Tracing policy impact – The case of European Centre projects*

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Introduction

This Policy Brief introduces an evaluation approach to assess policy impact of research and development projects. This approach was applied on selected European Centre projects to show whether and how these activities have triggered policy relevance and impact. The study found that all selected projects reached important levels of awareness-raising and confluence, while some had a notable impact on the process, system and beneficiaries. Finally, the Policy Brief recommends how policy impact could be supported and strengthened in future projects.

Background: How can policy impact be traced?

Public policy generally refers to guidelines and interventions by a public body to tackle recurring problems pertaining to social, economic, and environmental challenges. Research findings are among substantial policy determinants (including public opinion, interest groups, political parties) that influence policies of various levels (international, national, regional, municipal), domains, and types (e.g. legislative, executive, administrative policy) (Burstein, 2020).

The European Centre strives to address social welfare policies by providing applied and action-oriented research. It is well known that policy and research are two separate systems: while policy focuses more on intervening, research concentrates on analysing; while policy-making is about doing, administering and implementing, research takes time, deals with questions and produces long reports (Fox et al., 2019). It is important to keep these differences in mind when searching for opportunities to underpin policy-making by evidence. Fortunately, there is a plurality of ways how to (better) relate research to policy. For this study, the author assumes an instrumental model where research is – at least in

"The interaction between research and policy is not a singular dialogue. Rather, researchers and policy-makers are part of a wider group of interested parties, who contribute to – and support – the conversation, the inquiry and the action" (Fox et al., 2019: 8-9).

theory – capable of shaping policy-making (cf. Boswell and Smith, 2017). The causal pathways may not be linear and direct, but via gradual changes of stakeholder perceptions, overlapping networks and policy circles. Therefore, research usually does not directly and single-handedly impact policy, but may be one contributor in a multi-stakeholder setting and complex impact pathways (cf. contribution analysis, Befani and Mayne, 2014).

Methodological considerations

Project selection

The European Centre completed around 80 projects from 2017 to 2020. The author set off by asking internal staff to rate these projects according to their type and level of policy relevance, and to provide short rationales why a particular project may have had a policy impact. Based on this input, several criteria were devised to maximise the diversity of the selected projects for the detailed case-study:

• Policy topic: reflecting topics of Health & Care and Welfare & Work

• Geographical reach: Austria, other European counties, candidate countries (Bridge Building countries)

• Policy level: European, interregional, national, local

• Funding: European Commission, UN agencies, national governments

• Certainty of policy impact: best cases versus difficult-to-assess cases

Five projects were selected to cover the diverse areas to be discussed below.

Data sources to determine policy impact

The following data sources were collected for each project:

• **Documents from desk review:** This included final reports, meeting minutes, training materials, i.e. whatever documentation was available within the European Centre.

• **Surveys and interviews with European Centre's staff:** An online survey was conducted about categorising policy impact and assessing evidence. The ensuing interview built on the information from the survey and delved into more depth regarding corroborating evidence.

- **Interviews with one or more external stakeholders:** These centred around gathering evidence on policy impact. Some stakeholders recommended further informants, who were followed up.

- **Internet search for further evidence:** In several cases, additional internet searches became necessary, especially as they pertained to media coverage and legislative changes.

Analysis

To trace policy impact, conventional approaches such as using a counterfactual approach is rarely practical due to missing ex-ante data or comparison groups. More generative approaches to comprehend complex causal packages are needed (Fox et al., 2019). This study utilised process tracing (PT) to carry out contribution analysis. PT is an empirical qualitative tool that assesses claims of causal change (impact) in a systematic way (Collier, 2011; Beach & Pedersen, 2019). PT provides a case-based analysis to interpret the existing evidence for determining whether a project plausibly and reasonably contributed to policy impact and why, while considering other influencing factors. PT follows several steps (cf., Delahais & Toulemonde, 2017; Befani & Mayne, 2014):

1. **Propose the anticipated policy impact**: Internal and external stakeholders are asked to come up with possible policy impacts.

2. **Identify potential contribution and alternative pathways:** An initial theory of change (ToC) is developed using visual representation. A ToC constructs a possible impact pathway from activities to impact.

3. **Specify and assess evidence:** Evidence from document review, survey and interviews is assessed, by asking about the confidence of contributions such as locating direct project citations and references.

4. **Develop a narrative of policy impact:** In our study, the examined cases suggested a five-waves model of policy impact, which then was applied to each case-study.

Challenges of impact tracing by this study were:

- Time lag: Some projects produce an impact in the long run. We selected projects concluded before 2020. Additional policy impact may still take place.

- Availability and quality of data sources: Because this process tracing was carried out after project completion, some sources of evidence were not adequately recorded or were no longer available. Reporting by project

coordinators required careful assessment. The evidence level was highest when a European Centre project was directly referenced in a strategy or law.

• Multiple objectives, influencing factors, target groups, determinants: Attributing policy impact was often difficult because the European Centre projects were only one of many influencing factors.

