

CONTRIBUTION TO NATIONAL IMPLEMENTATION OF THE EUROPEAN CONVENTION ON HUMAN RIGHTS BY CO-OPERATION PROJECTS: A META-EVALUATION



Final report

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Key contributors to the evaluation

Directorate of Internal Oversight – Evaluation Division

Robert Stryk, Director,
Helen Nelson, Head of Evaluation,
Malcolm Cox, Evaluation team leader and report author,
Marta Borkowska, Evaluation assistant,
Olivia Lavigne, Evaluation assistant.

External expertise

Abigail Hansen, Evaluator.

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Abbreviations

Convention (the)	European Convention of Human Rights
Court (the)	European Court of Human Rights
CSO	Civil society organisation
DPC	Directorate of Programme Co-ordination
EU	European Union
HRA	Council of Europe Human Rights Approach
MAE	Major Administrative Entity
PMM	Council of Europe Project Management Methodology
RBM	Results-based management
ROM	Results-oriented monitoring
HELP	Human Rights Education for Legal Professionals
MEL	Monitoring, evaluation and learning
DIO	Directorate of Internal Oversight

Executive summary

a. This meta-evaluation has extracted the most valuable, most insightful and highest priority lessons from the evaluations and external audits carried out on projects and programmes during the five-year period of 2019-2024. It focuses on project support to national implementation of the European Convention of Human Rights (the Convention). This is one of the core objectives of the Council of Europe and the area with the greatest volume of projects and programmes within the operational structure of the Organisation.

Purpose and objectives

b. A meta-evaluation is an evaluation method that systematically combines the results of multiple independent evaluations to identify overall trends, effects, or relationships. The strength of a meta-evaluation such as this is the ability to aggregate findings, identify patterns, contradictions and broad lessons that might not be evident in individual evaluations.

c. The meta-evaluation provides an opportunity to view the entire body of decentralised evaluations from 2019-2024 through the thematic prism of support to the national implementation of the Convention, capturing both aspects of project management and the overall framing of co-operation at the Council of Europe.

d. Its objectives were to:

- Identify factors that generally contribute to a successful support of the national implementation of the Convention and factors that hinder such support.
- Identify key recurring aspects of how projects support the implementation of the Convention.
- Identify ways to improve Council of Europe support of the national implementation of the Convention.

e. The meta-evaluation aims to inform the future design and implementation of projects, thereby further enhancing their effectiveness in supporting the national implementation of the Convention.

Methodology

f. A total of 65 reports were assessed consisting of 52 decentralised evaluations managed by the Major Administrative Entities (MAEs), 11 external audits and 2 results-oriented monitoring reports. These reports were evaluated against indicators derived from the evaluation criteria relevance, coherence, efficiency and effectiveness. Initially reports were scored against the evaluation questions; subsequently, they were analysed in more depth according to repeated themes. An experimental Artificial intelligence (AI) tool was tested to carry out documentary reviews of the reports but the limitations in the volume of data and the security environment containing the tool meant that no meaningful AI analysis was possible. The AI tool was incapable both of assessing the reports against the evaluation question indicators and their rubrics and extracting meaningful qualitative data. The scoring was compounded due to the variety of approaches used in the evaluations and the inconsistent quality of the reports. As a result, evaluator-led qualitative data analysis was conducted to fully address these challenges. An analysis of recommendations in the reports and the 20 management response and action plans available was carried out, categorising the recommendations and assessing the level of implementation according to follow-up data. Finally, 12

interviews were held with key stakeholders from project management, programme co-ordination and the Department for the Execution of Judgments of the European Court of Human Rights. This systematic approach to analysis (including use of coding frameworks, exploration of contextual differences, accounting for variation in quality) in addition to the validation exercises ensures that interpretation and contextual issues are incorporated into the findings.

g. The evaluation reports are not systematic enough to provide an overall assessment of project support to the implementation of the Convention. There is varying quality in the evaluation of different aspects of that support, and the evaluation reports are too narrow in scope to provide quantified information at the Organisational level. Frequent repetition across all the evaluation reports, on the other hand, provides reliable qualitative information about that support.

Findings

h. The evaluations present a mixed picture of strengths and weaknesses of projects in supporting the implementation of the Convention. **The analysis at the level of the evaluation criteria found that relevance was most frequently achieved, followed by efficiency, and then effectiveness.** Deeper analysis demonstrated such scoring was unreliable, particularly in the case of efficiency.

i. Trends and patterns in evaluation reports identify Council of Europe strengths in **adaptability, stakeholder engagement, continuity of support and the human rights approach (HRA)**. At the same time, the meta-evaluation found that, in some cases, both evaluations and the projects/programmes they assessed treated gender mainstreaming superficially.

j. The evidence of effectiveness and impact of projects and programmes is scarce. Across all the evaluation reports, outcomes reported are fragmented. These were often the consequences of recurrent issues around project design, results-based management (RBM), and project implementation modalities.

k. Recommendations made in the reports issued during the period reveal recurring issues that needed addressing in project support to the implementation of the Convention.

Conclusions

l. The added value of Council of Europe project support to implementation of the Convention is its legal expertise, continuous relationship of trust and presence both over time and physically in member states, and in its human rights approach ensuring participatory processes and attention to rights-holders and vulnerable groups.

m. Evaluation reports repeatedly identify issues with project design and results-based monitoring which have not been satisfactorily addressed by the Organisation between 2019 and 2024.

n. The most frequent recurrent recommendations are highlighted as particularly relevant and deserving of renewed emphasis. They have been reframed based on the analysis and subsequent contributions by key stakeholders and the meta-evaluation reference group.

Reiterated Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Project teams should aim for interconnected outcomes that cause a chain of effects and contribute more collectively to impact. Project supervisors should further integrate Council of Europe Project Management Methodology (PMM) into their supervision and approvals processes to align efforts with Council of Europe goals and enhance project design and evaluation. (High)

Recommendation 2: Project teams should enhance outcome-focused monitoring that is more practical and comprehensive and uses robust qualitative and quantitative indicators at output and outcome levels. Project supervisors should support more extensive monitoring in line with PMM with the help whenever possible of monitoring and evaluation officers for guidance and data quality. (High)

Recommendation 3: Project teams and supervisors should strengthen and systematise gender mainstreaming and human rights approaches, with the support of PMM and gender advisers. The objectives of gender mainstreaming and the human rights approach should be made more explicit in PMM with greater emphasis on the purpose of these approaches. (Medium)

Recommendation 4: Project teams and supervisors should strengthen co-ordination and communication about the link between co-operation projects and the national implementation of the Convention as a uniting concept of Council of Europe work with external stakeholders, including donors, other international organisations, and a broader range of national stakeholders beyond the immediate partners and target groups of projects. This should entail more involvement and communication with the Department for the Execution of Judgments. (Medium)

Recommendation 5: Project teams and supervisors should explore opportunities for different implementation modalities to best suit particular stakeholders, periods and domestic/local circumstances, not only in response to challenges and crises, while appraising evidence that different modalities lead to improved outcomes. (Medium)

1. Introduction

1. This meta-evaluation provides an analysis of the findings, conclusions and recommendations arising from a series of Council of Europe decentralised evaluations, management responses, and external audit reports on the national implementation of the European Convention on Human Rights (the Convention). This evaluation is part of the Directorate of Internal Oversight's work programme 2024-2027¹.

2. The overall objective of the meta-evaluation is to deliver a consolidated assessment of the Organisation's co-operation activities in support of the Convention's implementation, and to present the most relevant, still-pertinent recommendations arising from the evaluations and audits with a view to reinforcing the Council of Europe's efforts. The meta-evaluation identifies common issues and trends in Council of Europe programmes and projects and identifies factors that both enable and inhibit the achievement of positive results in member states' implementation of the Convention.

