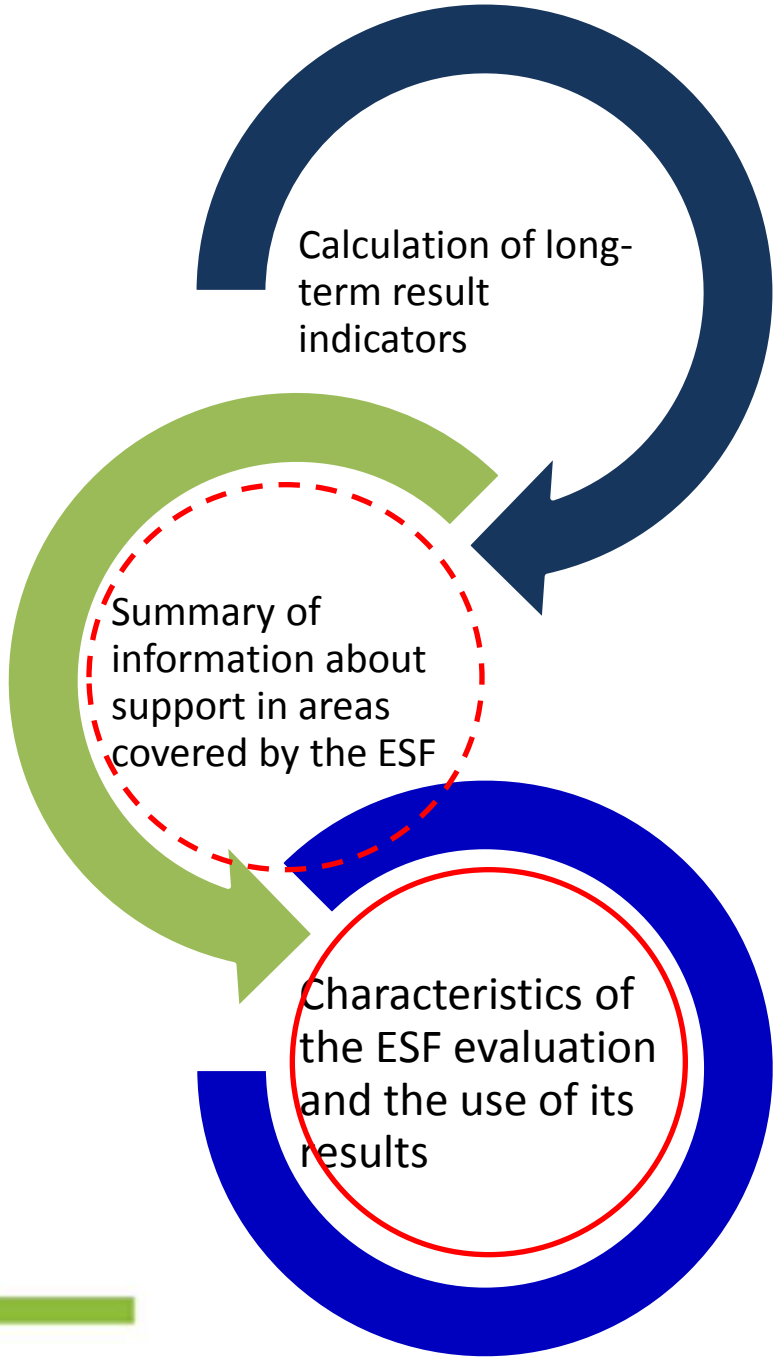
2004-2016
Agrotec Polska

evalu

How was the HC OP evaluated? Some reflections on the ESF evaluation in Poland.

Wrocław, 22 June 2017

Objectives of the study



Meta-analysis of the results of evaluations of support from the ESF

Three main lines of study

evalu 2004-2016 Agrotec Polska

Research methodology

Meta-analysis of the results of national studies – evaluations of HC OP and research projects HC OP

Meta-analysis of the results of foreign evaluation studies

Systematic review of research – meta-review of systemic reviews

Analysis of data from databases (Social Insurance Institution - ZUS)

Focus group interviews (FGI) with elements of workshop techniques

IDI with key persons related to evaluation policy, combined within the framework of the case study with desk research and use of meta-analysis of the results of evaluations