Five waves towards policy impact

Using process tracing and inductively analysing the five cases, we constructed a five-waves model regarding policy impact. These five waves may not proceed in a linear fashion, but they can also move in parallel: (1) Raising awareness; (2) Confluence; (3) Impact on process; (4) Impact on system; and (5) Impact on beneficiaries.

1. Raising awareness

This wave is about the project engaging stakeholders to better understand the needs and finding solutions to the issue at stake. A project dissemination event may help bring about buy-in and increased commitment from stakeholders. Such an event also may allow different stakeholders to exchange and share their own experiences among each other.

2. Confluence

Confluence refers to the fact that a project may be regarded as one piece in a larger machinery. The idea is that several forces may take place simultaneously influencing the process, many of which are pushing in the same direction. The project may have an additive influence, i.e. it is important to understand that a project is always contributing, but never independently attributing to policy impact.

3. Impact on process

This wave is about the evidence on whether stakeholders move beyond the awareness phase and start setting actions. This may be forming partnerships with other stakeholders, pursuing training and developing training materials, or commissioning new studies to follow-up with some issues.

4. Impact on system

This wave is about changes in the regulatory and legislative system. This may be the highest level of influence on which a research project can directly contribute.

5. Impact on end users

This wave is usually outside the influence zone of research projects. It is almost impossible to provide evidence that the project as such had a direct effect on the final beneficiaries of a policy. However, as any project should always have the final beneficiaries on the radar, beneficiaries are included in the waves model.

In the following, we illustrate waves of policy impact for the five selected projects. First, we briefly discuss preconditions, project activities and dissemination efforts – which are necessary starting points for any policy impact. Graphs illustrate the waves towards policy impact, which the projects may have made. Blue headings mark traceable evidence; orange titles indicate more hypothetical evidence. The case-study shows that all projects reached several waves of awareness raising and confluence.

Community care for people living with dementia in Europe

Funder: Swedish Ministry of Health and Social Affairs

More information: https://www.euro.centre.org/projects/detail/182

Preconditions: Sweden did not have a dementia strategy in place contrary to other European countries.

Activities (2016-2017): The Ministry commissioned the European Centre to develop an analytical framework for community care for dementia and constructing a toolbox to assess existing dementia care models.

Deliverable: Handbook for policymakers

Dissemination: The National Board of Health and Welfare (NBHW) and the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs convened a multi-stakeholder workshop in December 2016 to discuss project findings. National stakeholders from the public sector, NGOs, researchers, and international experts attended.

"The Handbook has been of great importance to the Swedish dementia strategy" (Ministry stakeholder)

Challenges: The European Centre was among many organisations that informed the decision-making process on dementia. Therefore, it is difficult to determine the exact impact pathways.

Figure 1: Waves to policy impact for Community care for people living with dementia in Europe (2016–2017)

Wave 1: Raising awareness

- Learn about international experiences and case studies
- Consider all sides of arguments (tension points)
- Exchange about topic/engagement in dialogue
  - Ministry, NBHW
  - Policy-makers at different governance level
  - actors of NGOs, public health organizations

Wave 2: Confluence

- European Centre is one of multiple stakeholders to provide input
- Critical mass was reached
- NBHW standardized course of action in dementia (2019), aligned with handbook recommendations

Wave 3: Impact on process

NBHW proposal to dementia strategy (2018) makes direct reference to handbook:
- Presents handbook's recommendations at four levels
- Proposes structural conditions for good community care

Wave 4: Impact on system

Swedish national dementia strategy (2018) makes direct reference to handbook:
- Views family support from a gender equality perspective
- Recognizes gender differences in caregiver strategies & experiences to address caregivers' burden and stress

Wave 5: Impact on end users

- Receive high-quality home-based, personalized care
- Involve user and community stakeholders

Findings:

Impact on process: The NBHW 2018 proposal for the dementia strategy makes a direct reference to the Handbook. It presents the handbook's recommendations for different levels: individual, society, health and care and national level.

Impact on system: The Swedish national dementia strategy (2018) directly references the Handbook for

- Viewing family support from a gender equality perspective.

- Recognising gender differences in caregiver strategies and experiences (e.g. emotional support by women)

- Considering gender differences to plan support and address caregivers' burden and stress

- Calling for research on community-based care

- Recommending collaboration among health and social care

Using the 5-waves approach, we find evidence that the policy impact is traceable from raising awareness (wave 1) up to system impact (wave 4), while the impact on beneficiaries (wave 5) cannot be directly traced yet.

Studies on people not covered by health insurance in Austria

Funders: Ministry of Health and Social Affairs (2003); Main Association of Austrian Social Security Institutions (2018)

"Valuable study" (Minister for Health and Women)

More information: https://www.euro.centre.org/projects/detail/186

Preconditions: The National Action Plan on Social Inclusion (2001-2003) suspected a gap on health insurance coverage, with many people uninsured. The follow-up study wanted to find out whether the policy changes resulted in a decrease of uninsured persons and why some are still uninsured.

