RCC ESAP I, Final Report 2020, p.36

<sup>37</sup> ILO Evaluation, Employment and Social Affairs Platform 2019, p.39

<sup>38</sup> ILO Evaluation, Employment and Social Affairs Platform 2019, p.35

contributed in the sphere of research and extended the findings of the gap analysis on collective bargaining.<sup>39</sup> During the SIDA funded and ILO implemented project “Access to Justice in Labour Disputes through Mediation and Conciliation” seeking to improve access to justice for all through amicable settlement of labour disputes, collective bargaining and collective agreements in Albania, ESAP was responsible for capacity building of labour mediators, conciliators and arbitrators by harmonizing, complementing and reinforcing skills and information provided in capacity building activities. Furthermore, ESAP 2 supported the Albanian tripartite Working Group on Amicable Settlement of Labour Disputes led by the Ministry of Economy, Culture and Innovation to conduct an analysis of the legal framework regarding mediation of individual and collective labour disputes and to draft adequate legislation on mediation, conciliation and arbitration of individual and collective labour disputes. In Macedonia, ESAP improved the utilization of the monitoring tool and extended the individual successes of the “Strengthening Social Dialogue in North Macedonia” project, aimed to improve social dialogue by enhancing ESC participation. Also in North Macedonia, ILO initiated its measure with an awareness campaign against undeclared work in cooperation with the EU funded and ILO implemented “Strengthening Social Dialogue”. The campaign was presented to public and media on a press conference, a targeted campaign in the municipalities of Ohrid and Struga respectively with focus on food industry and the importance and benefits of declared work, and continued with a video sensitizing people on disadvantages of informal and undeclared work. In collaboration with the GIZ funded project “Due diligence in supply chain of German enterprises in Serbia”, the ESAP supported a study visit of the Serbian Agency for Amicable Settlement of Labour Disputes to the US Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service. In Kosovo, ESAP 2 collaborated with the SIDA-funded project “Promoting Decent Work Through Strengthening Osh Management”. The ILO completed the wireframe and the development of the Electronic Case Management System for the Kosovo Labour Inspectorate with the aim of improving the effectiveness of the inspectors’ work to address undeclared work and Occupational Safety and Health. SIDA took over the testing phase under completion now. Additionally, the two projects co-organized the training of newly hired labour inspectors “Inception Training on Labour Inspection and OSH” on 22-30 November 2023 in Kosovo.

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<sup>39</sup> ILO ESAP II First Progress Report, p.20.



## 4.2 Efficiency

### 4.2.1 EQ 3. To what extent has ESAP used its resources efficiently in delivering set results?

Project had impactful regional approach. It successfully convened pertinent regional stakeholders through regional platforms, fostering a collaborative environment that facilitated the cultivation of shared awareness and understanding of the EU's practices, rules, and procedures. This collaborative effort proves invaluable as it lays the groundwork for comprehensive preparation towards eventual EU accession and subsequent integration into EU platforms. On the other hand, the Project serves as a platform for the regional exchange of knowledge and experiences. This facilitates the potential discovery of best practices within the employment and labour market sector. The project actively supported individual beneficiary endeavours, but it did so primarily at the level of discrete activities rather than as an integrated and systemic aspect of the overall project design. One shortcoming of the project was the limited information sharing and wider participatory approaches, which would have helped raise ownership over the project and more holistic approaches. This underscores the need for a deeper understanding of the synergies and complementarity between regional and beneficiary specific approaches in terms of time, costs, human resources efficiency, and their appropriateness in addressing specific challenges.

ESAP utilised human and financial resources across its implementation. Operating in diverse beneficiary economies with an extensive geographical reach and constrained human resources for each implementing partner, ESAP remarkably sustained efficiency. This achievement is particularly notable considering the stringent budget constraints and a lean staffing structure, largely comprised of remote personnel. Additionally, ESAP showcased adaptability and flexibility in navigating challenges, such as abrupt changes in employment policymaking in Montenegro and data security leaks in Albania, ensuring the continuous advancement of the project without disruptions.

**The ESAP's effectively allocated and utilized financial and human resources to achieve its planned activities and outputs. (JC3.1)**

**Finding 9. Considering a relatively tight budget within which especially ESAP I was operating on, project managed to effectively allocate its financial resources and deliver relevant and high-quality outputs.**

ESAP I operated on a budget of 3,450.000.00 EUR, while ESAP II had slightly higher financial resources at hand, amounting up to 5,051.000.00 EUR. Despite the increase, the budget could be considered still limited, considering the regional outreach and complexity of the project requirements. Desk review findings indicate that ESAP allocated its resources in an efficient and balanced manner while managing to deliver quality outputs. According to the latest budget utilisation data, financial delivery of ESAP's budget was 98%; which is considered as a very good utilisation rate for such a project. ESAP managed to achieve high quality outputs with limited financial input - for instance, with the budget of 5,000 EUR, it developed and implemented the labour inspection campaign which generated significant results.<sup>40</sup>

Evaluation revealed that a cohesion of four factors contributed to ESAP' cost-effective implementation and delivering of all of its planned activities: (i) RCC and ILO dedication and performance, (ii) experts' support, (iii) in-economy presence of ILO through its National Coordinators, (iv) implementing partners' reputation among the national actors.<sup>41</sup> The ESAP I evaluation found gaps in the financial resource's allocation (ESAP I) regarding the travelling expenses for the partner's regional travels.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup> ILO Evaluation, Employment and Social Affairs Platform 2019, p.38

<sup>41</sup> ILO Evaluation, Employment and Social Affairs Platform 2019, p.37

<sup>42</sup> ILO Evaluation, Employment and Social Affairs Platform 2019, p.38



**Finding 10. Despite operating on a regional level, which usually results in a more complex implementation process, ESAP managed to successfully deliver its planned outputs, ameliorating ensuing delays or human and financial resources challenges. Some delays in output delivery demanded a one-year non-cost extension of the project, but it seems that these are more related to contexts in each beneficiary (political instabilities/elections in Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, cyber-attacks in Albania) and the Covid-19 pandemic rather than gaps in the ESAP design. In light of these contextual challenges, ESAP showed a significant flexibility in adapting to changing circumstances, either by adapting the project activities or postponing them. For instance, the COVID-19 delays and shift online resulted in some savings but also a need to move some activities for later times, which caused an increase in the delivery rate and some overlaps in the following project phases.**

ESAP's efficiency in delivering outputs despite some human resources challenges is notable through the fact that its local staffing comprised of only two-person ILO team in Sarajevo (Chief Technical Advisor and Project Assistant) and a remote administrative and technical support (ILO Decent Work Team and Country Office, DWT/CO, in Budapest),<sup>43</sup> and one RCC staff member coordinating the entire RCC ESAP portfolio. It is worth noting that RCC has a Secretariat based in Sarajevo, which also provided support to ESAP project. The head of the programming department and one of its senior experts (who is also a coordinator of the RCC ESAP) closely followed activities of ESAP Team. The ESAP Team was also based in Sarajevo and benefited from the RCC network of national focal points gathered around RCC's strategic actions. There was turnover of staff during the project implementation. For instance a new ILO CTA was joined for the ESAP II, which required introduction to the team in Budapest and the administrative staff and procedures, which might have affected the continuity of project leadership, although there was no such evidence in reviewed documentation.<sup>44</sup> RCC team did not have a local office across Western Balkans, so it provided remote administrative and technical support from its Sarajevo Office.<sup>45</sup> ILO National coordinators took on some, albeit limited, role, which helped ameliorate to some extent human resource challenges, particularly in terms of generating local information and providing local context insights. This was especially visible during the Covid-19 pandemic when field missions, such as the inception field mission in March 2020 could not take place. ILO National Coordinators managed to ensure the ongoing in-person communication with the policy makers and other stakeholders.<sup>46</sup> Also, the Project relied on them for cooperation with the national authorities across the six economies.<sup>47</sup>

Other efficiency hurdles refer to a lack of project's awareness on the competency and legitimacy of national stakeholders who participated in the project activities at first place, as stated in the reviewed documentation as well as the initial stakeholder interviews. As visible from ESAP I and II, for instance, regarding the social dialogue component, participating stakeholders (ESCs, APRLDs, employer associations, trade unions, civil society) might not be the most experienced or relevant decision-makers (e.g., ministries of finance), which reduced the efficiency (as well as effectiveness) of such activities, calling for their reiteration with the relevant stakeholders, generating further human, time, and cost resources.<sup>48</sup> Besides, the efficacy of project implementation faced challenges stemming from internal institutional issues and impediments. Instances of key stakeholders grappling with internal changes or conflicts hindered their participation in events, leading to a lack of representation, shifting participants, or the absence of certain representatives. Consequently, this impacted the extent to which knowledge was absorbed and shared within the institution. This obstacle was identified as a key challenge, influencing both the efficiency and effectiveness of the project.

<sup>43</sup> ILO ESAP I, First Progress Report, 2017 p.3-4.

<sup>44</sup> ILO ESAP II, First Progress Report, 2020 p.3.

<sup>45</sup> RCC ESAP II VS-2016-0054 06 1. Budgeted

<sup>46</sup> ILO ESAP II, First Progress Report, 2020 p.4.

<sup>47</sup> ILO ESAP II Second Progress Report 2021, p.28

<sup>48</sup> ILO Evaluation, Employment and Social Affairs Platform 2019, p.44

The ESAP did not manage to successfully deliver all of its planned activities if it was not for a one-year non-cost project extension. Project design, in terms of timing, seems to be too ambitious for a three-year window, but also strongly influenced by the Covid-19, resulting in constant delays of activities and their postponement for the next phases as noted through reviewed documents<sup>49</sup> as well as through the initial stakeholder interviews. When it comes to political and beneficiary-specific delays, there were several such events across the region, that affected the project delivery.<sup>50</sup> For instance, in Albania, within the first project component focused on reducing informal employment and undeclared work, ILO's plan to implement a pilot three intervention packages was slowed down due to data leaks and two significant cyber-attacks against e-Albania, the government IT system.<sup>51</sup> To ameliorate this challenge, ILO and ASLISS team developed a Terms of Reference for development of the Risk Assessment System (RAS) and opened a procurement process, expecting to contract a service provider on the fourth project year.<sup>52</sup> Within the same project component, due to unexpected political changes in Montenegro and adoption of fiscal reform which drastically changed the minimum wage, structure and levels of income tax and health and social contributions, ESAP's previously identified data on the incentives for informal and undeclared workers elaborated in a study, were not relevant anymore, which called for an agreement for a future joint (ESAP and the Montenegrin Government) evaluation of the fiscal reform.<sup>53</sup>

A bulk of ESAP II implementation coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic, causing delays or demanding shifting activities online. The shift to online mode brought some savings in the budget, that were then utilised appropriately. However, the delays caused some activities to be implemented simultaneously instead in sequence as previously planned, which was considered by implementing partners and beneficiaries as suboptimal. called for the increase in the implementation rate in the post-Covid period and resulted in most activities planned for the first and second year being delivered in the second year.<sup>54</sup> A component that was affected by these challenges was the mutual assistance projects with actors working on undeclared work (labour inspectorates) which demanded ILO to finish its work before RCC starts by making functional and institutional analysis (collecting and assessing information from the labour inspectorates) to feed into Mutual assistance projects. However, due to delays, both activities happened at the same time overloading inspectorates with activities that looked similar, not allowing for a linear progress. As both activities demanded participation from same people who engaged in back-to-back activities proved to be a difficulty for both the institutions and the ESAP implementing partners. Besides, the peer reviews (two labour inspectorates reviewing the third) also took a lot of time and put pressure on all three inspectorates that were engaged, but were assessed as most useful activities by LI.

Another illustrative example relates to implementation of the activities under a Result 3.2 Regional policy guidelines for promotion of collective bargaining in selected sectors, which were accelerated in the second year to offset the previous delays.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, activities had to be postponed for a later time than planned depending on the current pandemic situation - in the initial plans (ESAP II), the inception meetings with the stakeholders and field missions to all six economies had to be delayed for the second part of 2020.<sup>56</sup> Further, the implementation of the activities under Component 1 on the informal employment and undeclared work which foresaw developing pilot packages for Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia aimed at reducing undeclared and under-declared work and generating quantitative evidence on policy making were delayed due to pandemic (as well as elections in Montenegro and North Macedonia). Notably, despite the aggravating conditions, Albania and North

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<sup>49</sup> ILO ESAP II, Third Progress Report, 2022, p.3

<sup>50</sup> ILO ESAP II, First Progress Report, 2020, p.2.

<sup>51</sup> ILO ESAP II, Third Progress Report, 2022, p.5

<sup>52</sup> ILO ESAP II, Third Progress Report, 2022, p.6

<sup>53</sup> ILO ESAP II, Third Progress Report, 2022, p.4

<sup>54</sup> ILO ESAP II, Annual Report, 2021, p.2

<sup>55</sup> ILO ESAP II, Second Progress Report, 2021, p.15

<sup>56</sup> ILO ESAP II, First Progress Report, 2020, p.3.

Macedonia managed to deliver the pilot proposals, while Montenegro decided to halt any actions to this matter until the parliamentary elections are over.<sup>57</sup> Under the same Component as a part of the Activity 2.1.1 on development of protocol for peer-review, ESAP II reiterated its flexibility, since instead of postponing the face-to-face regional workshop bringing together Labour Inspectorates initially planned to take place on December 2020, it conducted in virtually on the planned date.<sup>58</sup>

Other adaptations included a change of the scope of ESAP I project activities under one of its Components (Component 3) due to donor's input, where the initially narrow defined focus on enhancing social partners' involvement in the ERP processes was elevated a broader focus on their participation in economic and structural reforms and policies in the field of economic and social policies.<sup>59</sup>

### **The ESAP's integration of regional and bilateral approach, focusing on the cost-efficiency and timeliness of implementation (JC3.2)**

**Finding 11. Evaluation findings confirm that a regional approach is relevant and efficient in the context of Western Balkans, with a notion of a necessary continuous reference to individual economy-level specificities.**

All reviewed documentation, including programming documents, and stakeholder interviews emphasize the regional approach of the ESAP initiative, maximising mutual learning, knowledge and experience exchange, and joint actions. Considering that Western Balkan economies encounter similar social, economic and political challenges, project's regional approach is highly relevant for the improvement of regional cooperation in several relevant areas such as employment, social policy-making, labour market governance, working conditions and social dialogue.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, since the project's overall cost and time efficiency have been considered satisfactory, considering the environment and conditions it operated within, this might suggest that the regional approach contributed to this, since it requires lesser resources and has a potential to create a wider impact.

Despite the overall regional approach, ESAP's awareness of the relevance of individual economy adaptations of specific activities in order to address their specific needs and there is a notion that further project iterations should continue and build on this approach. The project's satisfactory overall cost and time efficiency, given the operating environment and conditions, may imply that the regional approach played a contributory role. This is because the regional approach demands fewer resources and has the potential to generate a broader impact. The project integrated also individual economy contexts, integrating regional activities with economy-specific objectives, activities as well as progress and results indicators, which helped have a more holistic approach.<sup>61</sup> While a stronger bilateral approach would call for more individual economy strategies and approaches and therefore result in challenges regarding time and costs, it would be beneficial particularly for some themes, e.g. social dialogue, which demand focused and continuous attention with strong understanding and anticipation of local challenges and contextual issues.

**Finding 12. Regional collaboration initiatives depend on a genuine willingness of the representatives of participating entities to engage in such activities. Continuous information sharing and discussion on how individual activities contributed to a 'bigger picture' is crucial in such regard.**

Overall, gathered evidence indicates that the ESAP was successful in garnering and maintaining interest and commitment of targeted stakeholders to remain engaged in the project. A number of regional activities, some demanding more proactive and intensive exchange and participation were successfully implemented thanks to this commitment, but also ESAP's efforts to nurture relationships.

<sup>57</sup> ILO ESAP II, Second Progress Report, 2020, p.4.

<sup>58</sup> ILO ESAP II, Second Progress Report, 2020, p.11

<sup>59</sup> ILO ESAP I, First Progress Report, 2017, p.3

<sup>60</sup> IPA II Annual Multi-Country ESAP II Programme 2019, Grant Application Form, p.11

<sup>61</sup> See also the findings of the ILO Evaluation, Employment and Social Affairs Platform 2019, p.27

For instance, within ESAP II first component, ILO organized a regional peer-learning workshop on informal employment statistics with the representatives of the National Offices of Statistics of all six economies.<sup>62</sup> As a part of the second component on the labour inspection, peer learning and knowledge exchange activities were organised ensuring the knowledge exchange among the national labour inspectorates, resulting in development and adoption of the regional guidelines of inspection on undeclared work by all LIS. To finalize and adopt the guidelines, a meeting of the Network of the Labour Inspectorates of the Western Balkans was conducted, fostering the joint discussion and providing a clear understanding of the approaches, procedures and measures incorporated in the guidelines.<sup>63</sup> Within a third project component aimed at the increase of effectiveness of tripartite and bipartite social dialogue, ILO utilized three approaches, all of them with the regionality as a crucial element – (i) ILO provided technical support and equipped the Economic and Social Councils with a regional performance monitoring tool tailored for each participating ECS; (ii) facilitated regional discussion over policy recommendations for promoting collective bargaining at a tripartite level; (iii) improved knowledge exchange and utilization of regional policy and performance tools in the area labour dispute resolution and industrial relations.<sup>64</sup> Some of the activities within these approaches included – preparatory workshops, workshops and meetings with individual ESC; two regional meetings regarding online performance monitoring; a regional tripartite conference with 33 participants lasting 2 days; two regional tripartite meeting with a special focus on collective bargaining, regional training for 56 mediators from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia; regional meeting on the CEELex database.<sup>65</sup> In general, various, online and face-to-face meetings and workshops were organised, bringing together all relevant regional actors and engaging them in a collaborative work towards improvement of the economy-level, as well as regional labour and employment policies. Furthermore, as accounted by stakeholders, ESAP supported the maintaining of the CEELex network with members from Western Balkans and the EU, engaging experts and professors to discuss topics of relevance for the Western Balkans and share their thoughts and practices on challenges related to these topics. There were also studies produced that were published as volumes or in peer-reviewed journals and made available to the stakeholders for reference on these topics. In addition, activities fostering regional collaboration and exchange included also a Regional network of labour law experts counting 25 members; regional Network of Agencies for Peaceful Settlement of Labour Disputes with 28 members; S A P online platform promoting the exchange of experience, good practices, data and information among the six Western Balkans; Two online Community of Practices (CoPs) established covering more than 60 members.<sup>66</sup> Besides, the RCC helped establish a regional Network on the EU Acquis Chapters 2 and 19 and its work was very important in terms of advancement of the region along the EU accession path.<sup>67</sup>

However, a key challenge, which is also mentioned in Finding 10 above was to maintain commitment of more senior institutional decision makers who decide on who can participate in regional events. According to initial stakeholder interviews, this was an obstacle for participation at different instances, leading to discontinuation or gaps in participation of some stakeholders, which was suboptimal for continuity and learning. However, this factor was beyond control of the project. Besides, most interviewed interlocutors raised criticism of lack of more systematic approach by the project to inform all stakeholders of different activities (and thematic areas of support). As explained by stakeholders across all institutions and all IPA beneficiaries, there was minimal to no information on types of activities, results implemented by components other than those they participated in. This meant that

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<sup>62</sup> ILO ESAP 2 Third Progress Report 2022, p.12

<sup>63</sup> ILO ESAP 2 Third Progress Report 2022, p.12

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p.18

<sup>65</sup> ESAP II Annual Report, 2023.