1.1. Background to the implementation of the European Convention on Human Rights

3. The Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, better known as the European Convention on Human Rights is the Council of Europe's first international commitment to human rights. It is an international human rights treaty between the member states of the Council of Europe. Governments who have signed up to the Convention have made a legal commitment to abide by certain standards of behaviour and protect the basic rights and freedoms of people. It is connected to a system of conventions, charters and treaties that expand on different articles and aspects of it (referred to in this meta-evaluation as "specific conventions"). It serves as a foundation of the convention-based system. The Convention unifies the work of the Organisation, as does the execution process through the national implementation of judgments as reiterated in the Brussels Declaration 2015,² and the Copenhagen Declaration 2018.³

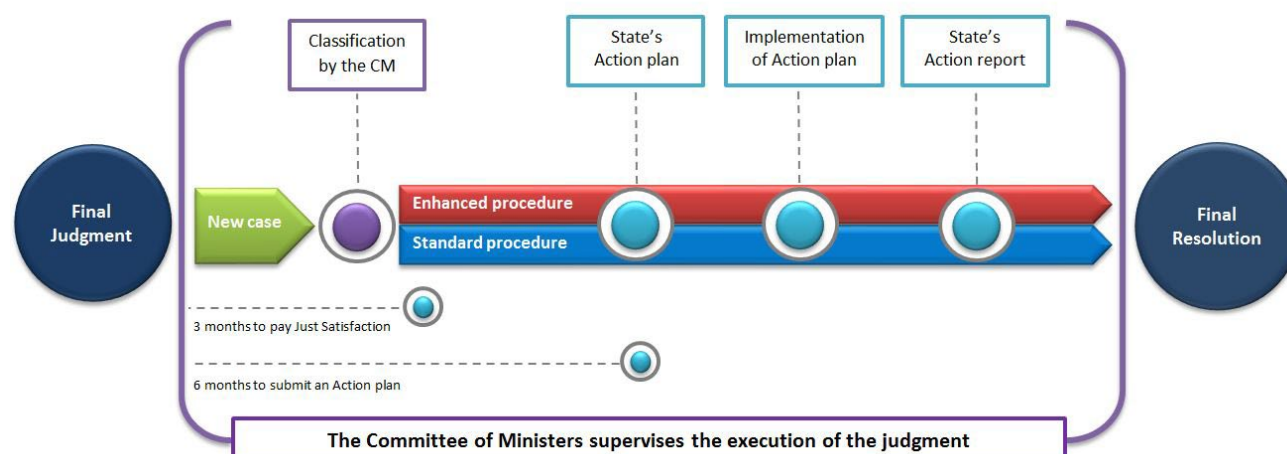
4. The Council of Europe provides multifaceted support for the national implementation of the Convention, which is carried out at the national level (encompassing local and regional levels). The national implementation of the Convention from the Council of Europe's perspective is ensured in the first instance by the execution of European Court of Human Rights judgments supervised by the Committee of Ministers, see figure 1. Under Article 46 of the Convention, member states have a legal obligation to remedy the violations identified by the European Court of Human Rights (the Court) both in the form of specific measures for the applicant (individual measures) and to prevent similar violations in the future (general measures).

1. [DIO Work Programme 2024-2027](#), GR-PBA(2024)5.

2. [Brussels Declaration - of the European Court of Human Rights](#), 2015.

3. [Copenhagen Declaration](#), 2018.

Figure 1: Supervision of the Execution of a Court judgment (source: Council of Europe)



5. The sub-programme of the Programme and Budget⁴ "Effective implementation of the European Convention on Human Rights at national and European level" has the mandate to provide guidance at the normative and policy levels in response to the challenges posed to human rights in Europe. It facilitates intergovernmental dialogue and supports domestic authorities in addressing the issues raised by the Court judgments, and other Council of Europe monitoring mechanisms.

1.2. Operational context

6. The Department for the Execution of Judgments of the European Court of Human Rights links judgments of the Court with national implementation. Implementation of judgments requires individual (e.g. compensation/release from detention/reopening of criminal proceedings) and general measures which may call for systemic and structural changes at the domestic level. These can be complex and multi-dimensional, requiring action by a variety of different domestic actors (Parliament, judiciary, criminal justice actors and multiple ministries). There are increasing synergies and interactions between the Department and divisions that implement co-operation programmes.

7. Support to national implementation of the Convention is provided through standard-setting, monitoring and co-operation in relation to Court judgments on specific aspects of the Convention. Priority thematic areas are indicated as part of the work of the sub-programme "Execution of Judgments of the European Court of Human Rights".

8. In parallel to the work of the Department, more than 300 co-operation projects are actively implemented each year, typically lasting two to four years. Approximately one-third of these projects are significantly linked to national implementation of the Convention.⁵

9. Projects are managed through the Council of Europe Project Management Methodology⁶ (PMM) which was systematised in the Organisation through a Handbook launched in 2016 and an IT platform launched in 2017. Prior to that, co-operation projects were tracked through an activities database. The PMM

4. [Programme and Budget 2024-2027](#).

5. Based on the projects during the period of the evaluation 2019-2024.

6. [Council of Europe Project Management Methodology](#), 2016.

has four pillars: i) Council of Europe strategy and values, ii) results-based management, iii) human rights approach and iv) field presence. As part of the PMM, the Gender Mainstreaming Toolkit⁷ was published in 2018 and the Human Rights Approach: Practical Guide for Co-operation Projects⁸ in 2020.

2. Purpose and scope of the meta-evaluation

10. The purpose of the evaluation was to synthesise evidence and insights that can inform the design and implementation of projects, thereby enhancing their effectiveness in supporting the national implementation of the Convention.

11. The objectives of the meta-evaluation were to:

- Identify factors that generally contribute to a successful support of the national implementation of the Convention and factors that hinder such support;
- Identify key recurring aspects of how projects support the implementation of the Convention;
- Identify ways to improve Council of Europe support of the national implementation of the Convention.

12. The meta-evaluation was conducted by the Directorate of Internal Oversight with the support of an external consultant⁹ during 2024. The meta-evaluation analysed all Council of Europe decentralised evaluations, and external audits related to projects and programmes that were finalised and available in the last five years (2019-2024).

3. Intended users of the meta-evaluation

13. The primary users of the meta-evaluation are the services that support the national implementation of the Convention, with particular attention on those with the highest proportion of projects supporting this implementation: **Effectiveness of the Convention system at national and European level; Independence and Efficiency of Justice; Prisons and Police; and Anti-discrimination.**

14. Other users of the meta-evaluation include: stakeholders concerned with the national implementation of the Convention, the Department for the Execution of Judgments of the European Court of Human Rights, the Private Office of the Secretary General and the Deputy Secretary General, the Secretariat of the Committee of Ministers, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe, the Directorate of Programme and Budget, the Directorate of Programme Co-ordination (DPC), the Directorate General of Human Rights and Rule of Law, and the Directorate General of Democracy and Human Dignity.

7. [Gender Mainstreaming Toolkit for Co-operation Projects, 2018.](#)

8. [Human Rights Approach for Co-operation Projects, 2020.](#)

9. Abigail Hansen.

4. Meta-evaluation methodology

15. An analysis of evaluations and audits was undertaken to identify the patterns and trends in project support of national implementation of the Convention. The analysis was guided by an assessment framework of evaluation questions to examine the relevance, efficiency, effectiveness and gender mainstreaming and human rights-based approach of the projects and programmes.¹⁰ The methodology is described in detail in Appendix 1.

16. To avoid oversimplifying specific findings and to account for the variability in the evaluation reports, the evaluators considered the quality of the reports, different interpretations of findings in reports within sets and categories, and the reasons and contexts of findings in reports. Interviews and consultations with the reference group were used to verify and validate the findings.

4.1. Evaluation questions

17. Eight evaluation questions framed the analysis around main lines of enquiry agreed upon in the reference group. Evidence was analysed on the achievements of the programmes, types of technical assistance that are effective, the factors that inhibit or enable the Organisation to effectively support national authorities in implementing the Convention, and the role of different stakeholders in supporting the efforts.

Table 1 Meta-evaluation questions

1.	What do the evaluations tell us about the programmes? What are the predominant achievements and common shortcomings?
2.	To what extent is project-work linked to Council of Europe strategy on national implementation of the Convention? To what extent does the Execution department benefit from and contribute to the project support?
3.	To what extent is the project management methodology enhancing support to national implementation? Does the Council of Europe have all the tools and resources it needs to deliver support to national implementation?
4.	To what extent do the various formats of technical assistance efficiently deliver support to national implementation respectively (expertise, legislation, policy, practice, institutional development, capacity building (tools and training), campaigning and awareness-raising, grants, networks and partnerships)?
5.	To what extent are different types of stakeholders determinant to the success of the support to national implementation (parliamentarians, local and regional elected officials, members of intergovernmental committees, members of monitoring mechanisms, and civil society organisations (CSOs))?
6.	How effective is the implementation of the Convention work within the Organisation?
7.	What are the most frequent enabling and hindering internal and external factors in supporting the national implementation?
8.	What are the main successes and challenges regarding gender mainstreaming and the human rights-based approach ¹ in project management methodology? What are the assessments of gender mainstreaming and human rights-based tools such as the Gender mainstreaming toolkit, the Gender advisor roles in regional offices and the Practical guide to Human Rights Approaches (HRA)?

10. For the sake of conciseness “projects” will be used in this report to refer to both projects and the programmes they are part of, unless the programmes are specifically the focus of the analysis. 13 of the evaluations are on programmes that comprise groups of projects.