Activities (2017-2018): Situation analysis of non-insured persons. Recommendations of models to address gap. Those were (1) General health insurance, (2) Application for eligible persons, and (3) Health insurance tailored to vulnerable groups.

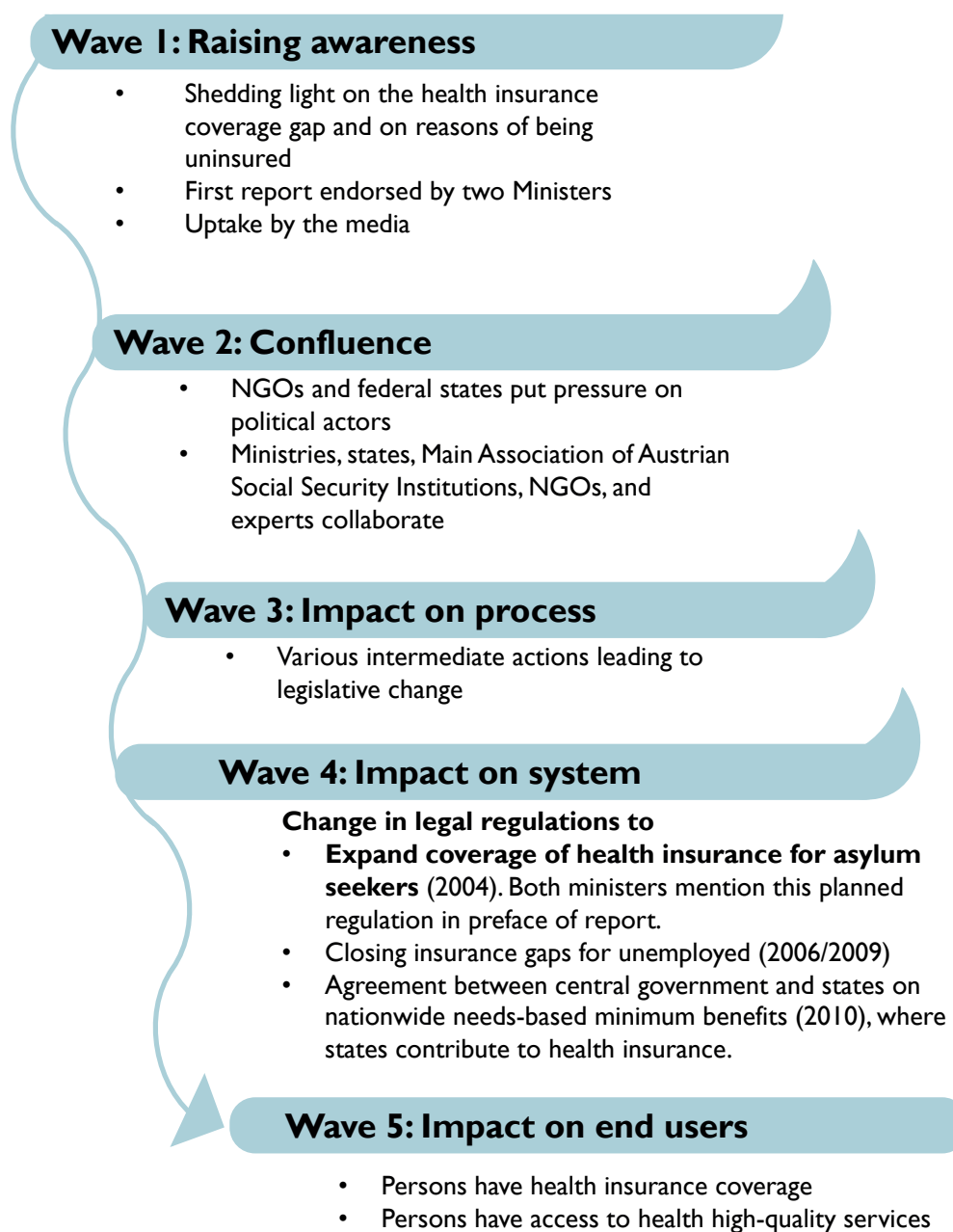**Deliverable:** The 2003 report was a Ministry report with introduction by two ministers.

"The study was a milestone, the first of its kind. It was not unnoticed" (Representative of Ministry)

Dissemination: Through Ministry with media uptake in both instances.

Challenges: It was difficult to estimate the number of the uninsured as an inhomogeneous group, which led to a vague communication of findings.

Figure 2: Waves to policy impact for People not Covered by Health Insurance in Austria

Wave 1: Raising awareness

- Shedding light on the health insurance coverage gap and on reasons of being uninsured
- First report endorsed by two Ministers
- Uptake by the media

Wave 2: Confluence

- NGOs and federal states put pressure on political actors
- Ministries, states, Main Association of Austrian Social Security Institutions, NGOs, and experts collaborate

Wave 3: Impact on process

- Various intermediate actions leading to legislative change

Wave 4: Impact on system

Change in legal regulations to
- **Expand coverage of health insurance for asylum seekers** (2004). Both ministers mention this planned regulation in preface of report.
- Closing insurance gaps for unemployed (2006/2009)
- Agreement between central government and states on nationwide needs-based minimum benefits (2010), where states contribute to health insurance.