<sup>66</sup> IPA II Annual Multi-Country ESAP II Programme 2019, Gran Application Form, p.11

<sup>67</sup> See more on the network at: <https://www.esap.online/news/89/rcc-esap-2-established-1st-ever-western-balkans-network-for-alignment-with-the-eu-acquis-advancing-on-the-eu-accession-agenda-by-mutual-learning-and-capacity-building>

no stakeholder was informed about project's work in different thematic fields, which they see as an important shortcoming.

### 4.3 Effectiveness, sustainability, added value

#### Regional cooperation and dialogue

##### 4.3.1 EQ 4. To what extent has the ESAP project contributed to enhancing regional cooperation and dialogue in the employment and social affairs sector?

ESAP has played an important role in catalysing regional cooperation within the Western Balkans' employment and social affairs sector, with a pronounced focus on joint activities, network building, and the establishment of platforms for collaboration. The established networks and platforms (e.g. Network of Labour Inspectorates, the PES network, the Network of Agencies for Peaceful Settlement of Labour Disputes and the CEELEEx Network, as well as the regional Network on the EU Acquis Chapters 2 and 19) have been key drivers and contributors to aligning regional standards with international and EU directives, fostering a significant exchange of expertise and unified practices across the region. In support to this, the ESAP Online Platform has been instrumental as a comprehensive repository, enhancing accessibility to critical resources and interactive features that bolster network support. However, challenges like high turnover rates and inconsistent institutional participation were noted as potential barriers to maximising the effectiveness of these cooperative efforts.

The ESAP initiative also laid the groundwork for significant policy reforms and legislative development. Illustrative examples include the establishment of a Tripartite Working Group in Albania, legislative committee reactivations in Republika Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the inclusion of key ministries in Montenegro to enrich policy discussions and support the drafting of the new Labor Law, and institutional capacity building for the drafting of the Law on Seasonal workers in North Macedonia, the new law on internship and the new Law on Labor Relations (now in government procedure). The commitment to improving operational effectiveness and implementing policy recommendations was evidenced by actions taken post-peer reviews of ESCs. These actions have led to the initiation of reforms across three economies and the commitment to implement policy recommendations across seven ESCs. The regional Performance Benchmarking Framework (PBF) and facilitated workshops highlighted ESAP's instrumental role in advancing the functionality and effectiveness of councils engaged in employment and social policy. This was more visible in some countries compared to others, mostly due to internal challenges faced by countries (i.e. Kosovo ESC not functional for almost 4 years now due to government changes and lack of political will). Furthermore, the collaborative development of regional policy guidelines for collective bargaining and hosting of the annual CEELEEx meeting underlined the project's expansive influence on labour rights and policy debates. Enhancing the performance of national PES (e.g. bench-learning initiative resulting in comprehensive, in-depth assessments on a national and regional level) and fostering collaboration between them through joint study visits, created solid foundation for harmonization of their procedures and practices, promoting inter-regional labour mobility and promoting good practices.

The preliminary lessons drawn from the project include the necessity of sustained stakeholder commitment, strong regional cooperation, the value of direct communication, the importance of supplemental technical support, and the requirement of a holistic project design that recognizes the intricacies of regional initiatives.

#### **The ESAP's regional events and activities have encouraged regional cooperation and exchange. (JC4.1)**

**Finding 13. ESAP acted as a catalyst of regional cooperation in the employment and social affairs sector, bringing together regional actors and fostering their cooperation. However, the feedback from stakeholders indicated effectiveness of regional cooperation in ESAP 1, but raised criticism that such cooperation was more limited in ESAP 2. Moreover, coordination, information sharing and visibility also declined in ESAP 2. More institutional level dedicated participation in regional events would have maximised the effectiveness of such cooperation opportunities.**

Document review and stakeholder interviews have confirmed that the ESAP project was an important driver of regional collaboration within the Western Balkans employment and labour market sector by promoting a series of joint activities and establishing critical networks and platforms. The regional cooperation and exchanges have been considered as the key added value by all stakeholders both from the learning perspective but also for building links between institutions and social cohesion. Beneficiary institutions highly appreciated the participatory processes and the strong regional network and connections established between countries facing similar challenges. Notably, the Network of Labour Inspectorates, formed through initiatives such as annual high-level meetings<sup>68</sup> and peer reviews, has contributed to harmonizing occupational health and safety legislation with international and EU standards. The peer reviews were highlighted as a strong and supportive exercise for both capacity building as well as self-reflection and self-criticism, and the tool itself was deemed very effective in finding gaps in the present systems. This network's efforts have been bolstered by the significant exchange of know-how, and per exchanges across the project implementation.

In addition to the inspectorates, ESAP facilitated the creation of the Network of Agencies for Peaceful Settlement of Labour Disputes and the CEELEx Network. These communities of practice enabled systematic knowledge transfer and discussions on legal challenges within the sector but also fostered relationships with EU Member States, indicating robust prospects for sustained collaboration. The CEELEx Network, in particular, extends the reach of the existing CEELEx database by integrating a virtual discussion board on the ESAP platform, facilitating continuous interaction among legal experts. Besides, the regional Network on the EU Acquis Chapters 2 and 19 has been established as a platform for exchange and peer support in advancing on the EU accession path.

The [ESAP Online Platform](#), developed in 2018, provided for a comprehensive repository of essential resources, such as capacity-building materials for ESC secretaries, a multi-language regional case database, and interactive features like chat rooms and discussion boards that support the aforementioned networks.<sup>70</sup> The platform allowed for analysis of macroeconomic data and labor market trend reports, supporting planning and implementation of planned activities. The platform's impact was also exemplified in the reviewed documents by its role in supporting the cross-border labour migration dialogue.

According to stakeholder feedback across all stakeholder groups, the ESAP I was very conducive for information sharing, coordination and cooperation. However, the ESAP II was criticed for being limited in this regard, with declined interaction which lead to lack of awareness of the project's work or achievements. One of the key obstacles as raised by some stakeholders was COVID which coincided with the start of ESAP II, but also very compartmentalised nature of the project, which did not allow for cross-fertilisation or awareness of project interventions across different themes.

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<sup>68</sup> Some regional events included opportunity to bring together Labour Inspectorates in a two-day workshop on 'Enhancing Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) through Social Dialogue at the Workplace' in Tirana where more than 60 labour inspectors and 20 representatives of the social partners participated in 2018; an online workshop on the peer review of labour inspectorates titled "*Improving effectiveness of Labour Inspectorates in addressing undeclared work in the Western Balkans*" with participation of 18 stakeholders from seven Inspectorates in the WB6 in 2020; virtual training "*How to Conduct a Peer Review of Labour Inspectorates*" familiarizing participants the peer review protocols, etc.

<sup>69</sup> ILO ESAP II Third Progress Report 2022, p.13

<sup>70</sup> Some of key features of the platform include (i) training material relating to capacity building of ESC secretaries; (ii) multi language regional case database on peaceful settlement of disputes; (iii) chat room and discussion boards functional and used in supporting the network of agencies for peaceful settlement of labour disputes in peer exchange and knowledge sharing; (iv) material and reports from the annual inter-agency meetings.<sup>70</sup>



Other key obstacles for the project to maximise results of regional collaborative activities were found to relate to a high turnover rate in institutions (according to the interview with the RCC representative it amounts to 20%) across the region, and also a lack of continuity in participation of designated institutional representatives in some beneficiaries. Despite ESAP's proactive approaches, it was not always possible to ensure this continuity due to the above-mentioned turnover but also senior management decisions that might not always be favourable in this regard. Lack of designated focal points in each beneficiary institution caused difficulties in information flow and consistency in representation in project activities and actions undertaken. However, this was acknowledged to be beyond control of the project and largely due to internal institutional challenges and politics.

Within the framework of dispute resolution enhancements, the Network of Agencies for Peaceful Settlement of Labour Disputes was supported to create a database containing over 45 case studies and train 161 conciliators and mediators focusing on effective dispute resolutions and mediation of disputes, aiming to improve capacities and enhance peer learning, thereby increasing alternative dispute resolution recourse in the region. For example, Serbia's amendments to the Law on Amicable Settlement of Labour Disputes nearly doubled the number of cases managed by the Agency, demonstrating the network's direct impact on national dispute resolution efficacy.

Furthermore, efforts to create a regional Performance Benchmarking Framework (PBF) culminated in a tripartite preparatory workshop that led to the adoption of a regional and seven individual PBFs. This initiative exemplifies how regional meetings and workshops can significantly advance the functionality and effectiveness of councils involved in employment and social policy.

As an outcome of the peer review processes assessing the ESCs, participating economies have identified actionable steps for the upcoming phases of project implementation. This has led to the introduction of significant reforms aimed at enhancing the efficacy and influence of ESCs on policy and legislation. Notably, three ESCs have initiated reforms to improve their operational effectiveness, while seven ESCs have agreed to adopt fourteen policy recommendations geared toward increasing their functionality. These recommendations have been operationalized in various ways. In Albania, a Tripartite Working Group has been established, demonstrating a commitment to a collaborative approach to labor and economic issues. Republika Srpska has witnessed the reactivation of the ESC's working committees, with the objective of forming a new permanent body to oversee legislative matters. In Montenegro, the inclusion of eight key ministries has been instrumental in broadening the scope of policy debates within the ESC, allowing for a more comprehensive discussion on economic and social reforms. Additionally, educational events in Serbia, North Macedonia, and Montenegro have been organized to enhance the understanding of more than 80 parliamentarians regarding the role and function of ESCs. These efforts collectively represent a strategic advancement in governance and social dialogue within the region.

**The ESAP contributed to increased access to relevant knowledge and practices and policy advancements within the region (JC4.2)**

**Finding 14. ESAP has shown to be highly effective in facilitating knowledge and experience exchange among the six economies in the Western Balkans. ESAP's multifaceted approach—ranging from technical programs and policy development to the establishment of robust networks and platforms—has significantly strengthened the capabilities of stakeholders across the Western Balkans. The tangible outcomes of these efforts were evidenced in improved policies or practices in beneficiary institutions, underscoring the platform's potential to enact lasting sectoral advancements.**

The ESAP engaged proactively in bolstering the capacities of the key regional stakeholders. Through a series of coordinated activities, ESAP has facilitated knowledge sharing, technical upskilling, peer reviews and collaborative policy development that are manifesting in concrete improvements and reforms. The online and in-person gatherings fostered an environment conducive to mutual learning and the practical application of shared insights. For instance, training for ESCs secretariat staff on the



use of the e-PBF/ESC web application and discussions on mediation at a regional meeting for mediators have been integral to enhancing stakeholder capacities and promoting cross-agency learning. Similar examples include other regional trainings, study tours and activities which promoted learning, and exposure to new practices and approaches to work. For instance, a regional peer-learning exchange program on data on informal employment was implemented through collaborative approach included diverse stakeholder participation representatives of the National Offices of Statistics of Albania, Montenegro, Kosovo\*, Serbia, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy of North Macedonia, and the Albanian Labour Inspectorate. Through a collaborative approach, these initiatives helped enhance the quality and harmonization of data on informal employment in the WB.<sup>71</sup> To maximise the potential of this engagement, targeted technical assistance was provided through reciprocal study visits, enriching stakeholders with practical insights. Notably, the Albanian PES exchanged visits with their counterparts in Kosovo\* to share expertise on PES operations, which included the Kosovo Tax Administration as well, which was considered a great learning exercise for Kosovo, specifically on the electronic wages register practice and the electronic register of employees in Albania, which is now underway in Kosovo. Similarly, the delegation from Bosnia and Herzegovina's PES visited Serbia, which was a valuable opportunity to learn from Serbia's experiences with local employment action plans, performance agreements, the integration of people with disabilities into the workforce, and leveraging ICT for efficient, real-time reporting. These study visits provided a platform for mutual learning but also underpinned ESAP's commitment to practical knowledge transfer within key areas of employment services.<sup>72</sup> In addition, study visits outside of the region provided insights in innovative practices and challenged and encouraged the Western Balkans economies to adapt their approaches. For instance, (according to RCC representatives) after a study visit to Norway by LIs, Tax administration and Regional Network on Undeclared Work, each of the six economies introduced new practices on risk assessment and data availability, and in some cases (North Macedonia) in tripartite dialogue as well; following to specific ESAP activities, Bosnia and Herzegovina's Tax Authorities showed significantly more readiness to share data; furthermore the links established between labour inspectorates in BiH and tax authorities in terms of data sharing was appreciated amongst other participants/economies who showed interest in establishing similar forms of cooperation alike the one in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Kosovo\* started-up joint inspections. (with ESAP support) between Labor Inspectorates and Tax authority, and an MoU was signed between ministries providing grants to businesses and tax authority for data sharing); study visit to Slovenia for Public Employment Services, which aimed at aligning the Labor Market Policy databases with the EU methodology, supported capacity building and knowledge generation on EU directives and enhanced interest in data provision and developing appropriate IT solutions. Subsequent workshops and roadmaps produced by ESAP furthered the impact of this exchange.

The establishment of networks, such as the PES Network, the Network of Labour Inspectorates and the Network of Agencies for Peaceful Settlement of Labour Disputes, was considered as one of key drivers of peer learning and exchange among experts within a collaborative environment. Stakeholders largely agree that the establishment of networks was the most valued action undertaken by the project, which went beyond official meetings and exchanges to personal connections and strengthened contacts for future collaborations. For instance, the Labour Inspectorates network benefitted from annual sub-regional meetings and peer reviews that spurred a regional unification of standards, particularly in occupational health and safety. These activities helped enhance the operational capacities of labour inspectorates but also instigated a sustained commitment to regional cooperation, as evidenced in reviewed documents by the notable participation of 18 inspectorates in a single meeting and the satisfaction reported from the in-person peer review processes. Similarly, document review and stakeholder interviews reveal that the Network of Agencies for Peaceful Settlement of Labour Disputes emerged as a key force in improving the region's dispute resolution mechanisms. This is exemplified by the nearly doubled number of cases handled by Serbia's

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<sup>71</sup> ILO ESAP II Third Progress Report 2022, p.11

<sup>72</sup> RCC ESAP Final Report 2020, p.20.

agency post-amendments to their respective law and the mandatory mediation for civil servants introduced in Montenegro. These developments were supported by a multi-language database of dispute resolution case studies and extensive training events involving over 160 conciliators and mediators, highlighting the network's practical impact on stakeholders' capacity to address labour disputes.

Finally, the PES Network, modelled after the EU PES Network, was instrumental in strengthening individual PES capacities and fostering a regional dialogue on the main challenges, gaps and experiences in designing and providing employment related services as well as in their overall performance. To that matter, through collaborative approach, 2 cycles of PES bench-learning exercises were implemented, both relying on mutual learning activities and assessments (6 national self-assessments, 6 external analysis, regional reports, regional roadmap on management by objectives) and complemented by the study visits connecting WB and EU PES Network representatives and providing them a space for the exchange and learning.<sup>73</sup>

In the realm of policy development, ESAP's influence is seen in the drafting of the "Comparative Overview of Drivers and Outcomes of Labour Law and Industrial Relations Reforms" and in the country reports on non-standard forms of work. Per reviewed documents, the outcomes from the peer reviews of ESCs led to actionable recommendations, resulting in legislative and organizational reforms within participating economies, such as the establishment of a Tripartite Working Group in Albania and new working committees in Republika Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Besides ESAP's efforts to facilitate the development of regional policy guidelines for collective bargaining, included workshops and meetings that brought together 47 participants from Western Balkans economies to discuss collective bargaining assessments. According to desk review, these events helped deepen stakeholder understanding and influence labour negotiation practices region-wide.

**Finding 15. ESAP's role in advancing policy reforms is evidenced by its collaborative efforts to shape strategies and legal frameworks in line with international labour standards, thereby fostering a holistic approach to labour market improvements. This support encompassed a broad range of activities, including the support to formulation of new legislation the strengthening of institutional capacities through targeted training and workshops; and the facilitation of policy discussions or evidence generation.**

ESAP has facilitated substantive labour policy reforms and the adoption of innovative practices across the Western Balkans, demonstrating a significant influence on both national legislation and regional policy standards. For instance, ESAP's engagement with stakeholders in Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia has led to the development of pilot measures aimed at reducing undeclared work, alongside generating quantitative evidence to inform the transition from informal to formal employment practices. ESAP's regional support also contributed to the establishment of new legislative bodies and the involvement of key ministries to broaden policy debates, as seen in Republika Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Montenegro. In Serbia, North Macedonia, and Montenegro, ESAP organized parliamentary awareness events that educated over 80 parliamentarians, influencing national labour policy discussions.

In Serbia, ESAP's role was pronounced in refining and preparing various drafts of laws, such as the Law on Social Entrepreneurship and the Law on Occupational Safety and Health, alongside strategic documents like the National Employment Strategy 2021-2030. In Montenegro, ESAP was instrumental in supporting the drafting of the new Law on ESC, new Labor Law and the drafting of the new Law on Peaceful Settlement of Labor Disputes. In North Macedonia, ESAP supported the drafting of the Law on Seasonal workers, the new Law on internship and the new Law on Labor Relations (now in government procedure). These efforts reflect ESAP's commitment to enhancing the legal framework in consultation with social partners and civil society, thereby fostering an inclusive approach to labour policy development.

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<sup>73</sup> RCC ESAP Final Report, 2020, p.26, RCC ESAP II, Description of Action 2019, p.23

The project's influence extends to mediating dialogues on the Universal Labour Guarantee recommended by the ILO Commission for the Future of Work, that lead to progressive discourse on labour law reform that shifts the focus to the nature of work rather than the employment relationship. This ESAP's convener role was important to stir discussions on rethinking labor protections in light of contemporary work dynamics.

Furthermore, through regional peer exchanges and tripartite meetings, ESAP has laid the groundwork for a blueprint on collective bargaining promotion in the Western Balkans. Stakeholders have especially appreciated the workshops in Albania on collective bargaining and the speakers present in the workshops. ESAP also contributed by supporting the drafting of ten policy briefs on collective bargaining, providing a regional foundation for standardizing labour negotiations. Regional policy guidelines for promotion of collective bargaining (10 developed in total) were almost exclusively based on the regional peer exchange on the policy recommendations for the purpose of bargaining and assistance in the implementation of selected policy guidelines.<sup>74</sup>

The adoption of the Performance Benchmarking Framework (PBF) is another example of ESAP's contribution, that was reflected by facilitated systematic approach for social partners to evaluate and enhance labour dispute resolution mechanisms. Training sessions and regional meetings, such as the one focused on mediation efficacy with participants from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia, have been important in developing mediation skills and promoting a cross-agency learning culture.