4.2. Meta-evaluation analysis

18. Evaluations within the time frame 2019-2024 were included in the sampling frame (52). All the reports that were available, both published and internal were included. All audit reports (11) related to co-operation projects were included, and two results-oriented monitoring (ROM) reports were included relating to the southern neighbourhood to include this geographic area in the analysis. Overall, 65 reports were collected, together with 20 management responses and action plans.

Table 2 Data sources for the meta-evaluation

Sources	Quantity
Evaluation reports	52
External audit reports	11
Management responses and action plans	20
ROM reports	2
Total reports	85
Interviews	12

19. The quality of each evaluation report was assessed on the basis of strength of evidence and soundness of judgment on a three-point scale and used to weight the initial assessment and the findings, giving more weight to higher-quality reports and less to lower quality ones.

20. The reports were thematically coded (see appendix 6) guided by the evaluation questions and allowing for deductive coding. Analysis was conducted for each evaluation question and supplemented by 12 interviews with key stakeholders involved in the co-ordination and implementation of projects and programmes, and within the Department for the Execution of Judgments of the Directorate General of Human Rights and Rule of Law. The purpose of the interviews was to validate the analytical findings and to collect contextual descriptions on the trends and patterns identified.

21. The first assessment resulted in heatmaps of the frequency and quality of evidence against detailed contextual aspects of Council of Europe projects and programmes. Deeper analysis demonstrated such scoring was unreliable, particularly in the case of efficiency, and the more detailed analysis confirmed this and examined the evaluation questions in the context of each report. Recommendations, management responses and lessons learned arising from the evaluations were reviewed to complement the contextual descriptions.

22. To test out the use of AI in meta-evaluation per the Terms of Reference, the evaluators used AI queries to perform parallel initial indicator assessments, to compare the results and establish the accuracy and validity of the AI tools.¹¹ An experimental AI tool was tested to carry out documentary reviews of the reports but the limitations in the volume of data and the security environment containing the tool meant that no meaningful AI analysis was possible. The AI tool was incapable both of assessing the reports against the evaluation question indicators and their rubrics, and extracting meaningful qualitative data.

11. Initially Mistral and Llama were used within a secured testing environment of the Council of Europe IT servers. Later JYLO was introduced as the AI tool, also hosted within the Council of Europe secure environment.

4.3. Meta-evaluation challenges and limitations

23. Evaluation reports and audits exhibit considerable diversity, reflecting both direct and indirect relevance to the Convention. The heterogeneity spans the purpose, objectives, scope, target users and methodology. The coding framework was intentionally designed to accommodate this variability. The meta-evaluation methodology allowed for the identification of commonalities and trends, while maintaining a nuanced understanding of the distinct characteristics inherent to each report.

24. The analysis of the quality of the evaluation reports revealed a lack of consistency in terms of strength of evidence and in terms of analysis and interpretation. The evaluators carefully avoided attaching importance to unevidenced and poorly interpreted assertions. Such content was filtered out by only including the highest frequency factors captured from the data.

25. Not all thematic areas have been subject to evaluation or audit, this results in patchy and uneven sectoral coverage of evidence. Some parts of the Council of Europe may already adhere to recommendations made and indeed could serve as good practice not identified in this meta-evaluation.

5. Key findings

5.1. Evaluative assessment of project support to national implementation of the Convention

26. The evaluations present a mixed picture of strengths and weaknesses of projects in supporting the implementation of the Convention. To present an aggregate assessment of the total body of evidence generated by the reports, each report was scored guided by rubric description (for example, 5 = a high level of achievement in efficiency, effectiveness, or relevance). An average score of the relevance, effectiveness and efficiency of the projects, as well as the other criteria of the meta-evaluation, was calculated. This is presented in a heat map below (see figure 2).

27. The results of the analysis found that relevance was most frequently achieved, followed by efficiency, and then effectiveness. Stakeholder engagement, project management tools and resources, the use of gender mainstreaming and human rights approach and their effects, internal and external factors, the use of PMM scored lower (ranging from 2.76 to 3.21 out of a maximum of 5).

28. Gender mainstreaming and Human Rights Approach (HRA) tools and the link to the Convention were the least examined features in the studies-with only approximately 25% of reports assessing against these criteria. As such, the results cannot be taken as representative and are excluded from the heatmap. The most examined questions concerned effectiveness and external and internal factors in 87% and 90% of reports respectively.

Table 3: Ranking of evaluation questions (Source: Assessment per criteria/reports)

Evaluation question	Rank	Score (5 very positive – 1 very negative)	Percentage of all reports	Quality rating (3 high – 1 low)
EQ1 Relevance	1	3.75	85%	2.51
EQ5 Efficiency	2	3.44	87%	1.96
EQ7 Effectiveness	3	3.22	90%	1.91
EQ6 Stakeholder engagement	4	3.21	83%	2.22
EQ4 Project tools and resources	5	3	75%	2.24
EQ9 Gender Mainstreaming and HRA	6	2.99	77%	2.26
EQ8 External and internal factors	7	2.87	90%	2.09
EQ3 PMM	8	2.76	82%	2.24
EQ10 Gender Mainstreaming and HRA tools	9	2.73	25%	2.33
EQ2 Link to the Convention	10	2.4	42%	2.04

Figure 2: Heat map of results against the meta-evaluation questions (Source: Assessment per indicators/reports)

What do the reports tell us? Heat map of results against the meta-evaluation questions					
	1	2	3	4	5
EQ1 Relevance Average score 3.75 (covered by 85% of reports. Quality rating 2.51)	No national needs	Indirect alignment to nationally stated needs	Direct alignment to nationally stated needs	Direct alignment to nationally stated needs within a strategic context of human rights, rule of law and democracy	Direct alignment to nationally stated needs within multiple national strategies of human rights, rule of law and democracy
EQ5 Efficiency Average score 3.44 (covered by 87% of reports. Quality rating 1.96)	Inappropriate formats of technical assistance	Limited formats of technical assistance that do not suit the context	A range of formats of technical assistance that adequately deliver appropriate outputs Reasonable cost-benefit ratio (costly format but with value, or low-cost but without great value)	A good range of formats of technical assistance that deliver appropriate outputs	A good range of formats of technical assistance that deliver highly appropriate outputs
EQ7. Level of effectiveness Average score 3.22 (covered by 90% of reports). Quality rating 1.91	No effectiveness evaluated	Limited effectiveness evaluated	Some effectiveness evaluated	Good effectiveness evaluated	High effectiveness evaluated
EQ6. Role of different types of stakeholders. Average score 3.21 (covered by 83% of the reports). Quality rating 2.22	No variety of stakeholders involved at all	Little variety of less relevant stakeholders involved	Some variety of somewhat relevant stakeholders involved	Good variety of normally relevant stakeholders involved	Excellent variety of highly relevant stakeholders involved
EQ4. Tools and resources to deliver support to national implementation. Average score 3 (covered by 75% of reports). Quality rating 2.24	Projects do not have any necessary tools and resources	Projects have limited necessary tools and resources are stretched	Projects have adequate necessary tools and resources	Projects have good necessary tools and resources provide flexibility and room to manoeuvre	Projects have excellent necessary tools and more than enough resources
EQ9. Gender mainstreaming and human rights-based approach. Average score 2.99 (covered by 77% of reports). Quality rating 2.26	No human rights-based approach	Basic human rights-based approach concerning recognition of diversity	Some gender mainstreaming involving disaggregation and consideration of equal participation and gender aspects Some human rights-based approach concerning recognition of diversity and consideration of equal participation and diversity aspects	Gender mainstreaming across the board with some gender specific objectives and results	Gender mainstreaming across the board with gender transformative objectives
EQ8. Enabling and hindering internal and external factors Average score 2.87 (covered by 90% of reports). Quality rating 2.09	Extremely challenging internal circumstances	Some challenging internal circumstances	Mix of beneficial and challenging internal circumstances	Mostly beneficial internal circumstances	Extremely beneficial internal circumstances
EQ3. Project management methodology enhancing support Average score 2.76 (covered by 82% of reports). Quality rating 2.24	PMM does not enhance projects at all	PMM provides limited support to projects	PMM provides support to projects in several areas	PMM provides support in several areas that enhances projects	PMM provides support across the board consistently enhancing projects

29. The evaluators assessed the quality of the evidence and analysis in relation to each of the evaluation questions. The strength of evidence was particularly poor in relation to effectiveness and efficiency, and strongest in the cases of relevance and mainstreaming tools. Both the lack of consistent content and the different scope and focus of the evaluation reports limit the utility of a ranking assessment. The meta-evaluation cannot reliably inform whether projects are more relevant than effective, therefore a more nuanced qualitative analysis of the content of the evaluation reports is more appropriate.