Wave 5: Impact on end users

- Persons have health insurance coverage
- Persons have access to health high-quality services

Findings:

Confluence: NGOs and federal states put pressure on political actors, with continued collaboration of ministries, regional governments, Main Association of Austrian Social Security Institutions, NGOs, and experts.

Impact on system: Several legal regulations expanded health insurance coverage for: 1. Asylum seekers (May 2004; both ministers mention this planned

regulation in the preface of the report.); 2. Unemployed (2006/2009); 3. Needs-based minimum benefits (2010): Agreement between central government and states, where states contribute to health insurance.

Using the 5-waves approach, we find evidence that the policy impact took place from awareness raising to impact on end-users. The European Centre was among several stakeholders working on improving the insurance situation, so impacts can only be partially attributed to the European Centre.

Integrated case management for employment and social welfare users in the Western Balkans

"Overall, this small project and the work we initiated with the European Centre had a truly catalytic effect"
(UNDP representative)

Funder: United Nations Development Programme (Istanbul Regional Hub)

More information: https://www.euro.centre.org/projects/detail/205

Preconditions: The project was highly policy-relevant, in line with national and EU priorities, as well as sustainable development goals.

Activities (2017-2018): The European Centre provided a systematic analysis for assessing current methods, policies and institutional frameworks, developed toolkits/training materials and made specific recommendations.

Deliverable: ICM guidelines and good practices

Dissemination: 3-day-train-the-trainer workshop, in which the North Macedonian Minister of Labour and other key stakeholders participated and created a roadmap for North Macedonia.

Challenges: Western Balkan countries are often faced with the challenge of losing 'institutional memory"'. Therefore, the institutionalisation of ICM has been challenging. In North Macedonia, a new government will form, which may or may not continue the started reform process.
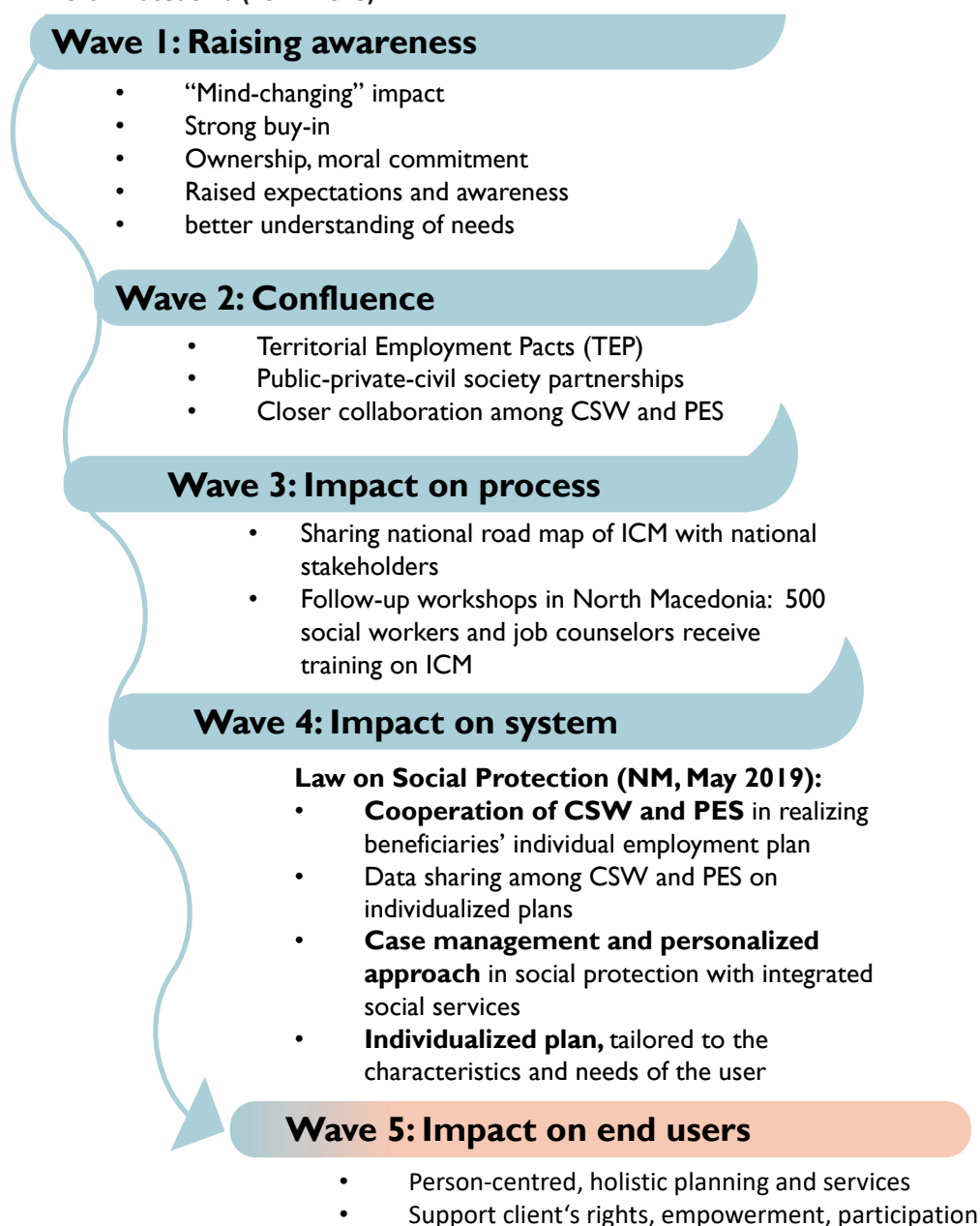
Findings (North Macedonia):