Finally, the annual CEELex meeting, which convened representatives from multiple Western Balkan economies and other European countries, fostered regional discourse on complex labour issues such as employment termination during the Covid-19 pandemic and the introduction of a legal presumption on the existence of an employment relationship, reflecting ESAP's broad reach in addressing labour rights.

### **Lessons learned were generated to inform further regional initiatives in the sector (JC4.3)**

#### **Evaluation revealed the following lessons learned:**

**Stakeholder Commitment:** The success of projects like ESAP hinges on the willingness and sustained commitment of participating stakeholders. This necessitates the development of strategically structured activities that actively engage and foster stakeholder participation from the beginning of the project, underpinned by tangible confirmation of committed support.

**Direct Communication:** Active and direct communication between project management and national authorities, institutions, and other regional stakeholders is crucial. In-person interactions, including meetings, visits, and events, are particularly valuable for engaging stakeholders and building robust networks.

**Supplemental Technical Support:** While regional capacity-building activities and peer-learning are highly beneficial, their effectiveness is significantly enhanced when they are complemented by additional targeted technical support. This helps address the identified gaps and shortcomings.

**Holistic Project Design:** The complexity of regional initiatives necessitates a comprehensive project design that accounts for the specific needs and contexts of national actors. The project's design must align with national strategies and be complementary to existing national and international assistance to ensure effectiveness and relevance in the sector.

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<sup>74</sup> ILO ESAP II Third Progress Report 2022, p.20

#### 4.4 Effectiveness, sustainability, added value

##### 4.4.1 EQ 5. To what extent has the ESAP project contributed to strengthening institutional capacities of national partners in developing, monitoring, and evaluating labour market and social affairs policies and measures?

The ESAP project has notably enhanced the capacity of national partners to develop, monitor, and evaluate labour market and social affairs policies. Through implementing pilot measures and setting up database to track labour law violations, ESAP has provided essential tools for assessing policy effectiveness. In Albania, the system consists of a unified case and data management and analysis (Matrix of Inspections and Risk Assessment (MIRA) that uses data mining and machine learning method to assess risk (probability / likelihood) of engaging in undeclared work or other labour law violations. After planning and business understanding, focus was directed to building a system that has a significantly broader scope, improving the State Labour Inspectorate's efficacy in Albania. In North Macedonia, it was noted that the project supported the development of a Web platform consisting of a content management system-based website to increase the transparency and visibility of the State Labour Inspectorate (SLI), an administrative module to increase of operational effectiveness the SLI, and an E-learning platform, containing 13 courses developed by the ILO and adapted to the North Macedonian context, for more effective training of labour inspectors with a special focus on undeclared work. Furthermore, the establishment of an observatory on employment, alongside a regional peer-learning exchange programme, has improved the data quality and availability for Western Balkan economies, aiding in the monitoring of socio-economic reforms.

All participating institutions unanimously emphasized the significance of the support provided by the ESAP project, particularly highlighting the important role of capacity building for labor inspectorates and Public Employment Services (PES) through tailored trainings and technical assistance. However, stakeholders acknowledged that while the support offered was invaluable, its uptake was not as widespread as anticipated. Notably, stakeholders underscored the immense value of study visits, citing them as essential opportunities to observe best practices firsthand and gain insights for potential implementation within their own contexts. These visits not only offered a tangible understanding of how other institutions operate but also served as a source of new ideas and opportunities, bringing about new and innovative approaches to their respective work. Despite the somewhat limited uptake of support services, the resounding sentiment was that such initiatives, particularly study visits, significantly contributed to enhancing institutional capabilities and fostering continuous improvement within the participating entities.

However, challenges persist with varying absorption capacity among institutions, varying level of commitment among economies, divergent data collection methodologies and approaches, fragmentation across institutions, posing barriers to effective policy implementation. The ESAP project's support in developing a Performance Benchmarking Framework endorsed by seven ESCs illustrates progress in standardizing performance monitoring. This, along with the virtual platform's growth as a data repository, points to the project's contribution to policy-making, although increased user engagement remains warranted.

**ESAP project contributed to strengthening institutional capacities of national partners in developing, monitoring, and evaluating labour market and social affairs policies and measures. (JC5.1)**

**Finding 16. The ESAP project has significantly advanced the institutional capacities of national partners. The project's multi-faceted approach, addressing both the strategic framework and hands-on operational tools, has laid the groundwork for improved governance and effectiveness of labour market policies in the region. However, lack of information sharing between different institutions or awareness among national partners of the entire scope of ESAP's engagement was a significant obstacle. Ongoing technical assistance is required to sustain and build upon these gains.**

The ESAP project invested in the enhancement of institutional capacities of national partners in developing, monitoring, and evaluating labour market and social affairs policies, through several avenues of support. In tackling **informal employment**, ESAP launched pilot measures and supported baseline survey implementations, establishing databases of labour standards violations. For example, in Albania, a database documenting over 60,000 violations was created to serve as a reference for assessing intervention effectiveness.<sup>75</sup> The project's scope also included pilot interventions in Albania and North Macedonia aimed at enhancing the State Labour Inspectorate's (SLI) effectiveness in addressing informal and undeclared work. In Albania the intervention featured: 1) The development of a the Matrix of Inspections and Risk Assessment (MIRA) as a unified system (case and data management tool that labour inspectors use in their daily work jointly with a risk assessment tool that uses data mining and machine learning (DM&ML), a form of artificial intelligence), leveraging data from various administrative sources; 2) The selection and adaptation of Business Analytics software for the SLI; 3) Capacity building for SLI staff in using the Risk Assessment System (RAS) and understanding risk assessment models; 4) Company inspections based on risk analysis outputs; 5) Implementation of an impact assessment to gauge the efficacy of these measures; and 6) The generation of policy briefs outlining intervention success based on impact evaluations. In North Macedonia, the project supported the development of a Web platform consisting of a content management system-based website to increase the transparency and visibility of the State Labour Inspectorate (SLI), an administrative module to increase of operational effectiveness the SLI, and an E-learning platform, containing 13 courses developed by the ILO and adapted to the North Macedonian context, for more effective training of labour inspectors with a special focus on undeclared work. This pilot not only increased the prospects of the Albanian and North Macedonian SLIs to more effectively and efficiently identify businesses that engage in undeclared work but also, since MIRA is based on the machine learning software, introduced innovative approaches to detecting and addressing informal work. According to stakeholder interview, concretely in Albania, MIRA ensured more effective identification of violations, saved the resources by providing the basic framework for mapping the undeclared work and improved the accuracy of planning measures on undeclared work for 30%.

One of its most relevant components is the RCC generated Observatory on employment in the Western Balkans containing selected macro-economic and labour market indicators, showcasing the trends in the Western Balkan region, public policy trends enabling the WB economies to monitor trends of implementation and impact of their reform measures aimed at sustainable socio-economic growth, as well as research papers and trends in employment and labour market.<sup>76</sup>

To enhance Data Quality and Access for data related to informal employment, the ESAP organised a regional peer-learning exchange program in 2022 for the representatives of the National Offices of Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina (virtual), Albania, Montenegro, Kosovo\*, Serbia, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy of North Macedonia, and the Albanian Labour Inspectorate. This support yielded significant advancements, including technical guidance on operational definitions and classification, updates on imminent changes, and harmonization assessments across institutions. Moreover, it resulted in training of 13 statistical officers and the publication of informal employment estimates by four Western Balkan nations which contribute to notable improvement in data quality and access. However, document review and interviews note that, despite these advancements, there

<sup>75</sup> ILO ESAP II Second Progress Report 2021, p.6

<sup>76</sup> RCC ESAP II Outputs, <https://www.esap.online/observatory/#public-policy-tracker>

are challenges, such as inconsistent dedication among economies and varied approaches to data collection and analysis. Also, inconsistencies in labour survey methodologies, manual data collection processes, and data fragmentation across institutions were cited as obstacles to efficient policy implementation.

Further support was also provided through distinct pilot measures in North Macedonia aimed at "More Effective Labour Inspections" and "Making Declared Work Attractive". Through these capacity building and awareness raising pilots, the ESAP provided technical know-how to 100 labour inspectorates equipping them with know-how and e-learning tools regarding employment forms and undeclared work and promoted simplified employment procedures and lower social security contribution for short-term workers, resulting in total 180 job seekers registered online (HOTAM portal) and via e-mail or phone.<sup>77</sup> Other similar outputs enhancing the overall quality of registered indicators of undeclared work include the e-training platform for labour inspectors developed in North Macedonia capacitating them with additional skills and knowledge in recognizing the indicators and thus making inspections more efficient in achieving the goals.

The ESAP project's support to the development and adoption of a unified Performance Benchmarking Framework (PBF) and monitoring tools, was also an important contribution in this domain. The PBF saw endorsement from seven ESCs, which facilitated the development of individual ESC monitoring mechanisms within the PBF and the creation of a web application that integrated regional and individual performance benchmarks.

The project further bolstered these efforts by providing technical support for online monitoring, critical for maximizing the utility of ESAP initiatives. This support manifested in the organization of regional meetings involving 44 ESC representatives and a tripartite conference with 33 participants, which facilitated knowledge exchange on PBF operations, including data handling and performance monitoring.

Other relevant project outputs include brochures (e.g., ESAP PHASE 2: Transitioning into formality and decent work in the Western Balkans, Youth & Jobs in the Western Balkans), reports (e.g., Report on Women's Employment in the Western Balkans, including interactive presentation of findings<sup>78</sup> RCC ESAP 2: Regional Comparative Report on Women's Employment in Western Balkans<sup>79</sup>, Youth and Jobs Quiz, accompanying report on the Youth Employment in the Western Balkans<sup>80</sup>, Study on Youth Employment in the Western Balkans<sup>81</sup>), leaflets, and presentations containing employment and labour market data, with the potential to be maintained and utilized for informing future policies in these sectors.

The PES Network aiming to establish close cooperation with the EU PES Network gathered all PESs in the region and, supported by the EU PES Network, with the project facilitation, for a continued implementation of the performance benchmarking outcomes and recommendations, fostering mutual learning among WB PES Offices.<sup>82</sup> Some of the relevant resources resulting from this network include the self-assessment in the bench learning areas by the individual PES, analysis of these reports by the external experts and peer assessors, delivery of the external assessment reports, an updated list of quantitative performance indicators including the stock and flow of unemployment in PES register, the transition rate from unemployment to employment, participants in active labour market programmes, etc., regular annual regional report on EB PES performance.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Moreover, a joint key output from both pilots is a learning that while business incentives such as less administrative burdens and better information sharing by the ILs are welcome, formalization of employment status for daily and short-term worker imposes negative cost-benefits ratio for them, for instance excluding them from financial assistance or scholarships. This calls for extending this measure to longer term undeclared seasonal workers to test its effectiveness for them.

ILO ESAP II Third Progress Report 2022, p.8

<sup>78</sup> [https://www.esap.online/women\\_and\\_work/?action=women\\_and\\_work](https://www.esap.online/women_and_work/?action=women_and_work)

<sup>79</sup> [https://www.esap.online/docs\\_archive](https://www.esap.online/docs_archive)

<sup>80</sup> [https://www.esap.online/youth\\_and\\_jobs](https://www.esap.online/youth_and_jobs)

<sup>81</sup> [https://www.esap.online/docs\\_archive](https://www.esap.online/docs_archive)

<sup>82</sup> RCC ESAP II Final Report, p.23

<sup>83</sup> RCC ESAP II Final Report, p.24



The key shortcoming of the project, as mentioned in preceding chapters was limited information sharing nationally, due to siloed approach of the project. Due to the silos, stakeholders from any other sector were not informed or aware of activities or accomplishments of the project in a given sector (e.g. Labor Inspectorates or social partners were not informed of ESAP's engagement with PES). This diminished the ownership over results or cross-fertilisation of best practices or approaches. Similarly, governmental interlocutors shared that, especially in ESAP2, they were not very much aware of what ESAP was doing with national partners- meaning activities were not coordinated properly with ministry level, and there was no sense of ownership by government. This is considered as a shortcoming.

### **ESAP project contributions to the improved monitoring influenced labour market and social affairs policies and measure (JC5.2)**

**Finding 17. The ESAP project has made significant contributions to the enhancement of monitoring in labour market and social affairs. The direct outputs are evident, yet the ongoing process of converting these into outcomes that will lead to substantial policy changes and implementation improvements depends on a continued commitment and effective application of the resources provided by ESAP.**

A combination of ESAP project interventions has contributed to the field of labour market and social affairs policies, and one of important effective interventions was the support to the enhancement of the monitoring and data management practices. The technical support and capacity-building initiatives provided by ESAP to partners from PES, ECS and also labour inspections delivered educational benefits but have also promoted a collaborative environment for sharing knowledge and experience, thereby reinforcing institutional capacity for the monitoring and evaluation of labour market policies. The support to pilot measures such as the creation of databases to document labour standards violations and the development of the Risk Assessment Tool (RAT), have improved the effectiveness of labour inspections. This was done through enhancing access to data and strengthening the analytical capabilities of LIs, which in turn led to more informed strategies for combatting informal employment. A regional peer-learning exchange programme and the subsequent training of statistical officers contributed to the further enhanced quality of labour market data in the Western Balkans, essential for informed policy development.

The analysis of the project's outputs, the PBF and RAT provides evidence that these outputs have substantially built institutional capacity for effective monitoring and evaluation. The improved access to high-quality labour market data through the ESAP platform and the CEELEX database has set the stage for more informed policymaking. Measures to tackle informal employment have led to improved labour inspection protocols and generated valuable insights, although the broader impact on policy is pending further implementation and evaluation. Existing challenges, such as inconsistencies in data collection practices, necessitate a continued effort toward alignment and integration of labour market information systems.

Another contribution has been the establishment of the PBF, which has standardised the assessment of performance across ESCs and facilitated the integration of regional and individual benchmarks through the development of a web application, leading to improved harmonization of monitoring processes. The project also build a PBF + web application tool for the ASLD institutions leading to improved and harmonized monitoring processes.

The ESAP II virtual platform has become an integral output of the project, providing a comprehensive data repository for stakeholders, containing essential resources for policy development.<sup>84</sup> The

<sup>84</sup> for instance, the ESAP platform includes numerous other RCC developed outputs such as, brochures (eg. ESAP PHASE 2: Transitioning into formality and decent work in the Western Balkans, Youth & Jobs in the Western Balkans), reports (eg. Report on Women's Employment in the Western Balkans, including interactive presentation of findings RCC ESAP 2: Regional Comparative Report on Women's Employment in Western Balkans, Youth and Jobs Quiz, accompanying report on the Youth Employment in the Western Balkans, Study on Youth Employment in the Western Balkans), leaflets, and

platform has witnessed growth in its user base and an increase in content, indicating an expanded impact on national policy-making processes. Nonetheless, the initial low user numbers indicate a requirement for additional promotional efforts and user education to fully realize the potential impact of the platform.

### **Lessons were generated to inform future interventions (JC5.3)**

**1. Effective Utilisation of Data is Crucial for Policy Development:** The ESAP project's efforts in building capacities, supporting the creation of a centralised virtual platform and databases for labour market data have demonstrated the critical role that accessible, high-quality data plays in shaping informed policies. Collecting consistent data and making it readily available and understandable to policymakers is key to their actual use in policymaking. This requires ongoing efforts in data systematization, analysis, and dissemination, as well as training for stakeholders to effectively utilise this data for policy formulation and adjustments.

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presentations containing employment and labour market data, with the potential to be maintained and utilized for informing future policies in these sectors.



## Tripartite and bipartite social dialogue

4.4.2 EQ 6. *To what extent has the ESAP project promoted the effectiveness of tripartite and bipartite social dialogue in improving social equity and working and living standards of citizens?*

The ESAP invested in enhancing tripartite and bipartite social dialogue mechanisms, aiming to improve social equity and the working and living standards in the Western Balkans, though with limited effectiveness. ESAP's support to the establishment of the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) Network of Agencies for Peaceful Settlement of Labour Disputes, is one of positive examples. Besides, ESAP's facilitation of knowledge exchange and collaboration among member economies, notably the third Annual Meeting in Serbia, underscored the project's commitment to promoting effective dispute resolution mechanisms. Project also successfully developed a regional Performance Benchmarking Framework and a dedicated web application. These tools aimed at standardizing the evaluation of amicable settlement practices and enhancing the effectiveness of labour dispute resolution institutions. By organising targeted meetings for conciliators and mediators, and facilitating discussions on mediation practices and labour rights issues, ESAP significantly contributed to building the capacities of these key stakeholders. This approach not only aimed to improve the immediate process of labour dispute resolution but also sought to impact broader labour relations positively.

Such ESAP's strategic interventions in promoting and enhancing amicable settlement mechanisms for labour disputes have underscored its role in strengthening social dialogue in the region. By advancing the capacities of conciliators, mediators, and other stakeholders involved in labour dispute resolution, the project has laid a foundation for more harmonious labour relations. This, in turn, is anticipated to contribute to the overarching goal of improving social equity and elevating the working and living standards of citizens in the Western Balkans, although assessing the direct impact on these broader outcomes requires further analysis and time.

However, despite the fact that the ESAP project made commendable efforts in various areas, there is a consensus among stakeholders that its promotion of effective tripartite and bipartite social dialogue, aimed at enhancing social equity and elevating working and living standards, brought limited results. Per stakeholder feedback, project's investments in this regard were diffuse, not consistent and generally not sufficient to achieve results within a very complex local context when it comes to social dialogue. Additionally, stakeholder feedback suggests that the expert support provided did not receive universal appreciation, criticising the level of understanding of local context or insensitivities to local contexts. Some stakeholders also expressed dissatisfaction with the perceived political dynamics surrounding the project. It is important to note that while criticisms were prevalent, stakeholders also acknowledged the complexities inherent to such initiatives (notably political, social dialogue context but also legislative frameworks, which are not favourable for promotion of social dialogue as such). This feedback offers valuable insights for refining future project strategies in a manner that aligns more closely with stakeholder needs and fosters a more positive informative and collaborative environment.

**ESAP project promoted the effectiveness of tripartite and bipartite social dialogue in improving social equity and working and living standards of citizens. (JC6.1)**

**Finding 18. ESAP's support, particularly in developing monitoring tools and facilitating knowledge exchange and collective bargaining discussions, has laid a foundation for enhancing social dialogue in the Western Balkans. However, the reality on the ground, according to stakeholder interviews, reveals major challenges in the effectiveness of the tripartite and bipartite social dialogue, including political, legal but also institutional complexities and limitations.**

The project's contributions to the ESCs (especially during ESAP 1) are integral to fostering better employment policies, even though the direct impact on working and living standards may not be immediately evident (See EQ7 and EQ8).