30. The key findings are structured around the trends that emerge from the meta-analysis regarding the effectiveness of project support to national implementation of the Convention, and patterns regarding external factors in general and internal factors. These factors can be categorised according to project design, project implementation, stakeholder management, the human rights approach and gender mainstreaming based on their significance. An evaluation question focused specifically on the tools and support to gender mainstreaming and the human rights approach complements the key findings and is addressed in the final section.

5.2. Recommendations generated by the evaluations and audits

31. An analysis of the recommendations contained in each report was undertaken to identify recurring issues and provide a categorisation of the most frequently occurring suggestions for improvement.

32. There are 594 recommendations across the 65 reports. 151 recommendations were generated in the action plan/programme-level evaluations, 65 recommendations were made in external audit reports, and the remaining 378 recommendations relate to project evaluations.

33. The most frequent recommendations relate to the need to strengthen monitoring systems, outcome focus, gender mainstreaming/human rights approaches, external co-ordination, project implementation approaches, and participatory design and implementation. There is one other category of recommendation that is even more frequently made relating to extending the work of the project. This type of recommendation however brings no value in terms of improvement of the project and has therefore been dismissed from this analysis.

Table 4: Ranking of recommendation categories in terms of frequency (source: meta-evaluation analysis of reports)

Ranking	Most frequent recommendation categories	Number of recommendations	Comparative closure rates after two years
1	MEL system	86	24%
2	Outcomes-focus	50	26%
3	Gender mainstreaming/Human rights approach	31	39%
3	External co-ordination	31	16%
5	Implementation approach	24	33%

34. As of 2023, the Organisation began to comprehensively track the follow-up or action taken against recommendations. Despite this partial picture, the analysis of recommendations and follow-up action (management response action plan reporting in TeamMate+) indicated that the Organisation addressed recommendations on implementation approaches, including of a participatory nature, and gender mainstreaming and the human rights approach to a greater extent than monitoring systems,

outcomes-focus and external co-ordination. The assessment considers the complexity and duration of actions addressing the recommendations and the action plan or project-level nature of the recommendations.

35. The evaluators incorporated the findings of the meta-evaluation into the assessment of the relevance and pertinence of the recommendations made across the studies; the final section of this report presents those recommendations that remain relevant for the Organisation, with an updated interpretation to account for changes (improvements) that have been made and the organisational developments that have taken place during the five year window that this meta-evaluation spans.

5.3. Effectiveness of project support to national implementation of the Convention

36. **Evidence on impact and effectiveness is sparse.** Impact and effectiveness are not well-evidenced in the evaluation reports for several reasons. First, none of the decentralised evaluations include impact assessments¹². It is both complicated and costly to assess impact accurately and credibly, and an evaluation of impact is not affordable for the small budgets usually allocated to project evaluations. Second, the quality assessment revealed that there are insufficient high-quality project evaluations on effectiveness. This may be because the evaluations suffered from a shortage of outcome level data and evidence as projects were not found to monitor and report them adequately. The strength of evidence of the body of evaluations reviewed for this study is too weak to confidently make claims at the impact level. There can be no aggregate quantitative assessment of project support to the implementation of the Convention.

37. **Where there is sufficient evidence of effectiveness, projects are seen to deliver outcomes aligned to the Programme and Budget of the Organisation and for all the dimensions of the strategic triangle (standard-setting, monitoring and technical co-operation).** These outcomes contribute to all three dimensions: i) they promote standards or explore different aspects of standards being drafted, ii) they support responses to monitoring recommendations and iii) they provide technical assistance through co-operation with governments. Projects support the national implementation of the Convention through developing legislative reforms and policy aligned to standards, introducing institutional structures and mechanisms that strengthen rule of law and human rights protection, and changing practices and strengthening capacity in these areas.

Table 5: All outcomes as reported in the evaluations analysed for this study (source: Meta-evaluation analysis of reports)

Category	Description
Legislative reform	Advice integrated into 19 specified laws and decrees adopted around children's protection, minorities protection, anti-corruption, academic integrity, human rights, and anti-money laundering etc. in eight member states
Institutional structure and mechanisms	Advice integrated into new structures established such as parliamentary working groups on Venice Commission opinions, independent inspectors in justice councils, electronic systems for reporting of political party financing, state services on ethnic policy, department of inclusion in education, local participatory mechanisms for civil engagement etc. in 12 member states
Policy change / alignment	Advice integrated into new policies and strategies such as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex strategy, national strategy for the implementation of European Court of Human Rights judgments, Code of Ethics for Locally Elected Authorities; Charter for Equality of Women and Men in

12. Assessments of 'the extent to which the intervention has generated or is expected to generate significant positive or negative, intended or unintended, higher-level effects', (Council of Europe Evaluation Guidelines, 2020).

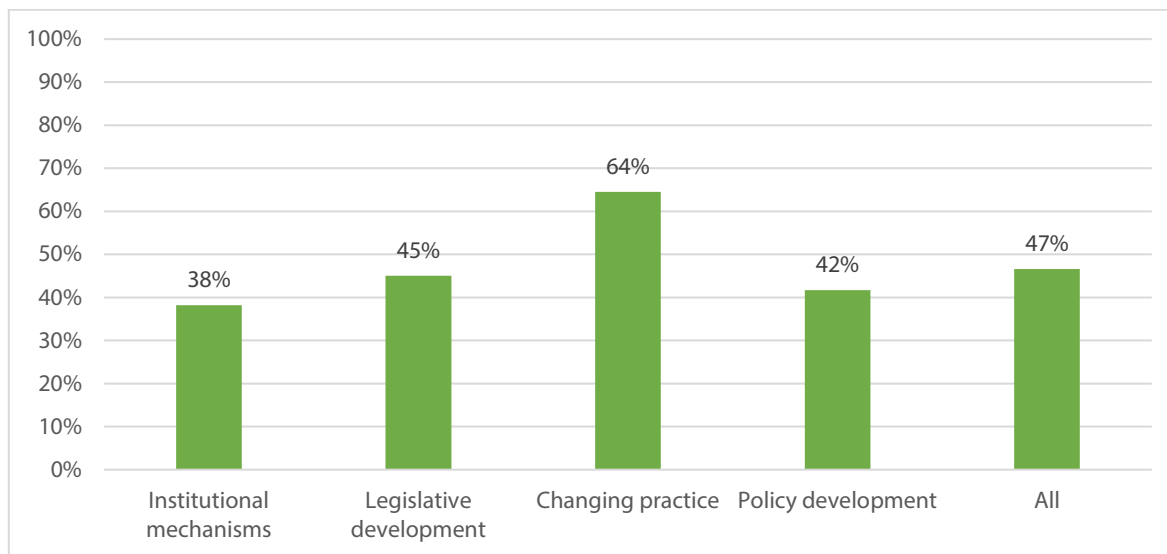
	Local Life, national action plan for combating violence against women, anti-corruption sectoral action plan, anti-money laundering and combating terrorist financing strategy for financial intelligence units, methodology on school segregation at pre-university level, memorandum of understanding between national and local level, and the EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation (2020 – 2030) etc. in eight member states
Changing practices	Introduction of work processes to integrate Council of Europe standards, budget allocations for Roma communities and greater Roma presence in local government budget discussions, child participation in policy development, inspection procedures to counter money laundering, mental health services for prisoners, incorporating Council of Europe European Commission for the efficiency of justice indicators in judicial functional reviews, participatory processes in local government, judges' rulings integrating Council of Europe standards, executive orders to enable access to legal aid in court processes etc. in 11 member states
Capacity and awareness	Mindset and attitude changes, national, institutional and local training and support following Council of Europe training, greater public awareness on evolving human rights issues, good practice in local government spreading to municipalities not involved in the project, greater interest in the reintegration of people leaving prison into society etc. in ten member states

38. **Projects are standalone and there is a lack of aggregate reporting.** The evaluations found that projects are not well connected to each other. There is almost no evidence presented of individual projects complementing other projects, including in the 13 evaluations of action plans and programmes. In practically all instances, results of individual projects are presented separately and there is no aggregation, synthesis or cumulative effect described of these projects. Moreover, within individual projects, evidence suggests a disparate set of results and outcomes, with only occasional indication of further expansion or development of these results. The project theories of change make these connections on paper, but they are not supported by the evaluation data. This suggests that there is little theory of change integrated into project implementation beyond their documentation and design.

39. **There is much more data and information about outputs than outcomes.** Approximately one third of results evidenced in evaluation reports are at the level of outcomes, the remainder being outputs. All evaluation reports examine effectiveness; however, in which case the imbalance implies that there is not enough analysis of outcomes.