Impact on process: The North Macedonian participants of the train-the-trainer workshop shared the national Road Map back home. 500 social workers and job counsellors received training on ICM. The original project focal point in North Macedonia became the deputy minister to implement ICM. The Ministry of Labour and the National Employment Agency closely worked with UNDP to develop a strategic framework to implement ICM.

Impact on system: The **Law on Social Protection** was passed in May 2019 to legislate ICM. While the European Centre is not specifically named, its work is regarded as 'catalytic effect' for it. The new law covers:

- Cooperation of Social Work and Centre for Employment in the realisation of a user's individual employment plan

- Data sharing among CSW and PES regarding individualised plans

- Case management and personalized approach in social protection with integrated social services

- Individualised plan, tailored to user characteristics and needs

Figure 3: Waves to policy impact for ICM for employment and social welfare users in North Macedonia (2017–2018)

Wave 1: Raising awareness

- "Mind-changing" impact
- Strong buy-in
- Ownership, moral commitment
- Raised expectations and awareness
- better understanding of needs

Wave 2: Confluence

- Territorial Employment Pacts (TEP)
- Public-private-civil society partnerships
- Closer collaboration among CSW and PES

Wave 3: Impact on process

- Sharing national road map of ICM with national stakeholders
- Follow-up workshops in North Macedonia: 500 social workers and job counselors receive training on ICM

Wave 4: Impact on system

Law on Social Protection (NM, May 2019):
- **Cooperation of CSW and PES** in realizing beneficiaries' individual employment plan
- Data sharing among CSW and PES on individualized plans
- **Case management and personalized approach** in social protection with integrated social services
- **Individualized plan,** tailored to the characteristics and needs of the user

Wave 5: Impact on end users

- Person-centred, holistic planning and services
- Support client's rights, empowerment, participation

Using the 5-waves approach, we find evidence that the policy impact took place from awareness-raising to system impact. The European Centre was among several organisations that worked on ICM, so the impact of the system can of course only be partially attributed to the European Centre.

Posting of workers in Eastern Europe

Funder: EaSI Programme, DG Employment, European Commission

Project information: https://www.euro.centre.org/projects/detail/1673

Preconditions: The project responded to the Posting of Workers Directive (PWD), so that candidate countries prepare their legal and political context, institutional capacities and labour market structures. Serbia already had a law on Posting, which was partially aligned with the PWD.

Activities (2018-2019): Strengthen the evidence-base via national workshops with representatives of Ministries, enforcement state agencies, social partners, NGOs; Transnational Peer Reviews with representatives from Ministries, enforcement state agencies, social partners, NGOs of the Western Balkans participating alongside EU counterparts (AT, IT, DE, SI).

Deliverables: Needs assessment, Country case studies, Policy briefs, Brochures, Comparative paper

Dissemination: Sharing information and experience in a kick-off, peer reviews, country workshops and a final conference. The national conference in Belgrade (September 2019) involved many national and international stakeholders such as line ministries, labour inspectorate, Directorate for Safety and Health at Work, NGO representatives and International Organisations (e.g. ILO).

> "Project activities have certainly contributed to strengthening the capacity and knowledge of employees in the Ministry of Labour" (MoL representative)