In its initial phase, ESAP I focused on improving the operational efficiency and participation of ESCs in economic and social policymaking. This effort included a thorough review of the ESCs, examining their structure, functionality, and effectiveness. The project facilitated a sub-regional peer review involving 39 participants, who developed terms of reference for the review and underwent training on conducting peer reviews. This led to the execution of peer review missions across six Western Balkan economies and the provision of technical assistance for drafting reports on each ESC reviewed. Additionally, ESAP I supported a regional peer-to-peer learning exchange for ESC members, which resulted in the commitment to implement policy recommendations to enhance council operations. It also organized learning forums for ESC secretaries, equipping them with mediation tools and strategies and facilitating national ESC information days to increase awareness of the councils' work.

Building on these efforts, ESAP II continued to support the ESCs by concentrating on three key areas relevant to enhancing the effectiveness of social dialogue in the Western Balkans: policy and performance monitoring tools, facilitation of regional tripartite discussions for collective bargaining at the sectorial level, and improvement of knowledge exchange in labor dispute resolution and industrial relations. Specifically, ESAP's assistance was crucial in providing ESCs with a regional performance monitoring tool (i.e., PBF), designed to address the individual needs and challenges of each economy, as discussed in EQ5 above. Further, it organized a regional tripartite conference with 33 participants to foster exchange on the PBF and provided technical assistance in achieving selected indicators on collective bargaining, directly influencing the quality of social dialogue.

Stakeholder interviews however indicate some disparities in the advancement of ESCs among countries, with Serbia identified as facing challenges in ESC development (during ESAP 1) due to limited budget and general support for dialogue culture, which improved in ESAP 2. In Albania, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, stakeholders generally agree that the ESAP project's efforts to promote effective social dialogue fell short, with limited progress towards enhancing social equity and improving working and living standards. Further scrutiny revealed that the perceived shortcomings in promoting effective social dialogue within the ESAP project were often attributed to a perceived lack of political will in certain contexts, but also - as shared by interviewed stakeholders - the limitations of the project to adequately support local processes, resulting in rather limited activities (Note: The project ensured representations of the National Labour Councils in three regional meetings of the ESCs, but resources and impact were limited). For instance, stakeholders in Kosovo lamented the inactivity of the Economic and Social Council for a prolonged period spanning three years due to political dynamics. Similarly, in Albania, social partners voiced concerns over their limited involvement in the National Council, with reports indicating that the tripartite commission seldom convened. Similar challenges were raised in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Note: in BiH, the project supported the alignment of the labour law reform with EU acquires and international labour standards. However, the reform, was delayed due to elections and other political factors). These instances underscore the critical role of political commitment in fostering an environment conducive to meaningful social dialogue and collaboration. Despite the challenges posed by political dynamics, stakeholders remain hopeful for renewed efforts to reignite engagement and ensure that social dialogue mechanisms are robustly supported and effectively utilized to address the diverse needs of

stakeholders and advance societal well-being. While criticisms were common, stakeholders recognized the complexity of the issues and called for more constructive engagement going forward. This feedback highlights areas for refining project strategies to better meet stakeholder expectations and foster a more positive collaborative atmosphere. The ESAP project can work towards overcoming barriers to effective social dialogue and nurturing an inclusive environment conducive to sustainable development and equitable progress.

In contrast, in Montenegro the stakeholders were more satisfied with the good cooperation between trade unions and state institutions, indicating close collaboration between all partners in regular bi-monthly meetings and inclusion of all social partners in all activities and legislative actions. Similarly, Macedonia's ESC is noted for its collaborative efforts and progress. An example of this progress is the tripartite workshop to draft the National Action Plan for ESC.

**Finding 19. ESAP's interventions have established a foundation for improving collective bargaining in the Western Balkans, with a potential to help enhance working conditions and living standards.**

The ESAP project has incrementally focused on enhancing collective bargaining processes in the Western Balkans, particularly evident during its second phase. Initially, collective bargaining received limited emphasis within the project's scope of promoting Social Dialogue. However, in the ESAP II phase, it was explicitly addressed as a key result area (Result 3.2 – Regional policy guidelines for the promotion of collective bargaining in selected sectors). This shift underscores the project's evolving strategy towards facilitating more robust collective bargaining mechanisms as a means to improve working conditions and living standards.

In its efforts to bolster effective collective bargaining, ESAP organized peer exchange events and provided assistance in implementing policy guidelines aimed at collective bargaining promotion. This initiative resulted in the drafting and implementation of ten regional policy guidelines. Specifically, in 2021, ESAP conducted a comprehensive assessment of the current collective bargaining landscape across Western Balkans economies, which was validated by 47 social partner representatives from the region in a tripartite preparatory workshop. Subsequent to this assessment, a meeting was held in 2022 with tripartite institutions and social partners to discuss the state of collective bargaining in the region, along with the proposed regional policy guidelines and a regional blueprint for its promotion.

ESAP's support extended to assisting ESCs in the development of guidelines for the regional promotion of collective bargaining. This process included the preparation of a policy paper outlining the guidelines, which was then reviewed at a joint meeting of the ESCs. Following feedback from the initial version and a working group, the ILO proposed a Blueprint incorporating a Results Framework, with clearly defined objectives, outcomes, and activities. This Blueprint was intended to be translated into local languages to ensure accessibility and implementation across the region. Furthermore, ESAP organized additional tripartite meetings to discuss trends in collective bargaining, aiming to support and enhance the capacities of ESCs and social partners in this critical area.

By facilitating dialogue and developing strategic guidelines, the project has promoted the need for investing in creating more conducive environment for improving working conditions and standards of living through enhanced collective bargaining. However, the direct impact of these interventions on working conditions and living standards have not been determined in all countries, as according to stakeholders (social partners) these guidelines have not been operationalized by the ESCs and social partners in most cases.

Stakeholders have emphasized the necessity for increased advocacy towards the governments in promoting social dialogue, advocating for stronger stakeholder engagement and active participation in the dialogue process. Additionally, they stress the importance of continuing the targeted capacity-building initiatives to deepen understanding and equip participants with the required skills for

effective engagement in dialogue and negotiation. This was specifically noted by the social partners, who expressed their evident needs for capacity building and further regional exchange. Interviewed social partners criticised ESAP's limited engagement, which did not allow for a more comprehensive support and partnership, which would have been beneficial for achievement of results.

Stakeholders have underscored the vital role that ESAP can play to support in improving national cooperation and collaboration among all participating institutions. This entails fostering a shared understanding and commitment to enhancing national processes. Through facilitating greater coordination and alignment of efforts, ESAP would ensure a more unified and effective approach to advancing social dialogue and achieving collective goals at the national level.

**Finding 20. There is evidence of ESAP support to effectiveness of amicable settlement mechanisms for labour disputes. The support brought positive results in Serbia, bringing models to be replicated in other countries.**

The ESAP has contributed to the effectiveness of mechanisms for the amicable settlement of labour disputes, as evidenced by its activities and initiatives across different project phases. Initially, ESAP focused on improving these mechanisms and promoting regional experiences and good practices. A significant step was the establishment of the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) Network of Agencies for Peaceful Settlement of Labour Disputes, which facilitated knowledge exchange through regional and bilateral meetings and the ESAP virtual platform. Notably, the ILO organized the third Annual Meeting of the Network in Serbia in 2018, attended by 70 participants including the Serbian Minister of Labour, which led to a regional comparison of settlement procedures and the development of a case database. The project also organized three annual meetings during its second phase: one virtual in June 2021, one three-day in person meeting combined with training about negotiations and mediations in October 2022, and a third one in March 2023 bringing to the network representatives from Spain and Greece. The last meeting has sparked an initiative for establishing a network/association of ASLD agencies at European level.

The project continued enhancing regional dialogue and expertise exchange among Amicable Settlement of Labour Disputes Institutions by establishing regional Performance Benchmarking Frameworks with a set of performance criteria and a corresponding web application. Activities included organizing a virtual meeting to decide on key performance indicators, developing a Performance Benchmarking Web Application (e-PBF / ASLD) accessible via the ESAP platform, and holding a regional meeting for conciliators and mediators from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia to discuss mediation concepts and practices. Additionally, the annual update of the CEELEX database and a meeting on various relevant labour topics further supported the effectiveness of amicable settlement mechanisms. According to the document review and stakeholder interviews, these activities not only advanced the capacity of conciliators and mediators in resolving labour disputes but also provided opportunities for practical application of new skills and discussion on contemporary labour issues, underscoring ESAP's role in enhancing dispute resolution and maintaining harmonious labour relations.

## 4.5 Transformative effects of ESAP

### 4.5.1 EQ 7. To what extent has the ESAP project contributed to improving employment opportunities and working conditions in the region as a whole and in each of the six economies, in particular for most vulnerable groups?

The ESAP has engaged in considerable efforts to enhance institutional mechanisms and practices to improve employment opportunities and working conditions in the region and to consider the needs of vulnerable groups within labour market measures across the Western Balkans. Through its support for legislative development, capacity-building initiatives, technical assistance and the facilitation of knowledge exchange, ESAP has laid groundwork aimed at improving such employment opportunities and working conditions. Despite these efforts, direct evidence linking ESAP's actions to tangible enhancements in employment rates and working conditions, particularly for vulnerable populations, remains minimal. As such, the actual impact of these interventions on the labour market outcomes and conditions for citizens, with an emphasis on the most vulnerable, in the six economies remains to be seen beyond project interventions. The evaluation identified a deficiency in the project's ability to monitor and measure the impact of ESAP interventions on employment generation, necessitating a more realistic presentation of project objectives and a comprehensive and objective elaboration of the project's reach and results.

**ESAP project contributed to improving employment opportunities and working conditions in the region. (JC7.1)**

**Finding 21. While ESAP's initiatives were implemented with the overall employment growth as the overarching goal, document review and field interviews did not reveal direct links between ESAP's interventions and the positive changes in terms of regional employment rates.**

While the ESAP project has been diligently implemented with the overarching goal of fostering employment growth, this evaluation has not been able to determine the direct correlations between ESAP interventions and observable improvements in regional employment rates. Despite the project's multifaceted efforts and investments aimed at enhancing labor market dynamics and strengthening employment opportunities, the absence of explicit links between ESAP initiatives and tangible shifts in regional employment metrics raises pertinent questions regarding the impact of the project's strategies and means in which such contributions could be monitored and recorded.

It is essential to acknowledge the complexities inherent in measuring the direct influence of development initiatives on macroeconomic indicators such as employment rates. Factors beyond the scope of ESAP's interventions, such as broader economic trends, policy frameworks, and external socio-political dynamics, undoubtedly influence regional employment dynamics. Thus, isolating the precise contribution of ESAP initiatives to changes in employment rates presents inherent methodological challenges.

ESAP initiative in supporting legislation drafting, sharing good practices and organizing capacity building activities have set the stage for positive changes. However, stakeholders have conveyed that while there is potential for policies to yield improvements in various areas, the level of support provided by ESAP has been perceived as insufficient to confidently attribute tangible outcomes to specific interventions. The limited perceived contribution in this aspect may have hindered the ability to fully capitalize on the opportunities presented by policy frameworks and translate them into concrete improvements. Without political will, sufficient resources, including financial assistance and technical expertise, countries may face challenges in implementing policies effectively and measuring their impact accurately, which affects the extent to which any project contributions can yield results beyond output and immediate outcomes levels.

One shortcoming on the project side as found by the evaluation was a lack of means in which the project could monitor and measure the ways in which ESAP interventions could contribute to changes in terms of employment generation, which would enable an assessment of the effectiveness and impact of project interventions. Such mechanisms should not only track quantitative indicators such as employment rates but also qualitatively evaluate the socio-economic outcomes and long-term sustainability of ESAP interventions. This also calls for a more realistic presentation of projects desired objectives, to ensure the full appreciation of what a project of this size, scope and regional nature can realistically achieve.

**Finding 22. ESAP's investment in the improvement of working conditions, especially in the aspect of occupational safety and hazardous (OSH) has been evident in document review and stakeholder interviews.**

The ESAP has demonstrated contributions to the improvement of working conditions in the Western Balkans, with a specific focus on occupational safety and health. Analysis of ESAP's annual reports and stakeholder interviews provide evidence of these contributions, particularly in aligning regional legislation with international labour standards and EU directives concerning OSH. The project's support for the law drafting process in several countries, including Serbia and North Macedonia, has led to the development of significant legal frameworks aimed at enhancing occupational safety, job security, and access to social benefits. For instance, in Serbia, the drafting of the Law on Occupational Safety and Health marked a crucial step towards establishing a safer work environment. Kosovo Labor Inspectorate has started the process of drafting a National Strategy for OSH, as a development necessity identified through ESAP activities and ESAP training provided on OSH. Similarly, stakeholders in Albania have noted the establishment of the OSH sector, drafting of the National Strategy for OSH 2024-2030 (The framework was drafted during ESAP 2. The full strategy is expected to be completed and approved under ESAP 3.) and incorporation of OSH modules in the training programme for inspectors, supported by ESAP as a great advancement in guaranteeing safe working environments. In Montenegro, due to political situation and frequent government changes, no tangible results are in place, however government officials noted that eleven pieces of new legislation are in process, all with the support of different EU projects including ESAP. Recommendations provided by the ESC in North Macedonia on various laws have been important in reinforcing occupational safety measures, securing job positions, and ensuring social benefits for workers. Furthermore, ESAP initiated multiple national labour inspection campaigns across the Western Balkans, targeting OSH challenges in sectors prone to high risks, such as construction. These campaigns have resulted in the identification of numerous hazardous workplaces and regulatory violations, leading to immediate actions to mitigate risks and enhance worker protection.

Additionally, ESAP's facilitation of workshops and webinars, such as the two-day event in Tirana focusing on OSH improvement through social dialogue and a webinar on "OSH and Safe Return to Work" amid the COVID-19 pandemic, underscored the project's commitment to capacity building and knowledge exchange among labour inspectors and social partners. These interventions have not only promoted the adoption of good practices and cooperation among national inspectorates but also highlighted the project's role in fostering sustainable improvements in OSH conditions. Collectively, results of these activities have a potential to make a significant impact on enhancing working conditions in the Western Balkans, though further investments are warranted to present strong foundations for sustaining results achieved thus far.

**Finding 23. This evaluation did not find evidence ESAP's contributions to employment and working conditions outcomes among the six beneficiary economies.**

Establishing causal or contributory links between ESAP activities and broad employment opportunities for the general population presents challenges due to the multifaceted nature of socio-economic

dynamics. However, it is evident that ESAP has played a role in driving several policy and legislative improvements, thereby laying the groundwork for safer working environments, enhanced employment prospects, and a heightened focus on improving conditions and opportunities for workers. The capacity-building initiatives undertaken by ESAP have been appreciated by most interviewed stakeholders (though with variation among social partners), both for the quality of the training modules and the expertise of the trainers selected. Moreover, the establishment of regional networks, repeatedly highlighted throughout stakeholder interviews, has fostered a more sustainable platform for the continual enhancement of policies and practices in the region.

The technical support provided by ESAP in implementing data management systems has contributed to the promotion of evidence-based policy formulation and decision-making. This, in turn, is expected to bolster the participating countries' efforts in advancing employment and working conditions outcomes. Notably, one of ESAP's key strengths, expressed unanimously by all participating countries, is its tailored approach to each nation's unique circumstances. The project's flexibility in adapting interventions to suit the evolving realities of each country has enabled more efficient identification of support needs, ultimately enhancing the project's effectiveness and relevance.

Capacity-building programs, technological enhancements such as electronic case management and data systems, and the provision of guidelines for best practices have contributed to the strengthening of institutional capacities which have a direct influence on the enhancement of working conditions. In most countries, ESAP has addressed the limited availability and reliability of data related to employment, working conditions, and labor market dynamics, which was a continuous challenge to countries to plan interventions and tailor strategies to address emerging challenges effectively. Through these interventions and by equipping partners with the necessary tools and resources, ESAP has laid the groundwork for more conducive and productive work environments, potentially yielding broader socio-economic benefits and improved employment outcomes across participating countries.

Certainly, within each country, there are internal challenges that can hinder the effectiveness of ESAP's efforts in this aspect. Stakeholders have mentioned that even with improved policies and legislative frameworks, there are significant challenges (notably, varying political support or willingness, institutional capacity or other competing government priorities) in effectively implementing them at the national or local level. In Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia there are several instances when ESAP supported the drafting of several legislative acts and policies, which is an important groundwork. However, lack of enforcement mechanisms, and resistance to change within governmental agencies can all impede the translation of policy improvements into tangible outcomes. Furthermore, in a few countries, stakeholders have acknowledged that limited financial resources and a shortage of skilled personnel can hinder the execution of ESAP initiatives. Without sufficient resources, it becomes challenging to fully implement or sustain long-term improvements in working conditions. Weak institutional capacity within government agencies, labor inspectorates, and other relevant institutions has been identified as one of the key points addressed by ESAP and improvements are acknowledged. Besides, there are (nationally) insufficient coordination mechanisms, which can undermine the effectiveness of ESAP interventions.

Particularly during implementation of ESAP 2, a few economies (e.g., Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo) have experienced political instability, governance challenges, and changes in leadership that have disrupted continuity in policy drafting and implementation and undermined the sustainability of project interventions' results and their, impacting the ability to achieve lasting impact. Furthermore, socio-cultural norms and attitudes towards labour rights, gender equality, and social dialogue also influence the success of ESAP initiatives. Deep-rooted cultural practices, discrimination, and social inequalities may and do still present obstacles to fostering inclusive and equitable working environments.

Therefore, determining the extent of ESAPs contribution to this aspect requires a comprehensive approach that goes beyond policy reforms and capacity-building efforts. It involves country efforts to foster multi-sectoral collaboration, and address systemic barriers to change to maximize the impact on improving employment and working conditions across participating countries.

**Finding 24. The ESAP outlined in its programming documents the intention to address the challenges faced by vulnerable groups, including women, youth, and people with disabilities. However, evaluation did not yield evidence of outcomes for these groups.**

There are some instances of ESAP's concrete focus and reporting on the vulnerable groups, though these are rather scarce and fragmented. For instance, ESAP's reports, notably, under Output 2.3 of the RCC's Report on ESAP I, mention that thematic review papers and peer review activities focused on vulnerable and disadvantaged groups were conducted in Serbia and Kosovo, highlighting the need to tailor labour market measures to these populations. Another example is a peer review activity in Albania on on-the-job training programs discussed the adaptation of such measures to better serve the needs of vulnerable groups, demonstrating a targeted approach to inclusivity in employment policies.

In addition to peer reviews, some concrete steps have been taken to address the employment challenges of persons with disabilities. This includes an in-depth analysis and subsequent peer review in Serbia aimed at enhancing the recognition of employment rights for people with disabilities and the provision of equal opportunities. Follow-up measures from these reviews included adaptations of active employment policy measures and the introduction of new initiatives within the National Employment Action Plan for 2019, specifically designed to improve employment prospects for hard-to-employ categories. These measures indicate a move towards more inclusive labour market strategies.