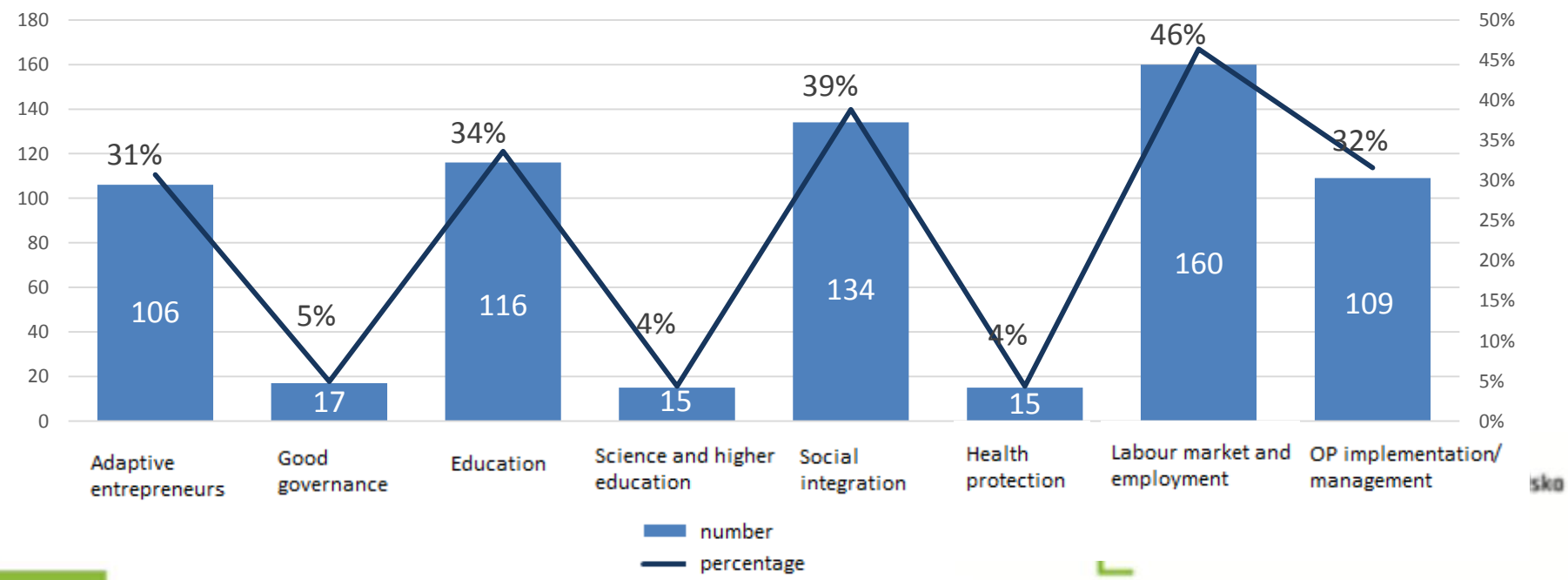
evalu 2004-2016 Agrotec Polska

Scale of the study

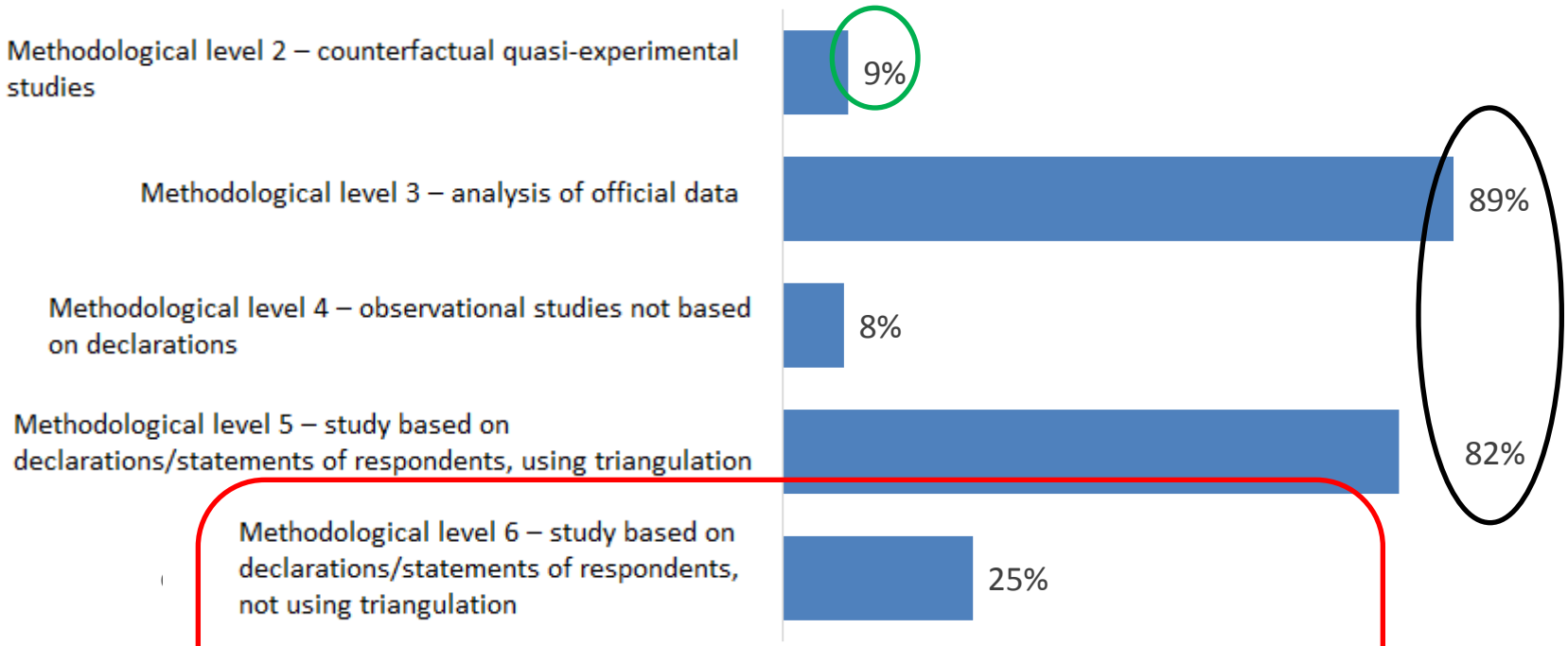
Over **1500** research projects
Almost **400**evaluation reports