40. **Activities described in evaluation reports appear to result in outcomes inconsistently and there are areas of work where this is more prevalent.** Some activities are more successful in producing outcomes than others. They provide an indication of the effectiveness of different types of activities. There is considerably more success in changing practice than changing institutional mechanisms, with legislative development and policy development somewhere in between. Given that several activities contribute to the same outcomes, overall conversion rates seem reasonable.

Figure 3: Chart showing the percentage of activities that lead to the achievement of an outcome - 459 references (source: meta-evaluation analysis of reports)



41. **The outcomes described in the evaluation reports are almost never linked to other outcomes** which means there is very rarely any analysis of the combined effect of outcomes leading to impact. At the same time, the ratio of different types of outcomes nonetheless provides a comparison of intermediate and immediate outcomes and therefore potential contribution to impact. Approximately one third are intermediate (legislative change, institutional development and policy development) and two thirds are immediate (awareness, changing practice, capacity and peer exchange).

42. **The evaluation reports reveal that the reach of the outcomes is limited in relation to the number of projects and activities delivered.** Changes in practice, awareness, capacity building are restricted to a small number of stakeholders in most cases, whilst policy changes, institutional mechanisms and legislative changes are limited to isolated instances rather than being far-reaching. Evaluation reports rarely probe into these qualitative aspects of the results.

Figure 4: Chart showing the conversion of activities to outcomes by category - 1500 references (source: meta-evaluation analysis of reports)

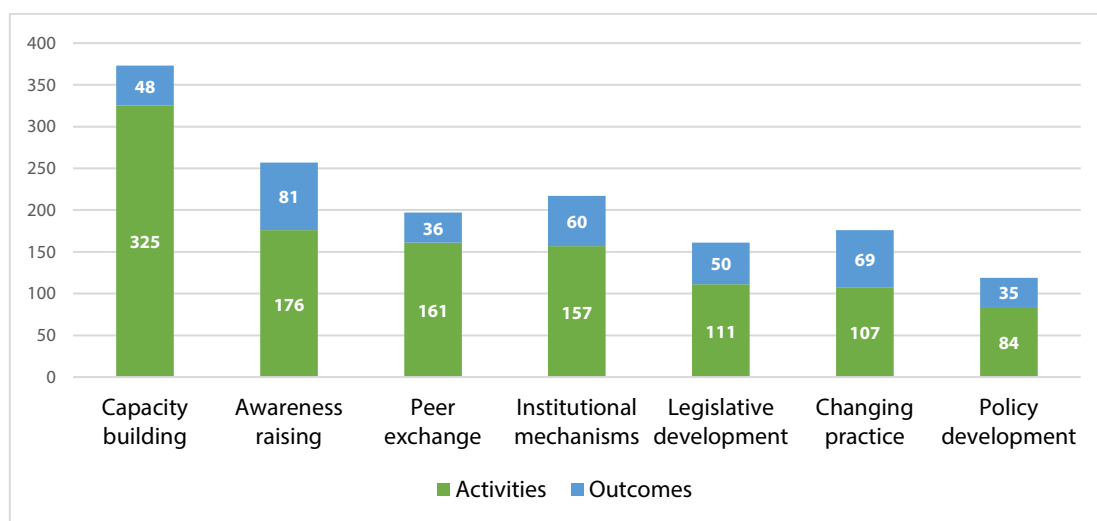
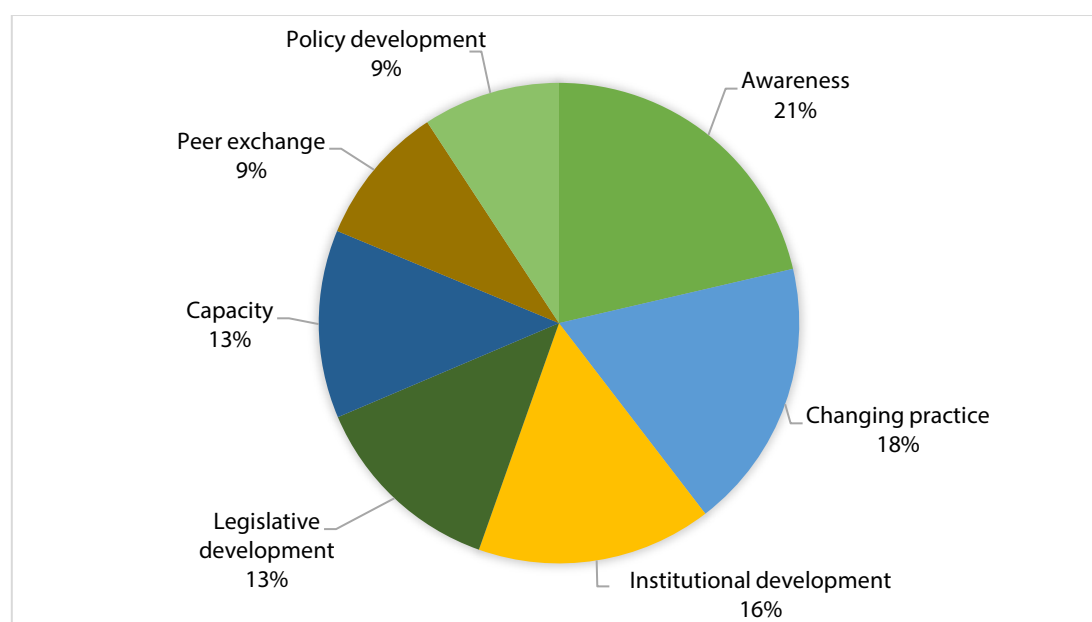
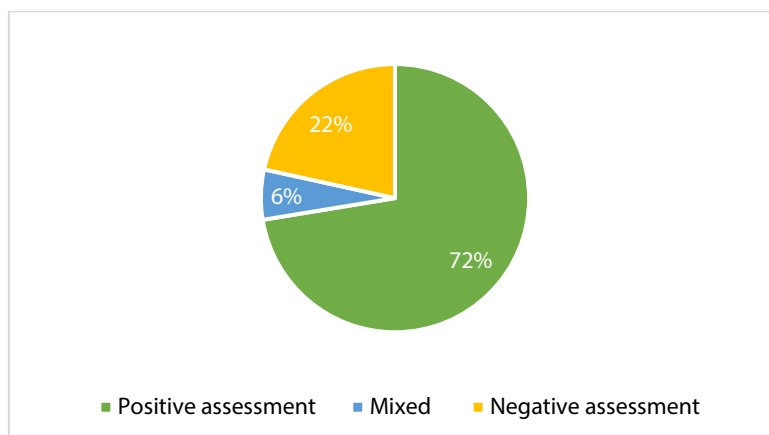


Figure 5: Chart showing the range of different categories of outcomes reported in all reports - 379 references (source: meta-evaluation analysis of reports)



43. **Follow-up measures significantly enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of project outcomes:** When actions are taken to follow up on individual outcomes – such as repeated support or integration of training into existing programmes – effectiveness improves markedly. This is supported by 37 evaluations reports, with over 70% assessing follow-up efforts positively, see figure 6. These measures not only amplify and extend initial results but also help embed lasting change, often sustaining benefits beyond the life of the original projects. Conversely, evaluations noted that a lack of follow-up highlighted diminished opportunities for further development and a reduced likelihood of sustaining outcomes over time.

Figure 6: Assessment of follow-up on individual outcomes - 89 references in 37 reports (source: meta-evaluation analysis of reports)



5.4. Summary of factors that influence the effectiveness of the support

44. **The achievement of outcomes is influenced by both internal and external factors.** By analysing the evaluation reports, the most prominent enablers and key success factors can be identified. These have been aggregated and ranked by frequency of mention, as shown in table 6:

Table 6: Enablers and key factors for success identified in the evaluation reports (source meta-evaluation analysis of reports)