Challenges: In Serbia, the formation of the new government is pending as of October 2020 (elections were in June 2020). The Action Plan implementation is delayed with an unclear time frame. Cooperation with social partners is not yet realised.
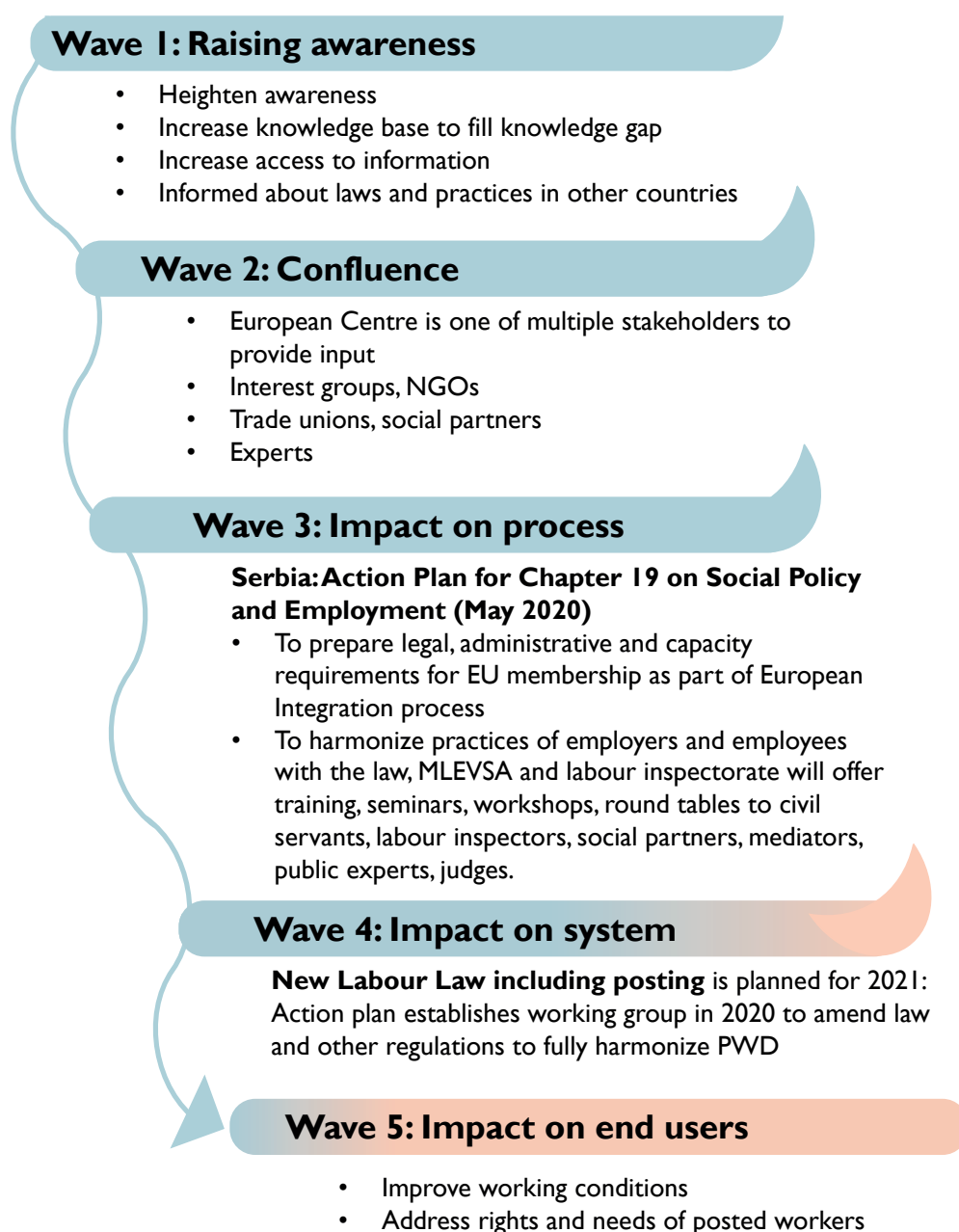
Findings:

Awareness-raising: EEPOW allowed for learning about laws and practices in other countries, heightening awareness, increasing access to information and knowledge base. A MoL representative underlined that the project contributed to strengthening staff capacity and knowledge.

Confluence: Interest groups including trade unions, NGOs, social partners, and experts are participating in the process.

Impact on process: In Serbia, the Action Plan for Chapter 19 on Social Policy and Employment was released in May 2020. It includes the action to prepare legal, administrative and capacity requirements for EU membership as part of the European Integration process. To harmonise practices of employers and employees with the law, MLEVSA and the labour inspectorate will offer training, seminars, workshops, round tables for civil servants, labour inspectors, social partners, mediators, public experts, judges.

Potential impact on system: The new labour law including posting is planned for 2021. The Action Plan establishes a working group in 2020 to amend the law and other regulations to fully harmonise the PWD.

Figure 4: Waves to policy impact for posting of workers in Eastern Europe (Serbia)

Wave 1: Raising awareness

- Heighten awareness
- Increase knowledge base to fill knowledge gap
- Increase access to information
- Informed about laws and practices in other countries

Wave 2: Confluence

- European Centre is one of multiple stakeholders to provide input
- Interest groups, NGOs
- Trade unions, social partners
- Experts

Wave 3: Impact on process

Serbia: Action Plan for Chapter 19 on Social Policy and Employment (May 2020)
- To prepare legal, administrative and capacity requirements for EU membership as part of European Integration process
- To harmonize practices of employers and employees with the law, MLEVSA and labour inspectorate will offer training, seminars, workshops, round tables to civil servants, labour inspectors, social partners, mediators, public experts, judges.