52% - one area
23% - two areas
25% - three or more areas

Number and percentage of evaluation reports referring to thematic areas



Quality of evaluation



Incomplete (and thus potentially leading to inaccurate interpretations) description of a given phenomenon or conclusions based on insufficient grounds

evalu
2004-2016
Agrotec Polska

Quality of evaluation

Evaluations provide very little information allowing to verify the theory of change

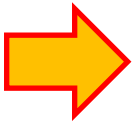
- We do not know which processes exactly were triggered by intervention and which processes generated the achieved effects.

Increased number of studies allowing to draw reliable conclusions on the impact of interventions, including studies using counterfactual methods

- The majority of studies stop at the product and result level and do not collect empirical data on how they translate on achievement of intervention objectives.

Theory-based evaluation

Lack of the identified theory of change in the studies



Difficulty in establishing causal relationships between forms of intervention and their effects

Challenges

Reproduction of the theory of change and not intervention logic

TBE has more than one name
different approaches – different applications

Risk of implementation of **the theory as a model** (different context – different effects, but the same intervention).

Struggling with the theory of change
by contracting authorities and contractors

Reproduction of the theory of change within the framework of meta-analysis

Figure 1. Theory of change 1.1. Development of personnel for enterprises and support for the system of adaptability of companies

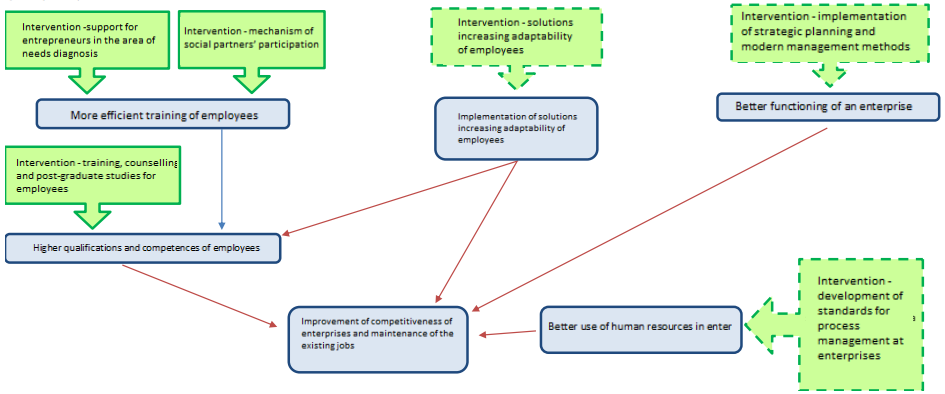


Figure 2. Theory of change 2.5 Improvement of effectiveness of management and the quality of public services