Furthermore, ESAP has contributed to generating knowledge about the employment challenges faced by women, youth, and other disadvantaged groups through the production of reports and other materials. Notable examples include reports on women's employment and a study on youth employment in the Western Balkans, alongside brochures and leaflets focusing on these demographics. In Kosovo, practices regarding the self-employment of vulnerable groups were identified, such as the development of admission criteria that grant additional points to individuals from these groups. These efforts suggest that, while direct evidence of improved labour and social outcomes for the most vulnerable groups may be limited, ESAP has initiated several activities aimed at addressing their challenges and has begun to integrate considerations for these groups into labour market measures and policies. However, concrete evidence of transformative potential of these investments was not found.



4.5.2 EQ 8. To what extent has ESAP contributed to the alignment of the Western Balkans policies and systems with the EU standards and acquis in the area of social policy and employment?

Overall, evaluation findings show that the ESAP has contributed to aligning Western Balkans policies and systems with EU standards and acquis in the areas of social policy and employment. Through fostering collaboration, promoting best practices, and facilitating policy dialogue, ESAP has played a crucial role in advancing the integration of the Western Balkans into the European Union's social and economic framework.

The ESAP project has played an important role in guiding the Western Balkan economies towards the adoption of European Union labour standards and practices. It has effectively supported regional institutions through capacity-building activities, knowledge dissemination, and policy alignment with the EPSR and ERPs. The annual Regional Overview publications and the execution of regional campaigns have been instrumental in raising awareness of social rights. Nevertheless, the need for greater involvement of ESCs in the ERP process has been identified as a key area for further enhancement to ensure that the reforms meet the diverse needs of the beneficiaries. Stakeholders have noted that ensuring the active participation of ESCs is essential for ensuring that reforms are tailored to meet the diverse needs of beneficiaries and reflect the socio-economic realities of the region, though project contributions in this regard were limited.

ESAP's initiatives such as PES bench-learning, the Western Balkans Network for Tackling Undeclared Work, and support to Labour Inspectorates have contributed to aligning domestic policies with EU models. These efforts, including regional workshops and exchange meetings, have fostered a conducive environment for policy harmonization.

**ESAP project contributed to increased alignment of the Western Balkans policies and systems with the EU standards and acquis. (JC8.1)**

**Finding 25. The ESAP project has actively engaged in aligning regional employment and social policies with EU standards and has fostered awareness and capacity building on the EPSR and ERPs, though enhancing the involvement of social partners in the ERP process remains an area for improvement.**

Through all its activities, ESAP project served as a convener and supporter of Western Balkans institutions in their efforts to align employment and social policy activities with the EU acquis and the broader objectives of the EPSR and the ERPs. This support is evidenced by the project's numerous initiatives aimed at raising awareness and building the capacity of beneficiaries on ERPs and EPSR. For instance, the ESAP has produced several outputs related to European Social Rights, focusing on disseminating knowledge on social rights and enhancing awareness of their importance. This includes the annual publication of the Regional Overview of Western Balkan Economies Regarding the EPSR, which outlines the progress of each economy on the 20 principles of the EPSR. RCC also launched awareness-raising campaigns on social rights, thereby contributing to the dialogue and understanding of social rights in the region. An online database including data per EPSR indicators was devised, adjusted to follow revised methodology and updated to reflect findings of annual progress reviews regarding EPSR: Social Scoreboard of Indicators, which allows for systematic tracking of progress in aligning national policies and practices with the EPSR principles. This information is relevant for making informed decisions and refining strategies to address emerging challenges.

Moreover, ESAP's original programming envisaged specific activities to enhance consultation and social partners' involvement in the ERPs. These activities evolved, as per donor request after the ESAP I inception report, to broaden the focus on social partners' overall involvement in economic and social policies, particularly in the realms of economic and structural reforms. Activities under this revised framework included workshops with DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion of the European

Commission, sub-regional workshops aimed at enhancing social partner capacities, and the development of a regional report that integrated active labour market measures into national strategic documents using Eurostat methodology.

Despite these efforts, the ESAP I Third Progress Report identified an area for improvement in the involvement of the ESCs in the ERP process. Strengthening this involvement was deemed critical to ensuring that the ERPs incorporate diverse social partner perspectives and more effectively respond to the needs of the beneficiaries.

**Finding 26. ESAP has actively facilitated the adoption of EU labour practices in the Western Balkans, although the direct impact on employment opportunities and working conditions.**

As detailed in previous EQs, the ESAP has made substantive contributions to the alignment of practices within the six Western Balkan economies with EU models, specifically in areas such as Public Employment Services (PES) bench learning, the Western Balkans Network for Tackling Undeclared Work, and Labour inspectorates. These initiatives, underpinned by a variety of capacity-building and knowledge-sharing activities, have collectively fostered an environment conducive to harmonizing employment and labour market sectors with EU practices and policies. For example, ESAP's implementation of a PES bench-learning exercise, fashioned after the EU PES Network model, involved the development of a methodology, execution of national self-assessment reviews, and the participation of Western Balkan PES in external assessments and regional analytical reporting. This exercise not only advanced internal management practices but also addressed IT system compatibility with EU standards. Furthermore, Western Balkan PES officials actively engaged with the EU PES Network, notably at its 9th Board Meeting, facilitating a meaningful exchange of practices and policies.

In tackling undeclared work, ESAP drew on EU experiences to align regional practices with those of EU Member States, exemplified by the organization of workshops, development of national diagnostic reports, and establishment of the Western Balkans Network for Tackling Undeclared Work. This network emphasizes cooperation, mutual learning, and knowledge generation, aiming to enhance policy-making and introduce new approaches to address undeclared work.

Additionally, ESAP's influence on Labour Inspectorates has been evident in activities aimed at enhancing their operations to match EU standards, such as technical assistance workshops, peer exchanges, and international forums. Notably, representatives from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia participated in an International Technical Forum in Spain, sharing and learning about innovative enforcement approaches and inspection methods.

### **ESAP project contributed to better policies for vulnerable groups (JC8.2)**

**Finding 27. Evaluation did not yield concrete evidence that project contributions to better policies have so far had positive outcomes for vulnerable groups. While the immediate impact of ESAP efforts may not be readily apparent, stakeholders remain optimistic about their long-term potential to yield positive outcomes for vulnerable populations.**

While evaluation does not offer concrete evidence of direct positive outcomes for vulnerable groups resulting from project contributions to policy development, it is crucial to recognize the nuanced nature of policy implementation and its impact over time. Many of the policies and systems developed as a result of project interventions are relatively new or yet to be adopted, so their full effects have yet to materialise. However, despite the absence of immediate measurable outcomes, these initiatives have laid a solid foundation and framework for future progress. Most of the stakeholders have agreed that the development of new policies and systems represented a critical first step in addressing the needs of vulnerable groups. With the establishment of the legal frameworks, guidelines, and institutional mechanisms, these initiatives create the necessary infrastructure to

support vulnerable populations and promote their inclusion in society. For example, policies and strategic plans towards OSH can have a transformative impact on the lives of vulnerable individuals and communities.

While the direct impact of project contributions to better policies may not be immediately visible, project results represent a step forward in addressing the needs of vulnerable groups. The project supported laying out the groundwork for future progress, and stakeholders are positive these initiatives have the potential to drive meaningful change and improve the well-being and prospects of vulnerable populations in the long term.

Moreover, project contributions to policy development extend beyond mere enactment; they encompass capacity-building efforts, stakeholder engagement, and knowledge dissemination activities that are essential for effective implementation. Through training programs, workshops, and awareness campaigns, the project has strived to equip stakeholders with the necessary skills, knowledge, and resources to implement policies successfully and address the specific needs of vulnerable groups.

While the immediate impact of these efforts may not be readily apparent, stakeholders remain optimistic about their long-term potential to yield positive outcomes for vulnerable populations. By addressing systemic barriers, promoting social inclusion, and fostering a culture of respect for human rights, these initiatives create an enabling environment for meaningful change to occur

Furthermore, the commitment and collaboration of stakeholders across sectors and levels of governance are crucial for translating policy intentions into tangible improvements in the lives of vulnerable groups.

## 4.6 Sustainability

### 4.6.1 EQ 9. How would the processes and tools created/promoted by ESAP continue if ESAP stopped operating?

The analysis of the processes and tools created/promoted by ESAP suggests a mixed scenario regarding their sustainability if ESAP were to stop operating, with several factors contributing to this complexity. ESAP I and II did not establish a comprehensive exit strategy, which is a main pillar in ensuring project's continuance after its end, giving the national stakeholders a roadmap to ensure and built on the so far project outcomes. All stakeholders have noted that while the project was successful in creating regional networks of cooperation and collaboration, these networks cannot be maintained without a regional project to facilitate their work. Furthermore, many processes that have been initiated by the project have just started or are in process of starting implementation in individual economies (e.g. legislation, digitalization processes, etc), so there is a general sense that the beneficiary institutions still lack capacities to transform/ implement them successfully in practice, without external support. While being deemed effective in abundance of its activities, especially capacity building initiatives, providing national stakeholders with relevant technical capacities and ensuring the institutional frameworks for implementation of such knowledge, a lack of a project's comprehensive sustainability strategy ensuring amplification and ownership of the outcomes can greatly endanger its overall effect.

**The processes and tools established / facilitated by ESAP are in use by beneficiaries. (JC9.1)**

**Finding 28. Programming documents elaborate the logic for ensuring sustainability of tools, practices and mechanisms and guaranteeing their utilization after the project end. However, this was only partly realized, and there is scepticism among stakeholders on the ability to maintain results without external support.**

Programming documents name several strategies relevant to ensure a sustainability of project's results such as:

- Consulting of the beneficiary institutions in (Ministries of Labour, Economic and Social Councils, Agencies for Peaceful Settlement of Labour Disputes, Labour Inspectorates, Statistics Offices, Social Partners) throughout the project stages ensuring the genuine identification of their needs, gathering their inputs, and fostering their project contributions;
- Providing technical assistance to the existing national institutions using the local experts;
- Utilization of the ILO local network of National Coordinators based throughout the region, ensuring an ongoing contact with the national actors (especially the national authorities)
- Basing tripartite and tripartite-plus social dialogue on the participatory activities;
- Peer-learning and capacity building, equipping beneficiaries with skills, tools, mechanisms and practices;
- ESAP online platform containing all relevant project documentation (eg., training materials, recommendations, analyses) supporting the institutional memory of the implemented activities;

- Community of Practices providing the engagement space for learning lessons based on the peer knowledge exchange.<sup>85</sup>

When it comes to the online CEELEX platform, the ESAP I Evaluation report noted that it seemed that it was introduced too early, before defining clearly its strategic goal and utilization purpose, missing the opportunity for it to be a valuable long-term component in labour market and social dialogue progress.<sup>86</sup> ESAP 2 continued to strengthen capacities and utilized this capacity to support relevant local processes. During ESAP 2, CEELEX members from the Western Balkans were and some still are providing expertise to their respective governments and social partners (North Macedonia (labour law reform + ESC), Montenegro (ASLD), Serbia (labour law and ASLD), Federation of the BiH (labour law reform), Albania(ASLD)). Also, the ESAP I Evaluation showed that it was not utilized at the bigger scale, but rather only by the CEELEX experts who also have clear benefits from it. While it is hard to grade the overall utilization scale, ESAP II Reports noted the continuous work of ILO and RCC on the platform, resulting in launching of a newly designed ESAP II online platform in 2021 and registering (across one year period) 11 news articles and 30 multimedia items (published by ILO) and 6,958 visitors, majority of which were from Serbia (12,3%), Albania (10%), United States (7,1%) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (5,7%).<sup>87</sup> According to RCC data, ESAP II observed 54 news articles; 24 multimedia items as parts of EPSR awareness raising campaigns; two campaigns on benefits of declared work, 63 publications, plus numerous social media contents, working documents and reference materials in the closed website section. The first 24 hours after the Launch of the Western Balkans employment Observatory, there was over 1 K of online visitors to the platform. Peer-learning was considered by all interviewed stakeholders as prospective when it comes to a long-term utilization and national ownership, mainly thanks to the project's capacity for promotion of regional collaboration.<sup>88</sup> However, according to stakeholder accounts, this will be difficult to maintain without outside facilitation and support. Also, evaluation evidenced concrete efforts of the ESAP to ensure the sustainability of the peer learning exercises, since it, already at its first implementation year, established a sub-regional network to the ESC, supporting it in the implementation of the recommendation coming from the ESC peer reviews, complemented by the sub-regional events on the experience and knowledge exchange.<sup>89</sup> However, stakeholders, across the region have reiterated the difficulties with the internal functioning of the ESCs that are risking the social dialogue process, indicating need for targeted interventions towards the government to strengthen the role and functioning of the ESC. The electronic systems developed are in place and running (in some countries i.e. Kosovo in pilot phase) and stakeholders consider them a legacy of ESAP. However, they notably mention further needs of tailored and hands-on capacity building to ensure lasting impact of project interventions.

Moreover, the labour and social policy contexts are dynamic and continually evolving, shaped by a myriad of internal and external factors such as economic trends, technological advancements, demographic shifts, and changing societal expectations. In this ever-changing landscape, sustained support is essential for achieving long-term improvements in the well-being and socio-economic outcomes of vulnerable groups. One of the key reasons why sustained support is crucial is the need for adaptability and responsiveness to emerging challenges and opportunities. As new issues arise and existing ones evolve, policies and programs must be continuously reviewed, revised, and updated to remain effective and relevant. These issues present novel challenges in terms of employment security, labour rights, and social protection, requiring innovative policy responses to ensure that vulnerable workers are adequately safeguarded. According to stakeholder interviews, sustained support is essential for building and maintaining the institutional capacity needed to effectively implement and monitor policies and programs. This includes investing in training and professional development for

<sup>85</sup> IPA II Annual Multi-country ESAP II Programme 2019, Grant Application Form, p.28

<sup>86</sup> ILO Evaluation, Employment and Social Affairs Platform 2019, p.44

<sup>87</sup> ILO ESAP 2 Second Progress Report 2021, p.28

<sup>88</sup> ILO Evaluation, Employment and Social Affairs Platform 2019, p.8

<sup>89</sup> ILO ESAP First Progress Report 2017, p.11

government officials, strengthening regulatory frameworks, further improving data collection and analysis capabilities, and fostering partnerships with civil society organizations and other stakeholders. Building resilient institutions capable of adapting to changing circumstances and delivering services efficiently is essential for achieving sustainable social and economic development.

**Finding 29. While ESAP was successful in building capacities of national actors and introducing operating mechanisms in the national institutions, prospects of national ownership of such successes are mixed.**

Although programming documents note that the high-level ownership of the project results would be ensured through continuous involvement and consultation of beneficiary institutions throughout the project stages, namely design, implementation and monitoring, the ownership of the project outcomes has been mixed and generally declining over the project consecutive phases. According to ESAP I Evaluation report, national ownership was built to a limited extent, due to constrains such as remote project management, disabling national partners to be effectively involved in the project events over a total duration of ESAP I.<sup>90</sup> During the ESAP II, project management team has remained the same (ILO project assistant and CTA in the region (Sarajevo)) and there was a turnover of in the team, along with the shift to online work during COVID-19 .<sup>91</sup> Another hurdle for ensuring and extending project's impact is the competency and legitimacy of national stakeholders who participated in the project at first place, as stated in the reviewed documentation as well as the stakeholder interviews. Namely, ESAP I document noted that, for instance, regarding the social dialogue component, participating stakeholders might not be the most experienced or relevant decision-makers (eg. ministries of finance), disabling them to directly implement and share the knowledge or foster change.<sup>92</sup> Similarly in the ESAP II the most important actors remain ESCs, APRLDs, employer associations, trade unions, with no inclusion of the high-level decision makers. However, as visible from stakeholder interactions, most of the engaged stakeholders have had different interests, varying levels of interaction with the project, understanding of project's contributions or generally motivation to engage. Besides, the project has had rather minimal engagement within this sector in comparison to the sector needs which hindered its overall contributions due to piecemeal approach.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

### Conclusion 1. Relevance

The ESAP project aligns strategically with the regional objectives and the broader aspirations of the Western Balkan economies for EU integration. The project's strength lies in its strategic deployment of the ILO and the RCC to leverage regional expertise and facilitate substantive regional cooperation in labor and employment reforms. The project's focus areas, such as improving employment opportunities and enhancing social dialogue, address critical regional needs, showcasing its high relevance. However, despite these strengths, the project exhibited gaps in promoting more consistency between regional and beneficiary specific engagement and in its capacity to effectively monitor and adapt project strategies to the shifting political and social dialogues within individual economies.

*This conclusion is based on EQ 1 and EQ2.*

### Conclusion 2. Efficiency

<sup>90</sup> ILO Evaluation, Employment and Social Affairs Platform 2019, p.43

<sup>91</sup> ILO ESAP II Budget

<sup>92</sup> ILO Evaluation, Employment and Social Affairs Platform 2019, p.44

The project demonstrated commendable efficiency in resource management and operational execution across a challenging multi-country landscape. Despite these strengths, ESAP encountered logistical difficulties such as remote management complexities, in particular during COVID which led to a project extension, and overlaps between some project components. Still, the project managed to overcome difficulties.

*This conclusion is based on EQ 3.*

### **Conclusion 3. Effectiveness (overall conclusion)**

While the ESAP project demonstrated substantial regional and institutional benefits, its full potential was curtailed by operational inefficiencies and a one-size-fits-all approach in certain aspects, despite the effort made to tailor national adjustments. To optimize outcomes, future initiatives should focus on deepening stakeholder engagement, enhancing participatory mechanisms, and continuously adapting strategies to reflect the evolving political and economic landscapes of the Western Balkans.

*This conclusion is based on EQ 4, EQ 5 and EQ6.*

### **Conclusion 4. Effectiveness (Regional Cooperation)**

The ESAP project leveraged a regional collaborative framework to enhance EU accession readiness among Western Balkan economies. By establishing and utilising networks like the Network of Labour Inspectorates, CEELEX and the PES network, ESAP facilitated significant exchanges of expertise and aligned regional practices with EU standards. This regional synergy was crucial in catalysing policy reforms and legislative advancements that uniformly elevated employment and labor standards across the involved economies. Additionally, the ESAP Online Platform played an important role in sustaining these networks, serving as a repository for resources and fostering continuous dialogue essential for addressing regional labour migration issues. Despite its successes, the project encountered operational challenges such as high institutional turnover rates and inconsistent participation that impeded the full realisation of its cooperative endeavours. Moreover, internal political instability and frequent administrative changes in some economies emerged as substantial obstacles to achieving lasting progress. These issues, compounded by limited participatory mechanisms and insufficient information sharing, underscored critical areas for enhancement in the project's design to ensure it remains adaptable to the dynamic regional and national contexts.