Wave 4: Impact on system

New Labour Law including posting is planned for 2021: Action plan establishes working group in 2020 to amend law and other regulations to fully harmonize PWD

Wave 5: Impact on end users

- Improve working conditions
- Address rights and needs of posted workers

Using the 5-wave approach, we find evidence that the policy impact has happened up to wave three (blue) in Serbia, whereas we could not trace the evidence for waves four to five (orange) yet, since the law is not passed yet. We need to keep in mind that the European Centre is among several organizations that worked on posting in the region, so the impact on the process and system is difficult to directly attribute to the European Centre.

European network on long-term care quality and cost-effectiveness and dependency prevention

Funder: Directorate General Employment

Project information: https://www.euro.centre.org/projects/detail/191

Preconditions: The project was policy-relevant, responding to a specific tender from DG EMPL in line with the European Pillar of Social Rights, especially with respect to Principle 18 on long-term care.

"The project helped develop the internal thinking of the Commission. It was part of the knowledge building and analytical work on LTC. LTC was a new topic to the Commission, it was just at the margins, but is now full steam ahead" (DG EMPL representative)

Activities (2017-2018): The European Centre reviewed the existing evidence on different LTC areas and the present case-study on promising practices in European countries. The European Centre coordinated two topics: Innovative care models and technologies, and integrated care provision.

Deliverables: CEQUA, the Europe-wide network on LTC, and its website were established. The website repository of promising practices is still online. This includes thematic and country reports. A European Observatory was dedicated to the project findings, relevant for LTC policy audiences.

Dissemination: Researchers, policy-makers, and international networks were among the primary audience. The closing event took place with DG EMPL and the project consortium in Brussels. No follow-up was carried out.
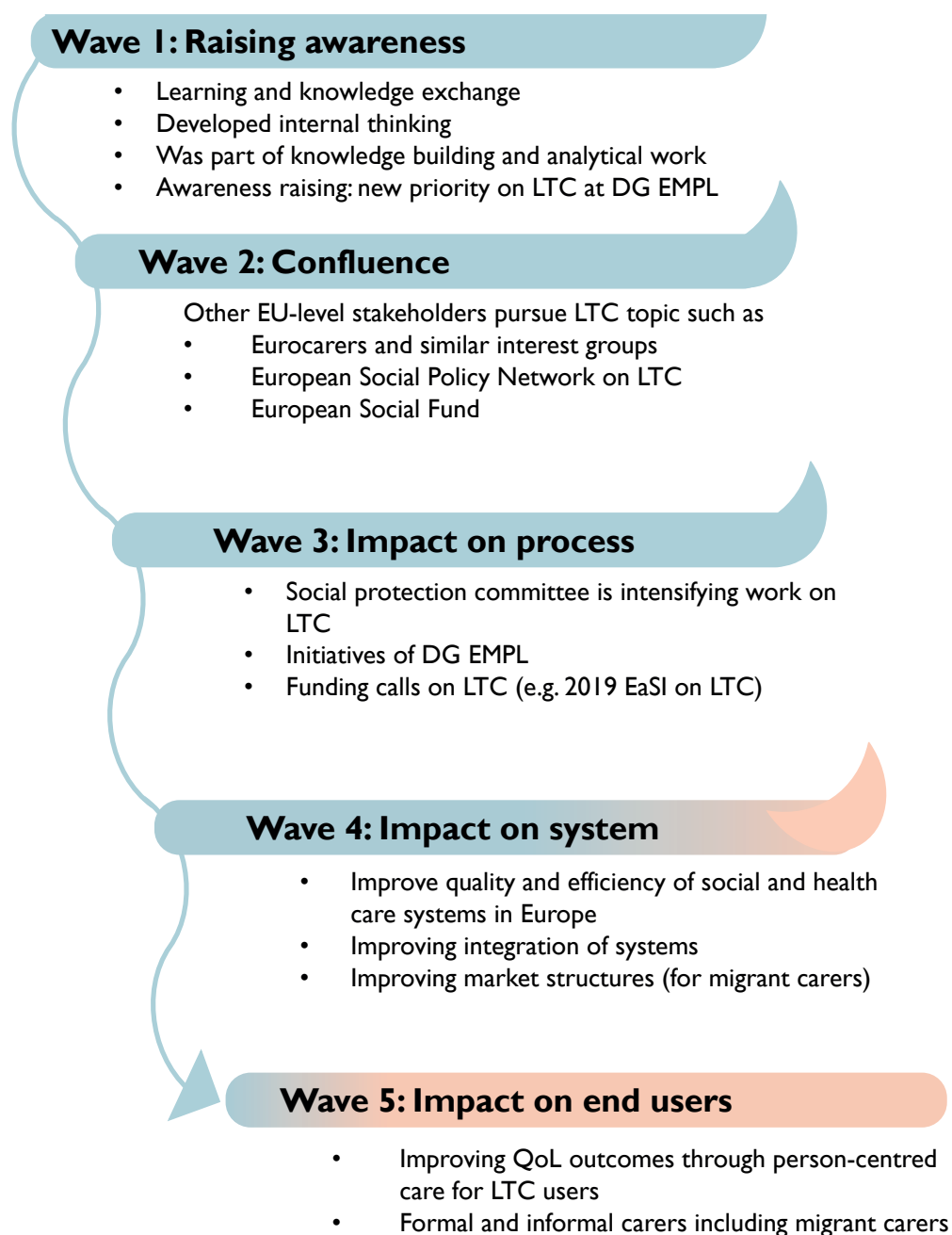
Challenges: The project had built in only limited dissemination efforts and follow-up. Despite this being the case, an indirect impact could be identified.