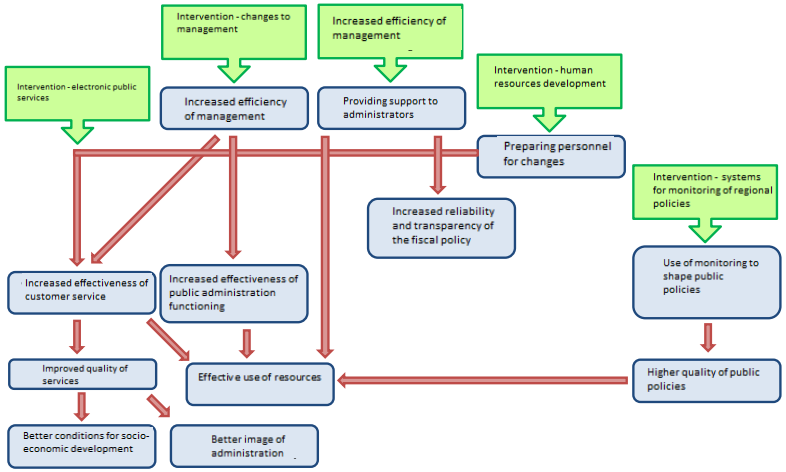
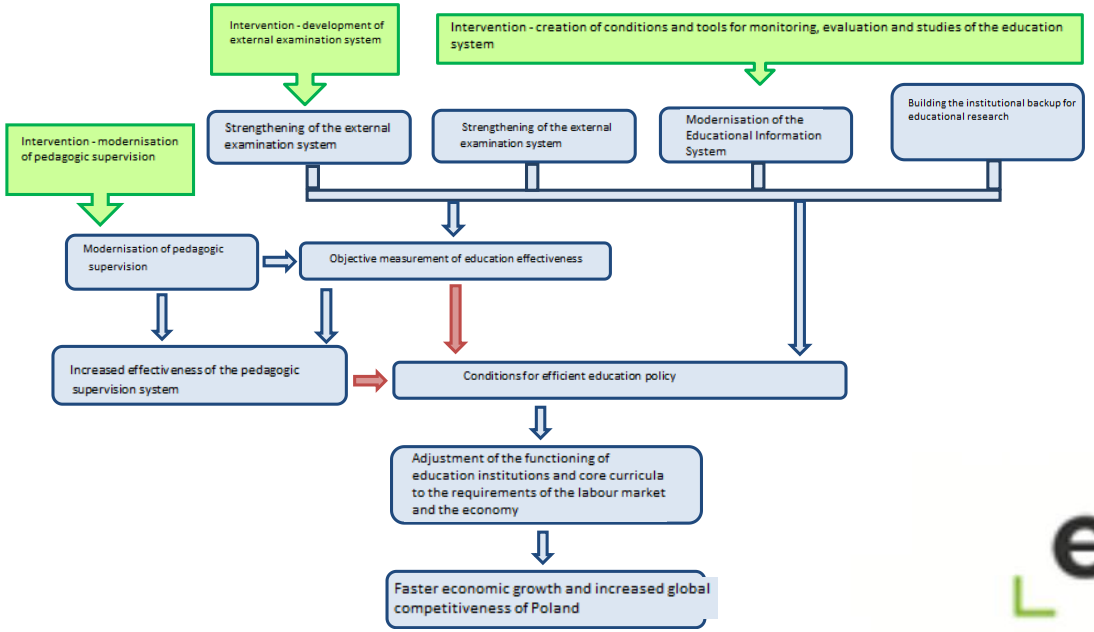


Figure 1. Theory of change 3.1. Standardisation of effects of education



evalu 2004-2016 Agrotec Polska

Quality of evaluation

Unclear methods of formulation of conclusions and recommendations by evaluators

- **Lack of information about the methods of developing and validating the conclusions**

Challenges faced by knowledge brokers

- Readiness of decision-makers to use knowledge from evaluation
- Institutional memory lost in new perspective
- Insufficient cooperation with other institutions
- Tasks of evaluation team going beyond evaluation
- "Lenience" of contracting authorities

Methods of formulation of conclusions and recommendations

(Un)conscious use of research plans?

Methods to answer the research question are identified ("platinum standard"), but method of reaching conclusions/recommendations are not described.

Methodological eclecticism – "anything goes"

Limited participation – mainly those involved and interested in support

Hegemony of triangulation

evalu 2004-2016 Agrotec Polska

Methods of formulation of conclusions and recommendations

1. Strategy of creating "safe" conclusions and recommendations – general and obvious, and often impractical
2. Avoidance of "difficult" / critical recommendations – reproduction of activities that are not necessarily pro-development
3. "Averaging of conclusions" – inclination to copy them or referring them to earlier developed conclusions

Where the method of conducting the studies was more reliable and the methodology more complex, there were more often more complex, often rather critical, but useful and valuable conclusions.