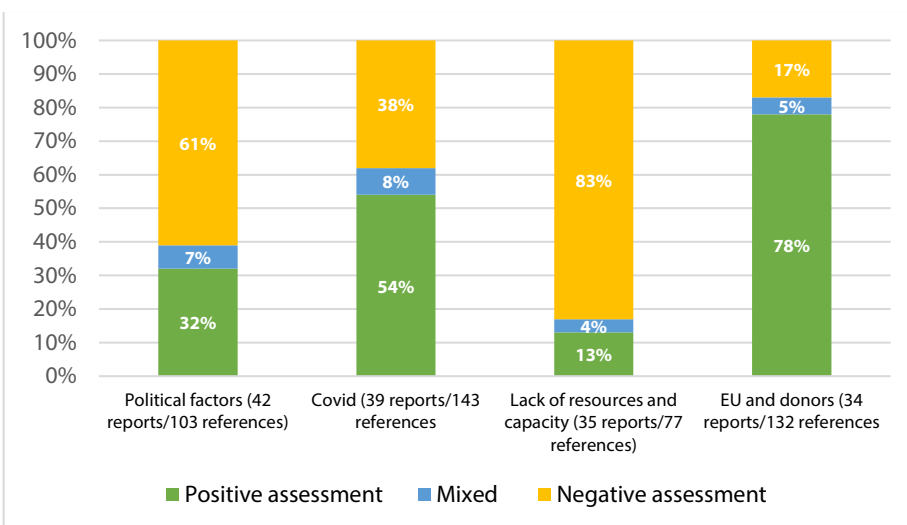
Enablers and key factors for success in order of prominence	
✓	Wide range of different stakeholders at multiple levels and across varied institutions including civil society in many cases
✓	Strong and meaningful relationships between Council of Europe and important stakeholders in member states
✓	EU, international organisations and donor influence such as EU accession leverage
✓	Meaningful participation in planning and design of projects
✓	Good blend of senior officials and technical specialists and experts
✓	Integration of civil society skills and links to citizens
✓	Reinforcement of results through civil society monitoring
✓	Encouraging political context
✓	Sustainability of results through civil society continuity

45. The following sections explore firstly the external factors followed by the internal factors that influence the effectiveness of efforts to support the national implementation of the Convention.

5.5. External factors that enable and inhibit the support for implementation of the Convention

46. **The political context is the most significant external factor affecting the effectiveness of project support to national implementation of the Convention.** It is examined in 42 evaluation reports and assessed negatively in over 60% of cases. The negative assessments reveal the main challenges to be in equal measure political instability

Figure 7: Assessment of external factors (source: meta-evaluation analysis of reports)



or the lack of political will or political sensitivity to the issues in question. These challenges affect both the effectiveness and the sustainability of the projects. Positive assessments highlight two main drivers of project success: strong political commitment and skilled project teams adept at navigating political challenges. Frequently shifting perspectives on human rights, rule of law and democracy required projects teams to foster constructive relationships with influential political stakeholders or adapt project objectives to align with evolving political contexts. The Council of Europe's efforts on building political commitment are proven to be important and are further discussed below.

47. **The Covid-19 pandemic was a significant external factor affecting the effectiveness of project support to national implementation of the Convention.** In over 50% of the cases where Covid-19 was referred to in evaluation reports, its consequences on project management were assessed positively, suggesting that it led to some positive changes to projects. This is largely because in many cases the transfer to online modalities was well managed. Since Covid-19 there are many more online options for project implementation, which are actively used. From the point of view of effectiveness, though, the evaluation reports provide only limited evidence that these changes enhance results, either from the point of view of a wider circle of beneficiaries or more visibility of Council of Europe projects. Similarly, the negative assessments highlight the impact the pandemic had particularly on regional objectives where the conditions brought many interventions to a halt and projects and programmes working with hard-to-reach communities such as Roma and Travellers suffered. Many project activities were delayed and postponed, but on the whole projects were able to complete the implementation of their activities through extended project periods.

48. **Member states' resources and capacity to engage in projects is a third factor influencing the effectiveness of support to national implementation of the Convention.** A lack of resources and capacity is reported in 37 evaluation reports. This is assessed negatively as a hindering factor in over 80% of cases. The lack of capacity is affected by high turnover in partner institutions in several cases and impacts on the quality of the contribution of both national authorities and CSOs. Projects are often shown to be

beyond member states' absorption capacity. This partly explains the limited achievement of outcomes mentioned above.

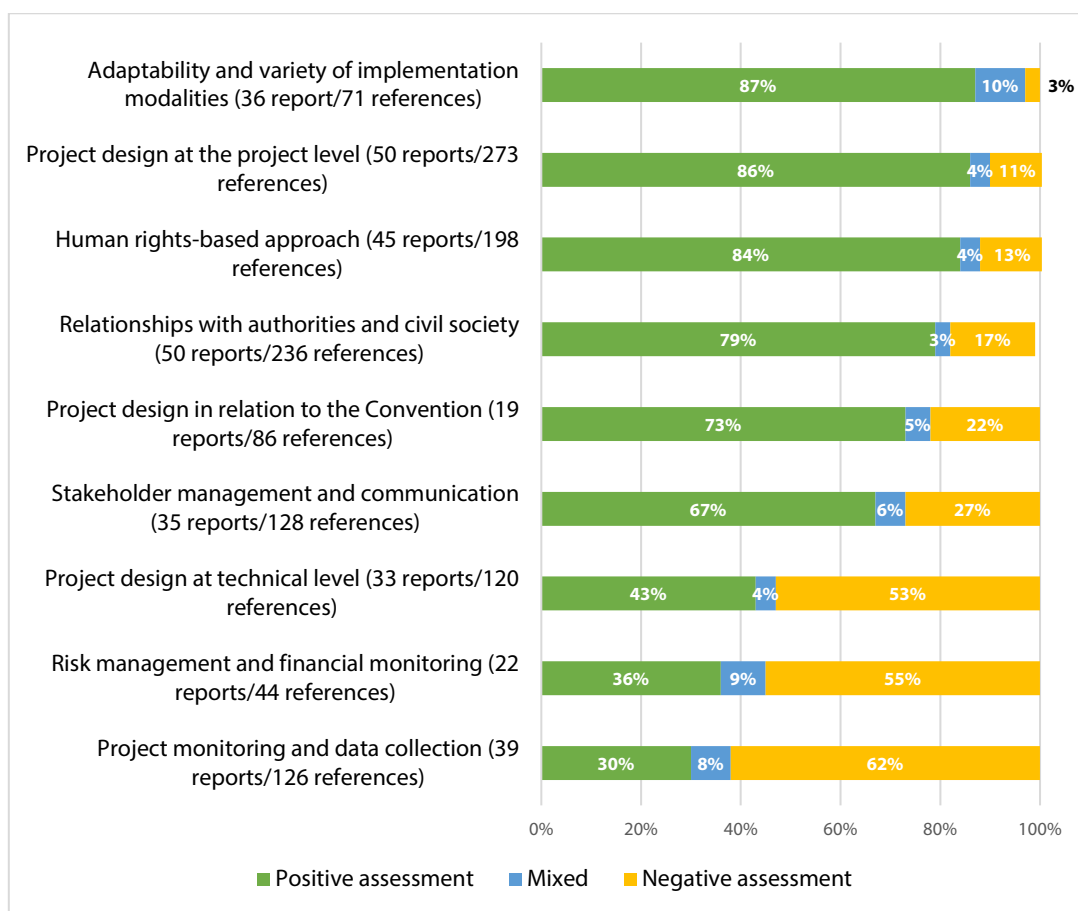
49. Finally, **external organisations and donor countries are shown to influence the effectiveness of support to the national implementation of the Convention**. There is evidence of European Union's (EU), donors' and international organisations' influence on projects in 34 evaluation reports. This influence is assessed positively in almost 80% of references, with the motivation provided by the possibility **of EU accession the most common enabling factor**. The mutual reinforcement of the Council of Europe's and international organisations' work is highlighted, as is good complementarity and synergies between the various institutions. There are negative assessments when EU accession overshadows the Council of Europe's work, or there is poor co-ordination between multiple donors.

50. **Donor funding sometimes introduces a focus on specific projects that fragments the collective nature of all Council of Europe initiatives**. Unless funding is at the action plan level, and therefore not ringfenced, donors fund projects based on their own interests, which may or may not align with the Council of Europe's strategic goals or those of other donors. These interests vary and evolve at different rates, creating inconsistencies across priorities. The funding mechanism reinforces the focus on individual project results because these are tied to contractual obligations and enable financial oversight and accountability.

5.6. Internal factors that enable and inhibit the support for implementation of the Convention

51. The internal factors are more detailed according to the context of project management. Figure 8 shows the prominent internal factors identified in evaluation reports. The chart shows that adaptability and variety of implementation modalities and project design were most favourably reported whilst project monitoring and data collection were reported negatively. The factors related to project design, implementation, monitoring and data collection will be discussed first followed by the other internal factors as set out in figure 8.