*This conclusion is based on EQ 4.*

### **Conclusion 5. Effectiveness (Institutional Capacity Building)**

The ESAP project substantially bolstered the capabilities of national partners to develop, monitor, and evaluate labour market and social affairs policies effectively. Initiatives such as the implementation of pilot measures, the creation of databases for tracking labor standards violations, and the development of analytical tools like the Risk Assessment Tool have markedly improved policy evaluation and enforcement in Albania and North Macedonia. These innovations have empowered State Labour Inspectorates to more effectively manage and mitigate undeclared work. Furthermore, the project's support in developing web platforms and e-learning modules has increased transparency and enhanced capacity building throughout the Western Balkans. The introduction of a regional peer-learning exchange program and the establishment of an employment observatory have also been instrumental in elevating the quality and accessibility of data, crucial for robust monitoring and informed policymaking. Despite these advancements, the variable engagement levels across participating institutions highlighted the challenges in applying



standardised methodologies within diverse institutional frameworks, potentially hindering consistent policy execution and outcomes.

*This conclusion is based on EQ 5.*

### **Conclusion 6. Effectiveness (Bipartite and Tripartite Social Dialogue)**

While the ESAP project invested efforts to improve tripartite and bipartite social dialogue, the outcomes were mixed. Initiatives such as the establishment of the CEE Network of Agencies for Peaceful Settlement of Labour Disputes and the development of a regional Performance Benchmarking Framework showcased the project's commitment to enhancing dialogue mechanisms. However, the impact of project's wider social dialogue efforts was often constrained by a generalised approach that did not adequately accommodate the nuanced local contexts. This resulted in interventions that were not only diffuse but also had limited transformative potential. The project's strategy, while ambitious, often lacked the depth necessary to foster profound and sustained improvements in social dialogue, highlighting the need for more tailored and contextually aware approaches in future endeavors.

*This conclusion is based on EQ 6.*

### **Conclusion 7. Transformative potential**

The ESAP project implemented several key reforms and provided significant capacity-building, modeling, legislative development, and peer learning opportunities, aiming to foster long-term enhancements in employment and labor conditions across the Western Balkans. However, the direct influence of these interventions on measurable employment outcomes, especially for vulnerable groups, remains unclear and cannot be conclusively linked to the project's activities. In addition, the actualisation of these benefits is contingent upon factors beyond the immediate scope of ESAP's interventions, such as broader economic trends and political will. This situation underscores the necessity for a more realistic and precisely defined intervention logic, acknowledging the limitations of a regional project's impact on extensive reforms. Furthermore, the lack of robust mechanisms for measuring impact has constrained a deeper understanding of the project's effectiveness. This analysis suggests a need for refining the project's strategies and objectives to better align with its operational scope and regional influence capabilities.

*This conclusion is based on EQ 7 and EQ8.*

### **Conclusion 8. Sustainability**

The sustainability of the initiatives launched under ESAP is uncertain, primarily due to the absence of comprehensive exit strategies and the continued reliance on external support for sustaining the established networks, models, and processes. The project's outputs, while significant, require ongoing commitment and support from external stakeholders to ensure their sustainability and effectiveness which is a significant impediment, stemming from limited capacities, ownership, and also political will to maintain results.

*This conclusion is based on EQ 9.*

## **6 RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following recommendations have been derived from the evaluation process.



**Recommendation 1: Invest efforts to integrate more strongly and consistently the regional and individual/targeted support.**

*Consider developing a balanced approach that combines regional strategies with tailored, economy-specific support to address unique challenges and needs effectively. Harmonizing these efforts can help maximise impact and ensure consistent alignment with regional goals while providing targeted assistance to beneficiaries.*

Operational Recommendations:

1.1. Enrich regional networking and peer exchange activities by efforts to consistently build local expertise by implementing/supporting training programs to enhance the skills of local personnel and facilitating institutional/IPA beneficiary level peer exchanges.

1.2. Consistently support institutional development of all IPA beneficiaries and avoid piecemeal approach by providing ongoing technical assistance to strengthen institutional frameworks necessary for the sustainable implementation of labor market reforms.

*This recommendation is linked to all conclusions*

*Main implementation responsibility: ILO, and RCC*

*Main associated actors: EU, all engaged partner institutions*

**Recommendation 2: Strengthen Systemic Integration of Project Initiatives**

Strengthen Systemic Integration of Project Initiatives by developing guidelines and frameworks and promote their adoption by beneficiaries to facilitate the integration of ESAP initiatives into national legislation and policy, ensuring alignment with broader economic and social goals.

Operational Recommendations include:

2.1 Form a Working group (or a task force) comprising representatives of the ESAP project, key government agencies, and key sector experts dedicated to promoting the adoption of these integration frameworks across all beneficiary economies.

2.2 Prepare comprehensive communication and advocacy materials that highlight the benefits and importance of adopting these frameworks for achieving sustainable economic and social development.

2.3 Initiate and maintain ongoing dialogue with policymakers and influencers to encourage and facilitate the formal adoption of these guidelines and frameworks into national legislation and policy.

*This recommendation is linked to all conclusions*

*Main implementation responsibility: ILO, and RCC*

*Main associated actors: EU, all engaged partner institutions*

**Recommendation 3: Strengthen mechanisms for sustainable stakeholder engagement and information sharing on project plans and activities to promote ownership over the project interventions and results.**

Consider establishing regular, structured forums and digital platforms that facilitate continuous dialogue and feedback between ESAP and its stakeholders to enhance transparency and collaboration.

Operational Recommendations:

3.1 Establish more formal engagement channels to ensure consistent and structured dialogue and information sharing with all relevant stakeholders.

3.2 Deliver information sessions or similar events to enhance stakeholders' understanding of project goals, methodologies, and their roles, increasing their capacity and willingness to contribute effectively.

*This recommendation is linked to all conclusions*

*Main implementation responsibility: ILO, and RCC*

*Main associated actors: EU, all engaged partner institutions*

**Recommendation 4: Strengthen project's engagement strategy by ensuring deep local context understanding, robust intervention logic and strong M&E protocols.**

Invest in comprehensive local context analyses to tailor the project's engagement strategy effectively, ensuring that interventions are culturally and socio-politically relevant. Additionally, implement robust monitoring and evaluation protocols that continuously assess and adjust the intervention logic based on real-time feedback and changing local dynamics, to enhance the project's impact and relevance.

Operational Recommendations:

4.1 Enhance ESAP's engagement strategies by developing a deeper understanding of the local and national contexts of the countries it operates in. This involves tailoring approaches to better align with the specific social, political, and legislative environments of each country, and in particular ensuring that social dialogue mechanisms are not only established but are also effective and sustainable.

4.2 Refine and establish a robust and pragmatic intervention logic for the project, which outlines a series of targeted interventions. This logic should recognise the realistic scope and influence that a regional project can exert, ensuring that the objectives are attainable and align with the overarching regional capacities and constraints.

4.3 Create detailed monitoring and evaluation protocols that include robust and realistic indicators, methods for assessment, and schedules for regular review.

4.4 Strengthen monitoring and evaluation frameworks to better track the impact of ESAP interventions on employment generation and the improvement of working conditions, in particular for vulnerable groups. This would involve developing more robust indicators that can capture both the direct and indirect effects of the project's initiatives aimed at vulnerable groups.

4.5 Ensure that findings from monitoring are systematically used to adapt and refine project strategies and interventions, enhancing responsiveness to on-the-ground realities.

*This recommendation is linked to all conclusions*

*Main implementation responsibility: EU, ILO, and RCC*

*Main associated actors: all engaged partner institutions*

**Recommendation 5: Promote and ensure consistent support and advocacy for social dialogue mechanisms.**

Consider developing a targeted advocacy plan that consistently promotes the benefits and importance of social dialogue mechanisms to government bodies and key stakeholders. Ensure that there is sustained support by providing training and resources to those involved in social dialogue, helping to maintain momentum and effectiveness over the long term.

Operational recommendations:

5.1 To improve the effectiveness of tripartite and bipartite social dialogue, advocate more strongly for government support and the active participation of all relevant stakeholders. This could include lobbying for legislative changes that favor the promotion of social dialogue, as well as providing more robust support for stakeholder engagement in dialogue processes.

*This recommendation is linked to all conclusions*

*Main implementation responsibility: ILO, and RCC*

*Main associated actors: EU, all engaged partner institutions*

**Recommendation 6: Develop a Comprehensive Exit Strategy**

Such strategy should include guidelines for national stakeholders to continue the implementation of the processes and tools developed by the project. This strategy should focus on transferring knowledge, scaling up successful practices, and ensuring that all project outcomes are fully integrated into national systems.

*This recommendation is linked to all conclusions*

*Main implementation responsibility: ILO, and RCC*

*Main associated actors: EU, all engaged partner institutions*

**7 KEY LESSONS LEARNED**

**7.1 Lessons learned re. relevance and the design of the project**

Thematic area of the project	Lesson learned
Regional cooperation and dialogue	The evaluation highlights a critical lesson about the importance of a thorough consideration of regional and economy contexts in the project planning. Further project iterations will need to invest in defining initial assumptions reflecting diverse political landscapes and varying individual economies commitment levels to avoid potential weakness in project effectiveness and sustainability.

Gender mainstreaming strategy	ESAP evidences a gap in the practical implementation of gender equality despite the project's theoretically stated commitment to it. Future project cycles need to develop a structured and comprehensive gender mainstreaming strategy at the operational level to ensure its genuine integration across project objectives, outcomes, and activities.
Sustainability strategy	The evaluation points out a reliance on certain outputs, such as knowledge exchange and regional platforms, which have a potential to remain in the long utilization by the beneficiaries, rather than developing a concrete sustainability plan. Future project iterations will need a more robust and diversified sustainability strategy is essential to ensure the lasting impact of the project.
Collaboration with relevant international stakeholders	The evaluation revealed that despite a few relevant collaborations, ESAP's engagements with similar initiatives of other international actors were rather sporadic. The absence of a concrete collaboration and synergy framework suggests a need for more structured and systematic approaches to foster joint efforts in the advancement of regional employment policies.

## 7.2 Lessons learned re. effectiveness

Thematic area of the project	Lesson learned
Regional cooperation and dialogue	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The success of projects like ESAP hinges on the willingness and sustained commitment of participating stakeholders. This necessitates the development of strategically structured activities that actively engage and foster stakeholder participation from the beginning of the project, underpinned by tangible confirmation of committed support.</li> <li>2. Active and direct communication between project management and national authorities, institutions, and other regional stakeholders is crucial. In-person interactions, including meetings, visits, and events, are particularly valuable for engaging stakeholders and building robust networks.</li> <li>3. While regional capacity-building activities and peer-learning are highly beneficial, their effectiveness is significantly enhanced when they are complemented by additional targeted technical support. This helps address the identified gaps and shortcomings.</li> <li>4. The complexity of regional initiatives necessitates a comprehensive project design that accounts for the specific needs and contexts of national actors. The project's design must align with national strategies and be complementary to existing national and international assistance to ensure effectiveness and relevance in the sector.</li> </ol>
Developing, monitoring and evaluating labour	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. The ESAP project's efforts in building capacities, supporting the creation of a centralised virtual platform and databases for labour</li> </ol>

Thematic area of the project	Lesson learned
market and social affairs policies and measures	market data have demonstrated the critical role that accessible, high-quality data plays in shaping informed policies. Collecting consistent data and making it readily available and understandable to policymakers is key to their actual use in policymaking. This requires ongoing efforts in data systematization, analysis, and dissemination, as well as training for stakeholders to effectively utilise this data for policy formulation and adjustments.
Tripartite and bipartite social dialogue	6. The fostering of regional collaboration and knowledge sharing is key to enhance social dialogue mechanisms.

### 7.3 Lessons learned re. efficiency

Thematic area of the project	Lesson learned
Resource efficiency and effectiveness	ESAP's efficient use of human and financial resources, demonstrates the project's resourcefulness under budgetary limitations and with a predominantly remote workforce is commendable. Moreover, ESAP's capacity to adapt to unforeseen challenges, such as policy changes and data security issues, without hindering the project's progress, underscores the value of flexibility and resilience in project management. These attributes are particularly relevant for projects operating in diverse environments and under similar resource constraints
Combination of regional and individual country approach	<p>The project's success in engaging regional stakeholders illustrates the significant value of regional platforms in promoting mutual understanding and harmonization with EU practices. Such collaboration is essential not only for fostering shared knowledge and preparation for EU accession but also for integrating into EU systems.</p> <p>The ESAP project's ability to act as a convener for regional exchange has highlighted the effectiveness of pooling knowledge and resources, which can be crucial in identifying and disseminating best practices across employment and labor market sectors. This collective regional approach, however, should be balanced with the recognition that integrated, systemic project design can enhance individual country efforts by leveraging synergies and ensuring resource efficiency.</p>

### 7.4 Lessons learned re. sustainability

Thematic area of the project	Lesson learned
Sustainability enhancing processes and tools as the	A key lesson learned from the ESAP project is the critical importance of establishing a comprehensive exit strategy to ensure the sustainability of its outcomes. Despite the effectiveness of the

Thematic area of the project	Lesson learned
alternative sustainability strategy to	project's activities, particularly in capacity building, the absence of a clear roadmap for national stakeholders to maintain and build upon these outcomes poses a significant risk to the project's long-term success and impact.

**ANNEXES**

**Annex 1: Terms of reference**

## Annex 2. Evaluation matrix

<b>EQ1 – Design</b>		
<i>Question: Was the intervention logic and the project’s assumptions and strategies appropriate for achieving the expected results and to ensure their sustainability over time? Which lessons learned can be drawn for the design of a future phase of the project and to an exit strategy?</i>		
<b>Rationale and coverage of the EQ<sup>93</sup>:</b>		
This question seeks to assess the appropriateness of the intervention logic, project assumptions, and strategies employed in ESAP to achieve the expected results and ensure their sustainability over time. By analyzing these aspects, valuable lessons will be extracted to inform the design of future phases of the project, as well as the development of an effective exit strategy that maintains the project's positive impact in the long term.		
<b>Evaluation criteria covered<sup>94</sup>: Relevance, design</b>		
<b>Judgement criteria<sup>95</sup> and indicators<sup>96</sup></b>	<b>Sources of data</b>	
	<b>Primary</b>	<b>Secondary</b>
<b>JC.1.1 Assumptions and strategies are appropriate for achievement of sustainable results</b>		
I-1.1.1 –The level of appropriateness of the project's assumptions and strategies in achieving the expected results and ensuring sustainability.	DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO, national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Council; social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates	EU-Western Balkans cooperation related policy documents; programming and reporting documentation; intervention-level documentation (e.g., descriptions of action, reports, data); EC strategic evaluations and annual reports; national strategic documents, Steering committees’ minutes of meetings (if available); open-source reports and assessments (e.g., WB reports, etc).

<sup>93</sup> Describe the rationale of the EQ and its coverage; why is this EQ relevant to answer to the evaluation mandate?

<sup>94</sup> What evaluation criterion/criteria is/are addressed by this EQ?

<sup>95</sup> Describe each selected JC and number them as illustrated in the template; the first numeric value represents the EQ the JC refers to.

<sup>96</sup> As above. The two first numeric values represent the JC the Indicators refer to.



I-1.1.2 – Key lessons learned from for the design of future phases of the project and the development of an effective exit strategy.	DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils; social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates	EU-Western Balkans cooperation related policy documents; programming and reporting documentation; intervention-level documentation (e.g., descriptions of action, reports, data); EC strategic evaluations and annual reports; national strategic documents, Steering committees' minutes of meetings (if available); open-source reports and assessments (e.g., WB reports, etc).
<b>JC.1.2 ESAP's strategies are appropriate to respond to the needs and priorities of its beneficiaries</b>		
I-1.2.1 – The degree of alignment with the needs and priorities of the beneficiaries and EU policies.	DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils; social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates	EU-Western Balkans cooperation related policy documents; programming and reporting documentation; intervention-level documentation (e.g., descriptions of action, reports, data); EC strategic evaluations and annual reports; national strategic documents, Steering committees' minutes of meetings (if available); open-source reports and assessments (e.g., WB reports, etc).
I-1.2.2 – The level of appropriateness of the project's approaches and strategies to the needs of beneficiaries as based on the needs and context assessments conducted by the Project.	DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils; social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates	EU-Western Balkans cooperation related policy documents; programming and reporting documentation; intervention-level documentation (e.g., descriptions of action, reports, data); EC strategic evaluations and annual reports; national strategic documents, Steering committees' minutes of meetings (if available); open-source reports and assessments (e.g., WB reports, etc).

<b>JC.1.3 - ESAP has appropriately mainstreamed gender and equity</b>		
I-1.4.1 – The degree to which ESAP has mainstreamed gender considerations in its activities and contributed to more gender-responsive labor and social policies.	DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils); social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates	EU-Western Balkans cooperation related policy documents; programming and reporting documentation; intervention-level documentation (e.g., descriptions of action, reports, data); EC strategic evaluations and annual reports; national strategic documents, Steering committees' minutes of meetings (if available); open-source reports and assessments (e.g., WB reports, etc).
<b>Data collection tools:</b> document review; KIIs, group discussions		

<b>EQ2 – Coordination &amp; Complementarity</b>		
<i>Question: Was ESAP complementary, promoted co-ordination and engagement and avoided duplication with other stakeholders' interventions at national and regional level and with EU bilateral actions in the six economies? Which lessons learned can be drawn for the design of a future phase of the project?</i>		
<b>Rationale and coverage of the EQ:</b>		
This EQ will help assess its effectiveness in promoting complementarity, coordination, and engagement with other stakeholders' interventions at the national and regional levels, as well as with EU bilateral actions in the six Western Balkan economies. Lessons learned will be collected to provide valuable insights for designing future phases of the project, ensuring that they maximize synergy with existing initiatives while avoiding duplication and enhancing the overall impact on the region's employment and social affairs sectors.		
<b>Evaluation criteria covered: Coordination &amp; complementarity</b>		
Judgement criteria and indicators	Sources of data	
	Primary	Secondary

<b>JC.2.1 ESAP's convener role assisted coordination with bilateral and multilateral interests towards a more productive policy dialogue</b>		
I-2.1.1 – The extent to which ESAP has identified and leveraged synergies with other stakeholders' interventions, both at the national and regional levels.	DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils); social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates	Programming and reporting documentation; intervention-level documentation; EC strategic evaluations and EU reports; open-source reports and assessments.