Multitude of evaluation models

Diversity of approaches, evaluation models, applied methodologies

→ Interesting and varied studies

→ Lack of the minimum standard

Adoption of a significant number of hidden assumptions on the functioning of the studies reality, ways of acting of human beings, causality of the analysed phenomena

→ Expecting contractors to consciously use theoretical perspectives (e.g. research context of the study) in their reports

Key conclusions

+	**The assessment of relevance of intervention under HC OP is positive** – in general it responded to the existing needs in the HC OP support areas.
+	**All areas recorded a positive, although not very strong impact of support.** It contributed to improving the quality of education in Poland, increasing the competences of adults, vocational and social activation, development of inter-institutional cooperation, implementation of management improvements in public administration bodies, improvement of the quality of public services.
+	**The support was useful for numerous target groups**. It helped in finding employment, improving psychosocial functioning, establishing own business, improving competences, organising additional classes at schools, development of non-governmental organisations, improving the competences of the personnel of public institutions.
+	**General method of planning intervention under HC OP and its results (where they were identified) are consistent with strategic documents and directions of development of public policies.**

Key conclusions

+ −	**In some areas**, e.g. social integration, education or good governance, **the support focused on more developed areas and did not level the existing territorial disparities.** Although the support contributed to convergence of Poland with old EU Member States, it **not always led to increasing the internal cohesion of the country.**
−	**Problems with durability of the effects of some measures were recorded** (e.g. projects on legal and civic advisory services, development programmes implemented at schools).
+	**In terms of vocational and social activation, the efficiency of intervention was not due to a specific form of support, but to its such elements** as profiling of support participants, monitoring of their participation in the project, use of incentives for participants and entities providing support. **It is recommended to introduce changes to increase individualisation of support, and in the case of some target groups to increase its comprehensiveness**, which however entails higher costs and pressure on limited human resources.

Key conclusions

–	**Numerous studies revealed the creaming effect**, i.e. the selection of such project participants by project promoters that offered better prospects for achieving the assumed indicators. **The risk of this effect is particularly high when requirements concerning employment effectiveness are imposed on project promoters.**
–	**Evaluations provide relatively little information about indirect and long-term effects of intervention.**
–	**Thus far very few theory-based evaluations have been performed.** Such evaluations should be promoted to obtain a better insight into the ongoing causal mechanisms and thus formulated evidence-based proposals for improvements to interventions.

Key barriers

1	**Lack of the coherent vision and strategy in public policies.** To overcome this barrier, decision-makers and their experts must define an appropriate vision and strategy.
2	**Barriers resulting from inertia of public institutions, from bureaucracy, legal constraints, rigid procedures and established rules of functioning.** Such barriers may be eliminated by amendments to legal regulations, reform of public governance, but also information and communication activities aimed at changing the thinking habits.
3	**Little interest in inter-institutional cooperation** resulting from the failure to see own interest in such cooperation, insufficient communication abilities and the lack of habit of cooperation with other entities. Since the problem is largely in mentality, no fast and visible effects should be expected, which does not mean that the activities cannot be important and useful in the long-term.

Key barriers

4	**Limited personnel and financial resources on the part of IB/IB2, but primarily on the part of beneficiaries or potential beneficiaries** (e.g. local government units). In the latter case, the barrier resulted sometimes in resignation from applying for funds or from implementing the approved project. A remedy may be the reduction of requirements and burdens (e.g. simplification of procedures) or building the implementation system based on combining intermediaries (e.g. partnership leaders), responsible for financial and organisational issues, and thematically involved project implementing entities which are familiar with support issues, but are not necessarily experts in implementation of the ESF projects.
5	**Problems with reaching to target groups of interventions, in particular socially excluded persons or persons at risk of social exclusion.** It requires various efforts and being open to non-standard activities in the area of communication and recruitment, or the use of potential of institutions that have experience in contacts with representatives of "difficult" target groups (e.g. non-governmental organisations).

Key challenges for evaluation

Evaluations provide very little information allowing to verify the theory of change of HC OP. **The lack of verification of the theory of chance does not allow to improve it.** This seriously reduces the possibility to formulate recommendations and forecasts for future interventions.

A challenge is to refer to long-term effects of interventions and their durability, and not on the current and technical improvements to the conducted activities.

Social responsibility of evaluation as an element of public participation.

evalu