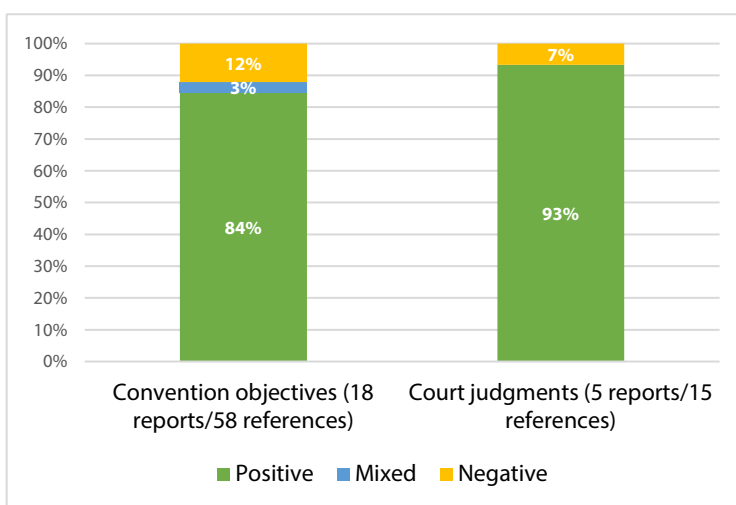
Figure 8: Assessment of internal factors (source: meta-evaluation analysis of reports)



Project design

52. **Evaluation reports rarely revealed direct links between projects and support of national implementation of the Convention.** Five projects that directly supported the execution of judgments were seen to bring about positive changes in the implementation of the Convention both in terms of specific measures and general measures at the systemic level. There were 18 projects which referred to objectives in support of the implementation of the Convention. Any such links are viewed favourably in the evaluative assessments, see figure 9 showing the relationship between positive and negative references. The advantages of links to the Convention are the direct benefit to citizens, the tangible improvements in national systems to protect human rights, the connections established between projects via the Convention objectives, and the clear

Figure 9: References to the Convention in evaluation reports (source: meta-evaluation analysis of reports)



visibility and easy-to-grasp purpose of the projects helping local stakeholders to understand projects better.

53. **Fragmented efforts:** Projects tend to operate in isolation due to their focus on narrow technical issues within specific Council of Europe sectors, such as IT systems, trial procedures, legal aid or detailed policy areas like jurisdiction of equality bodies, and electoral processes. This specialisation leads to fragmented efforts, with little natural overlap between conventions or across sectors, making connections between them unclear.

54. **Staff working on projects have a sense of the bigger picture through sharing premises and the physical proximity of the main institutions at headquarters.** The implicit link between treaties and conventions and the Court and the Convention is understood and possibly taken for granted. This can lead to assumptions that the bigger picture is evident for national stakeholders; the evaluations in this meta-evaluation study suggest that this is rarely the case. In those rarer cases when national stakeholders are aware that the more specific, technical work of their sector is contributing to their country fulfilling its obligation to implement the European Convention of Human Rights, it deepens commitment and the sense of connection to other stakeholders. It also brings pride and the sense of importance to what they are doing, one evaluation stated that: *“round tables and case law fora were perceived as particularly useful by the three High Courts in terms of generating a better understanding amongst the judiciary of the role of the Constitution and the ECHR.”*¹³ and another: *“There were two wide round tables with the participation of the Armenian Human Rights Defender and other CSOs on rule 9 on communication to the CM (Committee of Ministers) on the execution of ECtHR judgments. These events are remarkable because under Rule 9 National Human Rights Institutions and CSOs may submit to the CM communications with regard to the execution of judgments according to article 46, paragraph 2, of the ECHR.”*¹⁴

55. **Projects address the systemic nature of violations of human rights through general measures for the execution of judgments.** Some evaluation reports demonstrate the positive influence this has on projects directly targeting the execution of judgments. Most projects, however, appear to overlook this systemic aspect and thus fail to capitalise on the incentives this gives to member states to engage and follow up on project and programme outcomes. Such engagement and follow-up would enhance the Council of Europe’s impact.

56. **The European Convention of Human Rights was more tangible for stakeholders to understand than the concepts of human rights, democracy and rule of law.** The concepts exist in all member states, but they are not as clearly defined or discernible as the Convention. The national implementation of the Convention was found to help communication and bring greater meaning to projects and programmes. It conveys a message that is simple to understand and readily understood by stakeholders. The Convention also provides an **entry point for dialogue** and common understanding when member states face popular resistance on more politically sensitive topics such as the Council of Europe's Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. These findings are reflected in frequent recurrent recommendations on communicating the overall goal of projects with stakeholders.

13. Evaluation report of the Joint Project Supporting the Individual Application to the Constitutional Court in Türkiye.

14. Evaluation report of the Project: “Support for the execution by Armenia of judgments in respect of Article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights”.

57. **Projects strongly align to the standards and monitoring activities and reports of the Council of Europe.** The prioritisation within projects evaluated under the relevance criteria by most evaluations holds up to greater scrutiny because of strong alignment to Council of Europe standard-setting and monitoring mechanisms. The strategic triangle effectively ensures project relevance by aligning co-operation initiatives with the implementation of new standards and responses to monitoring recommendations. There is strong referencing to country action plans and country and regional co-ordination.

58. **Prioritisation mechanisms were found to be absent.** The analysis of the evaluation reports provided no evidence of an apparent logic that guides the prioritisation of projects within programmes. This raises questions about the strategic nature of projects and programmes. The nine country action plans¹⁵ and four large programme facilities¹⁶ are presented mostly as a framing of collections of projects. In this sense they do not provide a greater ambition than grouping together projects within a geographical context. The contribution that technical co-operation makes to the strategic triangle in terms of programming therefore needs to be reinforced. The work of co-operation programmes needs to be strongly aligned to the whole Organisation for this to happen. Co-operation projects are linked to standards and monitoring within individual Organisational programmes but a connection to an overall prioritisation at the Organisational level is missing. This could be provided by uniting all projects around the Convention at the highest Organisational level.

59. **The structure of projects presents challenges.** There are problems in the more technical aspects of project design relating to the structure of the programme and projects. The evaluation reports present projects as standalone interventions rather than integrated parts of the Organisation's broader strategy. Although programmes are linked at the governance level, they become fragmented through separate project steering committees and objectives, with outcomes only reported at the project level. Stakeholders are listed independently for each project even when they are the same across multiple initiatives, except in the case of the high-level programme steering committees. The evaluation reports highlight weak connections between objectives and indicators and point to the absence of programme-level results frameworks. Over the period of the evaluation reports, increasingly logframes exist at the programme level, however the project design is yet to be closely linked to a higher-level results framework that encourages member states to improve implementation of standards, to respond comprehensively to monitoring recommendations, and to strengthen ultimately the national implementation of the Convention. The most frequent recurrent recommendations touch on this aspect of project design.

15. Armenia 2019-2022, Bosnia and Herzegovina 2018-2021, Georgia 2016-2019 and 2020-2023, Republic of Moldova 2017-2020 and 2021-2024, Morocco 2018-2021, Tunisia 2018-2021, Ukraine 2018-2022.

16. Horizontal Facility for the Western Balkans and Turkey – phase I, Horizontal Facility for the Western Balkans and Turkey – phase II, Partnership for Good Governance, South Programme.

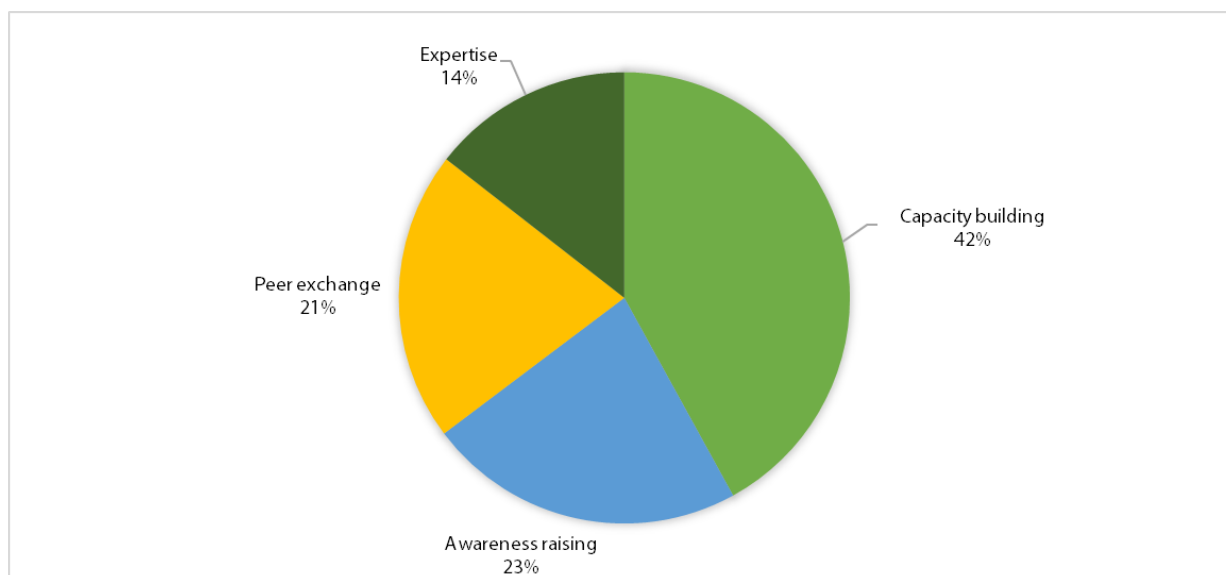
Project modalities

60. **There are adequate tools and resources available for project management, and the PMM as an approach is appropriate.** Project management tools and the Council of Europe's approach are assessed positively, in that they are available, in use and cater for project planning, monitoring and reporting, and risk management. There are online, digitalised options for meetings with interpretation, and training courses. These resources were developed during the Covid-19 period, as mentioned above.