Findings:

Awareness-raising: This project is a prime example for awareness raising. As a DG EMPL representative indicated, the project helped develop the internal thinking of the Commission on LTC. More precisely, it was part of the Commission's knowledge building and analytical work on LTC. LTC was a new topic to the Commission, from being at the margins to the full centre.

<u>Confluence</u>: The project was pulling to the same direction as other EU-level stakeholders such as Eurocarers and similar interest groups, the European Social Policy Network on LTC and the European Social Fund. The LTC topics were shared in Peer reviews and Mutual Learning Initiative workshops, briefly after the closing event. The joint report by the Commission and the Social Protection Committee also promoted the LTC agenda. It is, however, unclear whether the European Centre findings had an influence.

Figure 5: Waves to policy impact for the European Network on LTC quality and cost-effectiveness and dependency prevention

Wave 1: Raising awareness

- Learning and knowledge exchange
- Developed internal thinking
- Was part of knowledge building and analytical work
- Awareness raising: new priority on LTC at DG EMPL

Wave 2: Confluence

Other EU-level stakeholders pursue LTC topic such as
- Eurocarers and similar interest groups
- European Social Policy Network on LTC
- European Social Fund

Wave 3: Impact on process

- Social protection committee is intensifying work on LTC
- Initiatives of DG EMPL
- Funding calls on LTC (e.g. 2019 EaSI on LTC)

Wave 4: Impact on system

- Improve quality and efficiency of social and health care systems in Europe
- Improving integration of systems
- Improving market structures (for migrant carers)

Wave 5: Impact on end users

- Improving QoL outcomes through person-centred care for LTC users
- Formal and informal carers including migrant carers

<u>Impact on process</u>: The impact on DG EMPL initiatives, funding calls and funding decisions (e.g., EaSI 2019 on LTC) is unclear. Geographical notes were used in European Semester Analytical reports. The EU Social Protection Committee is intensifying work on LTC.

Using the 5-waves approach, we find evidence that the project was important for awareness raising and thus in line with other pulling factors to promote the LTC agenda, whereas we could not trace the evidence for process and system impact. The European Centre was among several organisations that worked on LTC at the European level, so the impact on the process and system is difficult to directly attribute to the European Centre.

Summarily, the study found that all projects reached the waves of awareness raising and confluence. We also found evidence for impact on the process for four projects, while detecting evidence for impact on the system (including strategies and laws) could be identified for three projects. One project showed an indirect impact on end-users. Based on the various political, administrative and structural contexts, reaching the awareness-raising and confluence wave is a notable result. Sometimes, the collaboration of stakeholders and fortunate circumstances worked well together so that a systemic change or even an increased welfare of end-users seemed in reach.

Recommendations for future projects

Think about diverse dissemination channels when planning a project

Based on the data review and interviews with stakeholders, the following recommendations on facilitating policy impact through research and project work and formulating ways to optimize future impact should be considered:

- **Make the evaluation of policy impact part of the project:**

    o Build the evaluation of policy impact into the design of any project
    o Include a budget in the project proposal specifically for evaluating policy impact
    o Ensure that the necessary data are collected to gather evidence throughout project implementation

- **Integrate stakeholders to increase policy impact:**

    o Integrate stakeholders as a sounding board and experts to learn from their experiences and ideas
    o Listen to stakeholders' needs and wishes
    o Foster mutual trust and understanding

- **Diversify dissemination to increase policy impact:**

  o Make deliverables user-friendly and easily/fast to absorb
  o Move beyond a simple final report
  o Consider web-based products including voiced-over presentation slides
  o Consider deliverables for a wider audience
  o Give room for stakeholders to interact and provide input during a dissemination event

- **Follow-up after project end:**

  o Communicate with stakeholders after a certain time about what happened after project completion
  o Identify windows of opportunities for further policy impact
  o Make this follow-up an obligatory part of the project, for it will also help with the evaluation of policy impact

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List of acronyms

CA	Contribution analysis
CSW	Centre for Social Work
DG EMPL	Directorate General Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion
EaSI	EU Programme for Employment and Social Innovation
LTC	Long-Term Care
NM	North Macedonia
PES	Public Employment Services
PT	Process tracing
PWD	Posting of Workers' Directive
MLEVSA	Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs

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- Forging the evidence-base for social policy making and mutual learning on social welfare issues
- Initiating future-oriented public policy debates on social welfare issues by networking across the UN-European Region

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