I-2.1.2 – Evidence of successful collaboration with external partners to enhance the overall impact of the project.	DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils); social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates	Programming and reporting documentation; intervention-level documentation; EC strategic evaluations and EU reports; open-source reports and assessments.
<b>JC.2.2 The Project complemented/contributed to achievement of results of other EU support interventions in the sectors</b>		
I-2.2.1 – The degree of collaboration and engagement between ESAP and other EU-funded projects, including joint activities, workshops, or joint initiatives.	DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils); social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates	Programming and reporting documentation; intervention-level documentation; EC strategic evaluations and EU reports; open-source reports and assessments.
I-2.2.2 – Existence and effectiveness of coordination mechanisms or working groups involving ESAP and other EU interventions to ensure harmonization and synergy in project activities.	DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils); social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates	Programming and reporting documentation; intervention-level documentation; EC strategic evaluations and EU reports; open-source reports and assessments.
<b>Data collection tools:</b> document review; KIIs		

### EQ3 – Efficiency

*Question: To what extent has ESAP used its resources efficiently in delivering set results?*

#### **Rationale and coverage of the EQ:**

This question will provide an assessment of the extent to which ESAP has adequately allocated and used financial and human resources and delivered the planned activities and outputs in a timely and cost-efficient manner. It will also assess the efficiency of the regional approach compared to a bilateral approach.

#### **Evaluation criteria covered: Efficiency**

Judgement criteria and indicators	Sources of data	
	Primary	Secondary

**JC.3.1 The ESAP's effectively allocated and utilized financial and human resources to achieve its planned activities and outputs.**

I-3.1.1 – Percentage of budget allocation vs. actual expenditure.	DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils); social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates	Project documents, platform meeting reports, project reports, steering committee meetings minutes, external reviews
I-3.1.2 – Ratio of planned activities and outputs delivered on time and factors affecting the delivery.	DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils); social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates	Project documents, platform meeting reports, project reports, steering committee meetings minutes, external reviews
<b>JC.3.2 The ESAP's integration of regional and bilateral approach, focusing on the cost-efficiency and timeliness of implementation.</b>		
I-3.2.1 – Stakeholder satisfaction and feedback re. efficiency of the regional approach compared to a bilateral approach	DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils); social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates	Project documents, platform meeting reports, project reports, steering committee meetings minutes, external reviews
I-3.2.2 – The level of collaborative synergy achieved among participating entities within the regional platform	DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils); social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates	Project documents, platform meeting reports, project reports, steering committee meetings minutes, external reviews

#### **EQ4 – Regional cooperation and dialogue**

*Question: To what extent has the ESAP project contributed to enhancing regional cooperation and dialogue in the Employment and social affairs sector?*

##### **Rationale and coverage of the EQ:**

This question will provide an assessment of how the regional events and activities have encouraged stakeholders to initiate and sustain regional actions on their own, and the extent to which the project has contributed to increased access to relevant knowledge and practices generated within the region. In addition, the evaluation team will be expected to assess the potential for policy transformation at regional and economy levels of the evidence generated by the project.

**Evaluation criteria covered: Effectiveness, sustainability, added value**

Judgement criteria and indicators	Sources of data	
	Primary	Secondary
<b>JC.4.1 The ESAP's</b> regional events and activities have encouraged regional cooperation and exchange		
I-4.1.1 – The degree to which ESAP has fostered more sustainable regional cooperation in the Employment and social affairs sectors.	DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils); social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates	Project documents, platform meeting reports, project reports, steering committee meetings minutes, external reviews
I-4.1.2 – Evidence of concrete advances in the sector in the region resulting from collaborative activities, such as regional meetings, joint projects, or policy dialogues, involving Western Balkan.	DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils); social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates	Project documents, platform meeting reports, project reports, steering committee meetings minutes, external reviews
<b>JC.4.2 The ESAP</b> contributed to increased access to relevant knowledge and practices and policy advancements within the region		

I-4.2.1 – The extent to which ESAP has facilitated knowledge exchange and mutual learning among Western Balkans.	DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils); social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates	Project documents, platform meeting reports, project reports, steering committee meetings minutes, external reviews
I-4.2.2 – Evidence of comparative advantage of regional approach for best practice sharing, peer reviews, or joint research initiatives resulting in improved knowledge and expertise	DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils); social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates	Project documents, platform meeting reports, project reports, steering committee meetings minutes, external reviews
I-4.2.3 - Evidence and examples of policy changes or reforms influenced by ESAP's platform activities, evidence and recommendations.	DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils); social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates	Project documents, platform meeting reports, project reports, steering committee meetings minutes, external reviews
I-4.2.4 Evidence of added value of the ESAP project compared to other instruments and tools to promote knowlegde sharing, peer learning such as TAIEX and SOCIEUX+ which bring peers from the EU Member States including on social dialogue, employment issues	DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils); social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates	Project documents, platform meeting reports, project reports, steering committee meetings minutes, external reviews
<b>JC.5.3 - Lessons learned were generated to inform further regional initiatives in the sector</b>		
Examples of lessons learned from the project's support to the regional cooperation and dialogue in the Employment and social affairs	DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils); social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates	Project documents, platform meeting reports, project reports, steering committee meetings minutes, external reviews
<b>Data collection tools:</b> document review, KIIs		

**EQ 5 – Developing, monitoring and evaluating labour market and social affairs policies and measures.**

*Question: To what extent has the ESAP project contributed to strengthening institutional capacities of national partners in developing, monitoring and evaluating labour market and social affairs policies and measures?*

**Rationale and coverage of the EQ:**

This question will allow the assessment of the project's support to the development of relevant tools for the collection and analysis of labour market data, and the extent to which that data is being used by the beneficiaries and contributing to more informed and effective policymaking processes, and if those tools ensure sustainability of the results. As such the question will allow the assessment of the extent to which the project has improved the capacities and provided adequate tools for national partners to better assess and develop their social and labour policies and if this support is contributing to improved policies. In particular, the team is requested to assess how the intervention in this area is contributing to increased capacities and available tools in a sustainable manner.

**Evaluation criteria covered: Effectiveness, sustainability, added value**

Judgement criteria and indicators	Sources of data	
	Primary	Secondary

**JC.5.1 ESAP project contributed to strengthening institutional capacities of national partners in developing, monitoring and evaluating labour market and social affairs policies and measures**

I-5.1.1 –Evidence and examples of <b>sustainably</b> strengthened institutional capacities of national partners in developing, monitoring and evaluating labour market and social affairs policies and measures	DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils; social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates	Project documents, platform meeting reports, project reports, steering committee meetings minutes, external reviews
I-5.1.2 – Evidence and examples of <b>sustainably</b> improved collection, analysis, dissemination and use by relevant stakeholders of labour market information	DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils; social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates	Project documents, platform meeting reports, project reports, steering committee meetings minutes, external reviews

<b>JC.5.2 ESAP project contributions to the improved monitoring influenced labour market and social affairs policies and measures</b>		
I-5.2.1 – The extent to which labour market data generated through ESAP's tools and resources (publications, briefs, etc.) are actively used by beneficiaries in shaping their policymaking processes and decisions.	DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils; social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates	Project documents, platform meeting reports, project reports, steering committee meetings minutes, external reviews
I-5.2.2 – Evidence and examples that the results are maintained and continue to inform policymaking beyond the project's duration.	DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils); social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates	Project documents, platform meeting reports, project reports, steering committee meetings minutes, external reviews
<b>JC.5.3 - Lessons were generated to inform future interventions</b>		
I-5.3.1 – Examples of lessons learned from the project's support to the monitoring and evaluating labour market and social affairs policies and measures	DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils; social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates	Project documents, platform meeting reports, project reports, steering committee meetings minutes, external reviews
<b>Data collection tools:</b>		



**EQ 6 – Tripartite and bipartite social dialogue**

*Question: To what extent has the ESAP project promoted the effectiveness of tripartite and bipartite social dialogue in improving social equity and working and living standards of citizens?*

**Rationale and coverage of the EQ:**

This Question will allow an assessment of whether the tools and support being provided by the project to key stakeholders in national social dialogue structures in the three areas of support - Economic and Social Councils' (ESCs) performance and relevance, collective bargaining, and amicable settlement of labour disputes - is contributing to a more participatory and effective policymaking in the region.

**Evaluation criteria covered: Effectiveness, sustainability, added value****Judgement criteria and indicators****Sources of data****Primary****Secondary****JC.6.1 ESAP project promoted the effectiveness of tripartite and bipartite social dialogue in improving social equity and working and living standards of citizens**

I-6.1.1 – Evidence and examples of ESAP project contributions to the effectiveness and impact of tripartite and bipartite social dialogue mechanisms in improving social equity and working and living standards of citizens in the Western Balkans, with a focus on ESCs.

DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils; social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates

EU-Western Balkans cooperation related policy documents; programming and reporting documentation; intervention-level documentation (e.g., descriptions of action, reports, data); EC strategic evaluations and annual reports; national strategic documents, Steering committees' minutes of meetings (if available); open-source reports and assessments (e.g., WB reports, etc).

<p>I-6.1.2 – Evidence and examples of contributions of ESAP support to the more sustainable social dialogue initiatives on social equity, including improvements in working conditions, labor rights, and standards of living for citizens in the region.</p>	<p>DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils; social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates</p>	<p>EU-Western Balkans cooperation related policy documents; programming and reporting documentation; intervention-level documentation (e.g., descriptions of action, reports, data); EC strategic evaluations and annual reports; national strategic documents, Steering committees' minutes of meetings (if available); open-source reports and assessments (e.g., WB reports, etc).</p>
<p>I-6.1.3 – Evidence and examples of the outcomes and results of collective bargaining processes facilitated by ESAP, including the extent to which they have contributed to improved working conditions and living standards.</p>	<p>DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils; social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates</p>	<p>EU-Western Balkans cooperation related policy documents; programming and reporting documentation; intervention-level documentation (e.g., descriptions of action, reports, data); EC strategic evaluations and annual reports; national strategic documents, Steering committees' minutes of meetings (if available); open source reports and assessments (e.g., WB reports, etc).</p>
<p>I-6.1.4 – Evidence and examples of the effectiveness of amicable settlement mechanisms for labor disputes supported by ESAP, including their role in resolving disputes and maintaining harmonious labor relations.</p>	<p>DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils); social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates</p>	<p>EU-Western Balkans cooperation related policy documents; programming and reporting documentation; intervention-level documentation (e.g., descriptions of action, reports, data); EC strategic evaluations and annual reports; national strategic documents, Steering committees' minutes of meetings (if available); open source reports and assessments (e.g., WB reports, etc).</p>
<p>I-6.1.5 – The degree to which the tools and support provided by ESAP have contributed to a more participatory and inclusive policymaking process in the Western Balkans, particularly in the areas of social dialogue and labor relations.</p>	<p>DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils); social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates</p>	<p>EU-Western Balkans cooperation related policy documents; programming and reporting documentation; intervention-level documentation (e.g., descriptions of action, reports, data); EC strategic evaluations and annual reports; national strategic documents, Steering committees' minutes of meetings (if available); open-source</p>

		reports and assessments (e.g., WB reports, etc).
I-6.1.6 – Evidence and examples of the impact of social dialogue initiatives promoted by ESAP on social equity, including improvements in working conditions, labor rights, and standards of living for citizens in the region.	DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils); social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates	EU-Western Balkans cooperation related policy documents; programming and reporting documentation; intervention-level documentation (e.g., descriptions of action, reports, data); EC strategic evaluations and annual reports; national strategic documents, Steering committees’ minutes of meetings (if available); open-source reports and assessments (e.g., WB reports, etc).
<b>Data collection tools:</b> document review; KIIs, group discussions		

### EQ 7 – Transformative effects of ESAP project

*Question: To what extent has the ESAP project contributed to improving employment opportunities and working conditions in the region as a whole and in each of the six economies, in particular for most vulnerable groups?*

#### **Rationale and coverage of the EQ:**

The evaluation question will assess the extent of ESAP's contribution to improving employment opportunities and working conditions in the Western Balkans, as well as within each of the six beneficiary economies, and the project's impact on the overall labor market and working conditions. The Western Balkans region faces employment challenges, including high unemployment rates and vulnerable groups, such as women, youth, long-term unemployed individuals, and members of the Roma community, experiencing disproportionately adverse conditions. ESAP was designed with the aim of addressing these issues and enhancing labor market opportunities. This assessment seeks to analyze the project's effectiveness in achieving these objectives by assessing changes in employment opportunities, working conditions, and the extent to which it has improved the situation for the most vulnerable groups. The assessment will also consider potential variations in outcomes among the six beneficiary economies, providing insights into the project's regional impact and specific contributions in each beneficiary.

#### **Evaluation criteria covered: Impact, sustainability, added value**

#### **Judgement criteria and indicators**

#### **Sources of data**

**Primary**

**Secondary**

#### **JC.7.1 ESAP project contributed to improving employment opportunities and working conditions in the region**

<p>I-7.1.1 – Evidence of ESAP's contributions to changes in regional employment rates, including overall employment growth.</p>	<p>DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils); social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates</p>	<p>EU-Western Balkans cooperation related policy documents; programming and reporting documentation; intervention-level documentation (e.g., descriptions of action, reports, data); EC strategic evaluations and annual reports; national strategic documents, Steering committees' minutes of meetings (if available); open-source reports and assessments (e.g., WB reports, etc).</p>
<p>I-7.1.2 – Evidence of ESAP's contributions to improvements in working conditions, including factors such as occupational safety, job security, and access to social benefits, in the Western Balkans.</p>	<p>DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils); social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates</p>	<p>EU-Western Balkans cooperation related policy documents; programming and reporting documentation; intervention-level documentation (e.g., descriptions of action, reports, data); EC strategic evaluations and annual reports; national strategic documents, Steering committees' minutes of meetings (if available); open-source reports and assessments (e.g., WB reports, etc).</p>

<p>I-7.1.3 – Identification and description of variations in employment and working conditions outcomes among the six beneficiary economies, highlighting differences in project impact and regional dynamics.</p>	<p>DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils); social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates</p>	<p>EU-Western Balkans cooperation related policy documents; programming and reporting documentation; intervention-level documentation (e.g., descriptions of action, reports, data); EC strategic evaluations and annual reports; national strategic documents, Steering committees’ minutes of meetings (if available); open-source reports and assessments (e.g., WB reports, etc).</p>
<p>I-7.1.4 Evidence and examples of project's contributions to better labour and social outcomes for the most vulnerable groups</p>	<p>DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils); social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates</p>	<p>EU-Western Balkans cooperation related policy documents; programming and reporting documentation; intervention-level documentation (e.g., descriptions of action, reports, data); EC strategic evaluations and annual reports; national strategic documents, Steering committees’ minutes of meetings (if available); open-source reports and assessments (e.g., WB reports, etc).</p>

I-7.1.4 Evidence and examples of project's contributions to regional economic integration in line with the EU's single market rules in particular regarding the free movement of workers, working conditions of workers from another economy	DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils); social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates	EU-Western Balkans cooperation related policy documents; programming and reporting documentation; intervention-level documentation (e.g., descriptions of action, reports, data); EC strategic evaluations and annual reports; national strategic documents, Steering committees' minutes of meetings (if available); open-source reports and assessments (e.g., WB reports, etc).
<b>Data collection tools:</b> document review; KIIs, group discussions		

**EQ 8 – Impact - Alignment of the Western Balkans policies and systems with the EU standards and acquis in the area of social policy and employment**

*Question: To what extent has ESAP contributed to the alignment of the Western Balkans policies and systems with the EU standards and acquis in the area of social policy and employment?*

**Rationale and coverage of the EQ:**

The evaluation question regarding the extent of ESAP's contribution to aligning Western Balkans' policies and systems with EU standards and *acquis* in social policy and employment is motivated by the need to assess the project's impact on fostering regional convergence with EU norms. ESAP's objectives include addressing informal employment, promoting formalization of undeclared work, and facilitating the transition from economic inactivity to employment in the Western Balkans. This evaluation seeks to analyze whether ESAP has generated credible evidence, enhanced institutional capacities, and improved policy-making, particularly in relation to vulnerable groups such as women, youth, long-term unemployed individuals, and members of the Roma community. Additionally, it aims to assess ESAP's gender, environmental and climate change adaptation mainstreaming efforts and potential variations in outcomes among the six beneficiary economies, while considering the region's future participation in the European Platform Tackling Undeclared Work.

**Evaluation criteria covered: Effectiveness, sustainability, added value**

<b>Judgement criteria<sup>97</sup> and indicators<sup>98</sup></b>	<b>Sources of data</b>	
	<b>Primary</b>	<b>Secondary</b>

**JC.8.1 ESAP project contributed to increased alignment of the Western Balkans policies and systems with the EU standards and acquis**

<sup>97</sup> Describe each selected JC and number them as illustrated in the template; the first numeric value represents the EQ the JC refers to.

<sup>98</sup> As above. The two first numeric values represent the JC the Indicators refer to.

<p>I-8.1.1 – Evidence of project's contributions to the implementation of the employment and social dimension of the Economic Reform Programmes (ERPs) and of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) and EU acquis in the beneficiaries</p>	<p>DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils); social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates</p>	<p>EU-Western Balkans cooperation related policy documents; programming and reporting documentation; intervention-level documentation (e.g., descriptions of action, reports, data); EC strategic evaluations and annual reports; national strategic documents, Steering committees' minutes of meetings (if available); open-source reports and assessments (e.g., WB reports, etc).</p>
<p>I-8.1.2 – Evidence of project's contributions to the alignment of practises in beneficiaries with EU models (e.g. PES bench learning, Labour inspectorates, Western Balkans' Network Tackling Undeclared Work, etc.)</p>	<p>DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils); social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates</p>	<p>EU-Western Balkans cooperation related policy documents; programming and reporting documentation; intervention-level documentation (e.g., descriptions of action, reports, data); EC strategic evaluations and annual reports; national strategic documents, Steering committees' minutes of meetings (if available); open-source reports and assessments (e.g., WB reports, etc).</p>
<p>I-8.1.2 – Perception of internal and external stakeholders of ESAP's contribution to those reform processes</p>	<p>DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils); social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates</p>	
<p><b>JC.8.2 ESAP project contributed to better policies for vulnerable groups</b></p>		

<p>I-8.2.1 – Evidence of project contributions to the improved policy-making processes and outcomes in the areas of social policy and employment</p>	<p>DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils); social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates</p>	<p>EU-Western Balkans cooperation related policy documents; programming and reporting documentation; intervention-level documentation (e.g., descriptions of action, reports, data); EC strategic evaluations and annual reports; national strategic documents, Steering committees’ minutes of meetings (if available); open-source reports and assessments (e.g., WB reports, etc).</p>
<p>I-8.2.2 – Evidence and description of potential differences in outcomes among the six beneficiary economies, highlighting variations in policy alignment and impact.</p>	<p>DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES; Economic and Social Councils) social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates</p>	<p>EU-Western Balkans cooperation related policy documents; programming and reporting documentation; intervention-level documentation (e.g., descriptions of action, reports, data); EC strategic evaluations and annual reports; national strategic documents, Steering committees’ minutes of meetings (if available); open-source reports and assessments (e.g., WB reports, etc).</p>
<p>I-8.2.3 – Evidence of project contributions to the labor and social outcomes for vulnerable groups, including women, youth, long-term unemployed individuals, and members of the Roma community.</p>	<p>DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils); social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates</p>	<p>EU-Western Balkans cooperation related policy documents; programming and reporting documentation; intervention-level documentation (e.g., descriptions of action, reports, data); EC strategic evaluations and annual reports; national strategic documents, Steering committees’ minutes of meetings (if available); open source reports and assessments (e.g., WB reports, etc).</p>



I-8.2.3 – Evidence of project contributions to the the readiness and progress made by the Western Balkans' Network Tackling Undeclared Work in preparing beneficiaries for their future participation in the European Platform Tackling Undeclared Work.	DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils; social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates	EU-Western Balkans cooperation related policy documents; programming and reporting documentation; intervention-level documentation (e.g., descriptions of action, reports, data); EC strategic evaluations and annual reports; national strategic documents, Steering committees' minutes of meetings (if available); open source reports and assessments (e.g., WB reports, etc).
<b>Data collection tools:</b> document review; KIIs, group discussions		

<b>EQ 9 – Sustainability</b>		
<i>Question: How would the processes and tools created/promoted by ESAP continue if ESAP stopped operating?</i>		
<b>Rationale and coverage of the EQ:</b> This evaluation question will assess the extent to which the processes and tools created/promoted are uptaken by national stakeholders and will be maintained upon expiry of ESAP project. This evaluation seeks to analyze whether ESAP has generated capacities, motivation and commitment by beneficiaries to continue using tools and processes in their work.		
<b>Evaluation criteria covered: sustainability, added value</b>		
<b>Judgement criteria<sup>99</sup> and indicators<sup>100</sup></b>	<b>Sources of data</b>	
	<b>Primary</b>	<b>Secondary</b>
<b>JC.9.1 The Processes and tools established / facilitated by ESAP are in use by beneficiaries</b>		
I-9.1.1 – Evidence that platforms, processes and tools established/facilitated by the project are still in use following the finalisation of ESAP II	DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils), social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates	EU-Western Balkans cooperation related policy documents; programming and reporting documentation; intervention-level documentation (e.g., descriptions of action, reports, data); EC strategic evaluations and annual reports; national strategic documents, Steering committees' minutes of meetings (if available); open source reports and assessments (e.g., WB reports, etc).

<sup>99</sup> Describe each selected JC and number them as illustrated in the template; the first numeric value represents the EQ the JC refers to.

<sup>100</sup> As above. The two first numeric values represent the JC the Indicators refer to.

I-9.1.2 – ESAP exit strategy was developed and in use by the project partners	DG NEAR, DG EMPL, RCC, ILO national institutions (Ministries of Labour and Social policy; PES, Economic and Social Councils); social partners; IFIs, other development partners, Labour Inspectorates	EU-Western Balkans cooperation related policy documents; programming and reporting documentation; intervention-level documentation (e.g., descriptions of action, reports, data); EC strategic evaluations and annual reports; national strategic documents, Steering committees’ minutes of meetings (if available); open-source reports and assessments (e.g., WB reports, etc).
<b>Data collection tools:</b> document review; KIIs, group discussions		

### **Annex 3: List of interviewed persons**

list available as a separate document.

## Annex 4: Interview Guides

### COMMON INTRODUCTION FOR ALL INTERVIEWS

(This guide shall serve as basis for interviews and discussions with Key informants)

We are an evaluation team commissioned to carry out the Final Evaluation of the Employment and Social Affairs Platforms (Phases I and II), assessing the ESAP project's performance, examining its outcomes in relation to expected objectives and delineating the factors underlying these results. Additionally, the evaluation aims to extract key lessons, draw conclusions, and provide recommendations to enhance future interventions, particularly a potential third phase of ESAP. We are asking you to participate in the evaluation because you can contribute a relevant and valuable perspective on the functioning of this project. If you decide to participate, you will be interviewed by members of the evaluation team for a duration of approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour.

**Participation is voluntary:** Your participation in the interview is voluntary. You can withdraw from the interview after it has begun, for any reason, with no penalty.

**Confidentiality:** The reports from this and the other meetings will collect and summarize the views and opinions of participants without connecting them to specific individuals and without using names at any time. The ET will retain the names of the interviewees in the event we will need to reach out to you for further questions. However, any report of this research will be presented in a way that makes it as difficult as possible for anyone to determine the identity of individuals participating in the evaluation. Your responses will be kept anonymous in the final results.

Are you willing to be part of this discussion? (verbal response only requested)

Respondent (M/F): \_\_\_\_\_  
Respondent Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Title and Function: \_\_\_\_\_  
Interviewer Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Time: \_\_\_\_\_  
Location: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Interview Guide for RCC, ILO, DG NEAR, DG EMPL**

### **EQ 1. Design and relevance.**

#### **1. Design**

- In your opinion, how well was the project designed to ensure that its assumptions and strategies work towards achieving the expected results and ensuring sustainability? What worked well and what did not?
- What key lessons have been learned for designing future phases of the project and developing an effective exit strategy?

#### **2. Beneficiaries' Needs and Priorities:**

- How aligned were the project's approaches and strategies with the needs and priorities of the beneficiaries' needs?
- Were the project's strategies based on the needs and context assessments conducted? What was missing?

#### **3. Gender and Equity Mainstreaming:**

- To what extent has the project mainstreamed gender considerations in its activities and contributed to more gender-responsive labour and social policies?
- How has the project targeted/ responded to vulnerabilities and equity considerations?
- How were other cross-cutting issues been mainstreamed (e.g. environment, climate change)

### **EQ2 – Coordination & Complementarity**

#### **1. Coordination & Complementarity**

- To what extent has the ESAP ensured complementarity with other similar interventions? Please, provide examples?
- To what extent and in what way did ESAP promote coordination and engagement, and avoided duplication with other stakeholders' interventions at national and regional levels?
- How about other EU bilateral actions in the six economies? Describe the collaboration and engagement between ESAP and other EU-funded projects
- Which lessons learned can be drawn for the design of a future phase of the project?

#### **2. Convener Role and Coordination:**

- How effectively did ESAP identify and promote regional cooperation and exchange?
- Can you provide evidence of successful collaboration with external partners to enhance the overall impact of the project?
- Were coordination mechanisms or working groups involving ESAP and other EU interventions effective in ensuring harmonization and synergy in project activities?

### **EQ3 – Efficiency**

#### **1. Resource Allocation and Utilization:**

- How effectively were financial and human resources allocated and utilized to achieve planned activities and outputs?

- What factors influenced the delivery of planned activities on time?

## **2. Integration of Regional and Bilateral Approach:**

- How satisfied were stakeholders with the efficiency of the regional approach compared to a bilateral approach? What was missing? What would you have done differently in hindsight?
- What level of collaborative synergy was achieved among participating entities within the regional platform?

## **EQ4 – Regional Cooperation and Dialogue**

### **1. Encouragement of Regional Cooperation:**

- Describe how ESAP fostered sustainable regional cooperation in the Employment and social affairs sectors.
- In your view, what have been the examples of concrete advances resulting from collaborative activities involving the Western Balkans?
- What is missing? What are some key lessons learned?

### **2. Access to Relevant Knowledge and Practices:**

- How has ESAP facilitated knowledge exchange and mutual learning among Western Balkans? Describe approaches and results that you are proud of
- Provide examples of policy changes influenced by ESAP's platform activities?

## **EQ5 – Developing, Monitoring, and Evaluating Labour Market and Social Affairs Policies and Measures**

### **1. Strengthening Institutional Capacities:**

- Provide evidence of sustainably strengthened institutional capacities of national partners when it comes to collection, analysis, dissemination, and use of labour market information?
- How has ESAP contributed to improved collection, analysis, dissemination, and use of labour market information? What is missing?

### **2. Impact on Policy Monitoring:**

- To what extent are labour market data generated through ESAP actively used in policymaking processes?
- Can you provide examples of lessons learned from the project's support to monitoring and evaluating labour market and social affairs policies and measures?

## **EQ6 – Tripartite and Bipartite Social Dialogue**

### **1. Effectiveness of activities for Promotion of Social Dialogue:**

- Provide evidence of ESAP's contributions to the effectiveness and impact of social dialogue mechanisms.
- Can you describe outcomes in terms of collective bargaining processes facilitated by ESAP? What is missing?

### **2. Impact on Working Conditions and Living Standards:**

- How have social dialogue initiatives promoted by ESAP contributed to improvements in working conditions and standards of living?

## **EQ7 – Transformative Effects of ESAP Project**

### **1. Improvement in Employment Opportunities:**

- Provide evidence of ESAP's contributions to changes in regional employment rates and improvements in working conditions.
- Can you identify variations in outcomes among the six beneficiary economies?

### **2. Impact on Vulnerable Groups:**

- Describe the project's contributions to better labor and social outcomes for vulnerable groups.
- How has ESAP contributed to regional economic integration and the free movement of workers?

## **EQ8 – Impact - Alignment of the Western Balkans Policies and Systems with EU Standards**

### **1. Increased Alignment with EU Standards:**

- Provide evidence of ESAP's contributions to implementing EU employment and social dimensions.
- Can you describe the project's contributions to improved policies for vulnerable groups?

## **EQ9 – Sustainability**

### **1. Continuation of Processes and Tools:**

- To what extent are platforms, processes, and tools established by the project still in use? What is missing? What could have ESAP done differently/more to promote sustainability?
- Was an exit strategy developed and utilized by project partners?

## **Interview guide for national institutions and other actors participating in ESAP events and activities**

### **Design:**

1. Were the project's strategies appropriate for achieving expected results and ensuring sustainability?
2. How well did the project align with the needs of your institution/your economy, including gender considerations? What was missing? What should ESAP do differently?

### **Coordination & Complementarity:**

1. How effectively did ESAP coordinate with other stakeholders' interventions at national and regional levels?
2. Can you provide examples of successful collaboration with external partners to enhance project impact?
3. Are you aware of some coordination mechanisms that were employed by ESAP that were effective in avoiding duplication and promoting complementarity?
4. How did ESAP contribute to achieving results of other EU-funded projects in the sectors?

### **Efficiency:**

1. To the extent of your knowledge, how efficiently has ESAP project delivered its result (timewise, finances wise)? What were challenges that were encountered in delivering planned activities on time, and how were they addressed?
2. In your opinion, was the regional approach employed by ESAP more cost-effective and timely compared to bilateral approaches that some other projects apply? What are the pros/cons of regional approach vs. bilateral (economy specific) approach?
4. How satisfied were you with the efficiency of the project's implementation?

**Regional Cooperation:**

1. To what extent did ESAP encourage sustainable regional cooperation in Employment and social affairs?
2. Can you provide examples of concrete advances in your institution/economy resulting from collaborative activities, such as regional meetings or joint projects?
3. How did ESAP facilitate knowledge exchange and policy advancements within the region?
4. Were there any challenges in promoting regional cooperation, and how were they mitigated?

**Institutional Capacity Building:**

1. To what extent has ESAP effectively strengthened your institutional capacities or those of other national partners in developing, monitoring, and evaluating labour market and social affairs policies and measures? Can you provide examples of sustainably strengthened institutional capacities in your institution or of other national partners? What was missing?
2. How actively were ESAP's tools used in informing your/your economy's policymaking processes, and what impact did they have? Please, provide examples.
3. Were there any challenges in capacity building efforts, and how were they addressed?

**Social Dialogue Promotion:**

1. How successful was ESAP in promoting effective tripartite and bipartite social dialogue?
2. What impact did social dialogue initiatives have on improving working conditions and living standards?
3. Can you describe outcomes and results of collective bargaining processes facilitated by ESAP?
4. Were there any challenges in promoting social dialogue, and how were they overcome?

**Transformative Effects:**

1. What measurable improvements did ESAP contribute to when it comes to employment opportunities and working conditions in the region? Please, provide some examples
2. What measurable improvements did ESAP contribute to more consistent national policies and mechanisms to address the needs of vulnerable groups, and what impact did it have on regional economic integration?
3. Can you provide examples of project contributions to regional economic growth and stability?
4. Were there any unintended consequences of project interventions, positive or negative?

**Alignment with EU Standards:**

1. What evidence exists of ESAP's contribution to aligning policies and systems with EU standards in the area of social policy and employment? What were the key achievements/contributions?
2. How do you perceive ESAP's role in advancing policy reforms and implementing EU acquis?
3. Can you provide examples of policy changes in your economy that were influenced by ESAP's platform activities?
4. Were there any challenges in aligning policies and systems with EU standards, and how were they addressed?

**Sustainability:**

1. Are processes and tools established by ESAP still in use after project completion?
2. What measures were taken by ESAP to ensure the national ownership over results and also sustainability of project outcomes beyond the project duration?
3. Can you provide examples of lessons learned regarding sustainability for future interventions in the sector?



## Annex 5: Bibliography

No	Title of Document
1	VS-2016-0002 02 ILO ESAP Annex I - logframe revised
2	VS-2016-0002 03 ILO ESAP Annex IV - timeline - revised
3	VS-2016-0002 04 ILO ESAP narrative - revised document clean_final
4	VS-2016-0002 06 1. Budget
5	VS-2016-0002 07 2. Justification
6	VS-2016-0002 08 3. Sources of funding
7	VS-2016-0002 11 ILO ESAP Annex III - communication and visibility strategy - revised
8	ANNEXE I - Work programme
9	ANNEXE III - Budget
10	VS-2019-0347 02 Description of the action (3)
11	VS-2019-0347 04 Budget
12	VS-2019-0347 07 Communication and visibility
13	VS-2022-0062 02 nILO_ESAP2_Budg_rev_Final
14	VS-2022-0062 03 nILO_ESAP2_WorkPlan_Year3_Ext_Final
15	ILO ESAP Final Eval Report 11122019
16	Annex 1 - Logframe (002)
17	Annex 2 - Work Plan Timeline (002)
18	ESAP Annual progress report_31 May 2017
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21	ESAP Annual progress report_2018_final_31.05.2018
22	Annex_4_Logframe
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24	ESAP Annual progress report_May 2019
25	ESAP2_AnnualReport1_060121_AH_FINAL
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28	Programming document_ESAP I
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30	RCC Final REPORT_ESAP I
31	VS-2016-0054 02 RCC ESAP timeline 3.11
32	VS-2016-0054 03 RCC ESAP Logframe 3.11
33	VS-2016-0054 04 RCC ESAP narrative 3.11
34	VS-2016-0054 06 1. Budget
35	VS-2016-0054 07 2. Justification
36	VS-2016-0054 08 3. Expected sources of funding
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40	VS-2022-0055 02 Sub ESAP Log Frame.docx
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43	Employment and Social Affairs Platform 2 public reports, tools, databases and learning resources
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52	Revised Indicative Strategy Paper (2014-2020) for North Macedonia
53	Revised Indicative Strategy Paper (2014-2020) for Montenegro
54	Revised Indicative Strategy Paper (2014-2020) for Serbia

## Annex 6. ESAP's reconstructed intervention logic

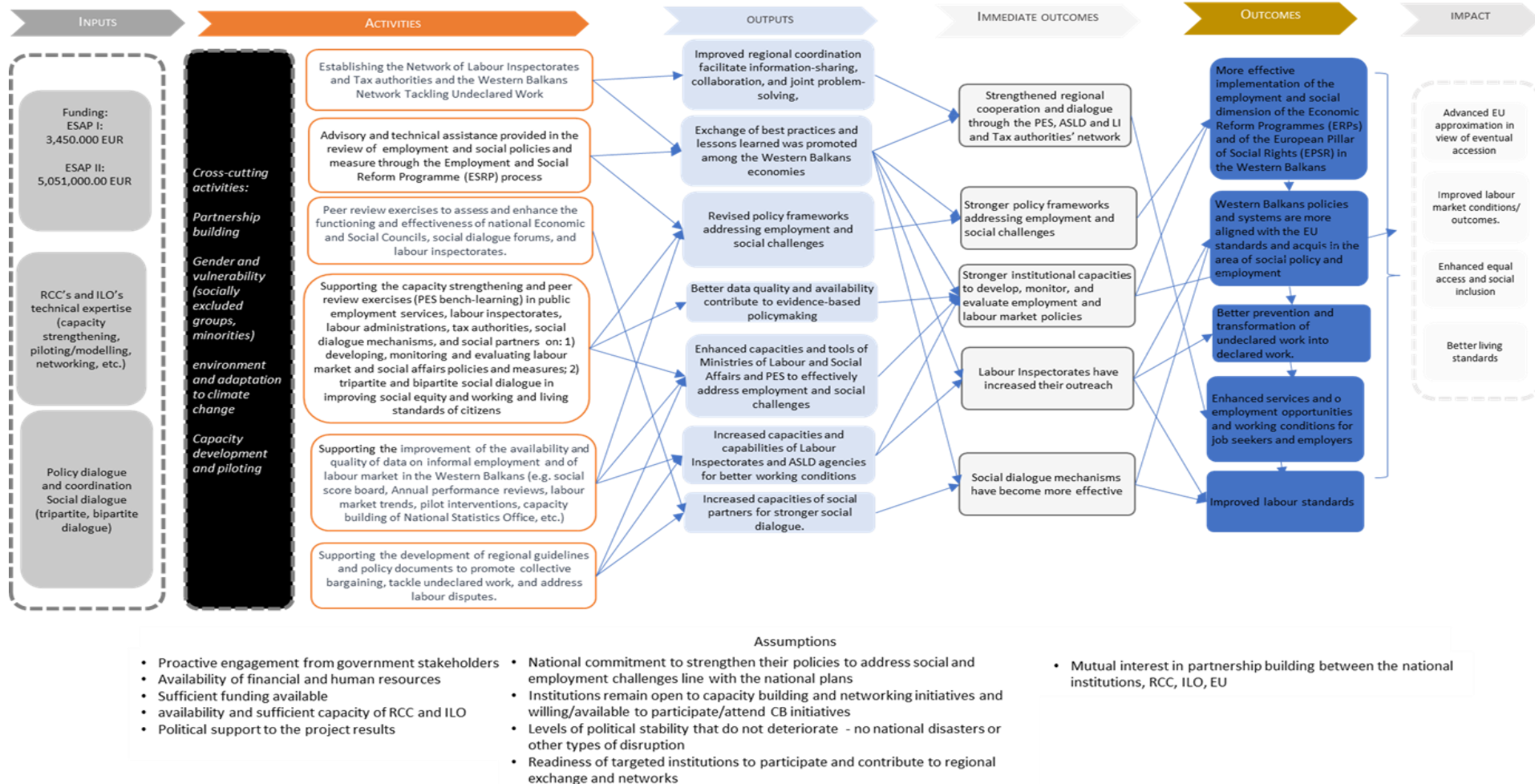


FIGURE 1. RECONSTRUCTED INTERVENTION LOGIC OF ESAP PROJECT (ESAP I AND ESAP II COMBINED)