61. There appears to be a **standard model of project intervention modality**, consisting of awareness-raising of public authorities and CSOs, capacity building of authorities and research to amend policy and legislation, which nearly all projects conform to. There is very little variation or change in the modalities of project implementation, which means that opportunities for enhancing effectiveness and impact may be missed.

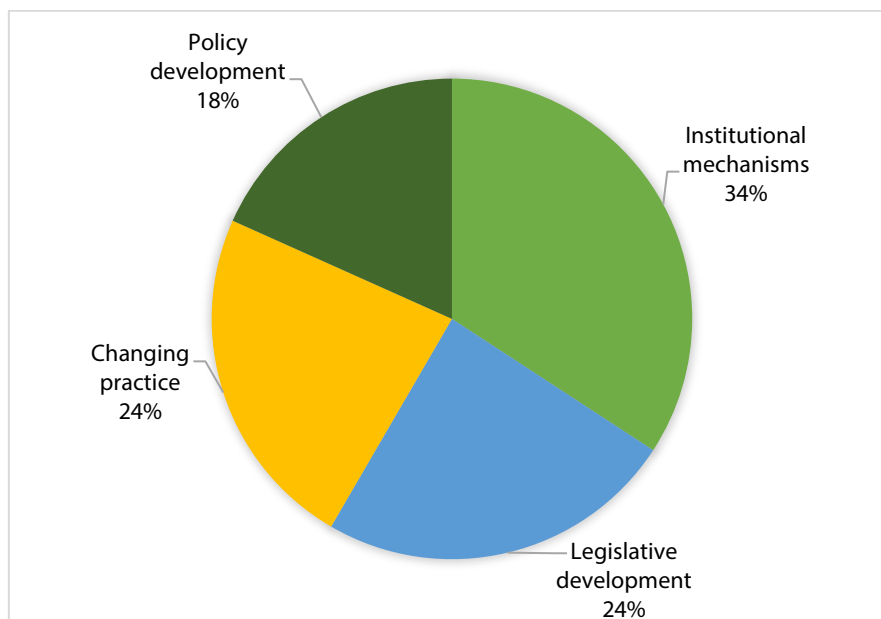
62. Evaluation reports provide extensive information on the types of activities that are implemented, under which circumstances and with which intentions. Two-thirds of the activities described are dedicated to capacity building and raising awareness, see figure 10.

Figure 10: Assessment of activity type - 774 references (source: meta-evaluation analysis of reports)



63. The change targeted by the activities is shown in figure 11, grouped according to objectives relating to legislative or policy development, to institutional mechanisms such as Court processes, financial risk assessment tools, reporting and management systems, and to changing practices in public institutions and communities. The discussion of activities and objectives in the evaluation reports is descriptive with little overall analysis and no cost effectiveness analysis. As a result, there is little evidence in evaluation reports to meaningfully assess the most efficient ways to implement projects, nor the appropriate balance of targeted outcomes to best achieve impact. This contrasts with the level of efficiency assessed and reported in the evaluation reports at the surface level.

Figure 11: Targeted areas of change by activities - 459 references (source: meta-evaluation analysis of reports)



Adaptation and resilience

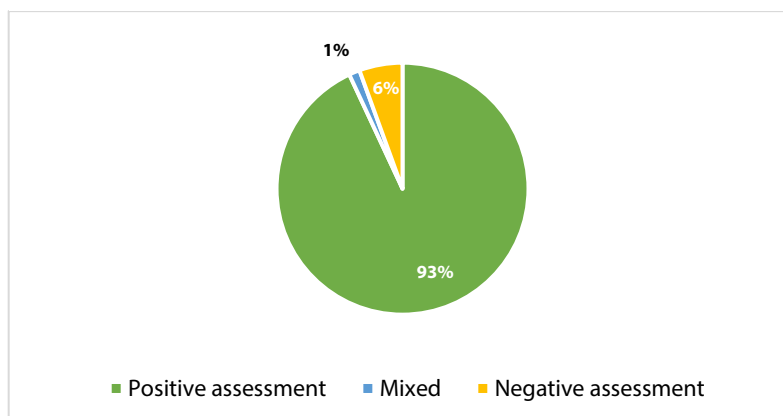
64. The period of the meta-evaluation from 2019-2024 has been turbulent due to combinations of significant crises at local, national, regional and international levels. Crisis, political challenges and conflict are consequently well documented in the evaluation reports. The evidence of adaptability and flexibility to deliver projects and programmes is in response to crises and challenges at global and local levels. **This reveals a strong resilience within the Council of Europe project and programme teams, and skills in adjusting to changing circumstances.** The evaluations suggest that adaptation is more reactive than proactive, performing well to maintain project and programme activities but not necessarily preparing well for changes nor seizing opportunities to enhance project and programme results. New approaches are being incorporated into projects and programmes because of crises rather than for the sake of innovation for improvement.

65. **Evaluation reports do not provide extensive evidence on the adaptation of project interventions to different contexts.** Compared to the coverage of activities and outputs, 10% demonstrate new approaches to delivering projects. Over 40% of these cases are linked to Covid-19 and measures that needed to be introduced to continue work during the pandemic. This suggests that there is not a great deal of experimentation or variation in approach in Council of Europe projects and programmes. Nonetheless, such adaptation is assessed very positively in the evaluation reports because it strengthens outcomes. There are tangible benefits from exploring new approaches to intervention modalities. The introduction of online approaches to deliver training programmes, conferences, roundtables, working groups etc. has enabled projects to reach more people and provide greater and longer-lasting effects (as opposed to one-off training for example).

66. Changes to project implementation approaches, such as types of activities chosen,

impacting on results is evidenced in 21 evaluation reports and is assessed positively in over 90% of cases, with most positive assessments specifically noting the benefits of online modalities in broadening reach and therefore potentially enhancing impact. Experimentation and piloting are also effective in developing new practices. The Human Rights Education for Legal Professionals (HELP) programme contributes to effectiveness by providing permanently available training resources that are adapted to domestic contexts and then often integrated into existing national training programmes, see figure 12.

Figure 12: Assessment of contribution of HELP to effectiveness - 72 references in 20 reports (source: meta-evaluation analysis of reports)



67. Success in adapting projects and building ownership and commitment results from close relationships and immediate access to key stakeholders in member states through field offices.

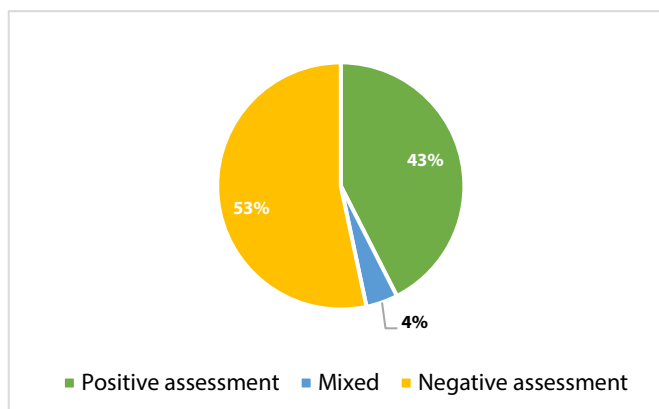
Projects are often considered to be successful because of good political commitment or in spite of the political challenges, or around the skill and expertise in Council of Europe projects and programmes in managing the political instability and frequently changing perspectives on different challenges relating to human rights, rule of law and democracy.

68. Evaluation reports identified the benefits of conducting options appraisal and testing approaches to extend outcomes and engage more stakeholders. Recurrent recommendations frequently suggest there be more piloting and testing of different implementation modalities.

Results-based management

69. Logframes proved to be beneficial but need to be strengthened. From the point of view of assessments of project design, see figure 13, the use of a project logframe is seen positively in the evaluations overall as it enables better communication and co-ordination of projects, helping with stakeholder management. However, the logic and design of project logframes are often questioned. Links between outcomes, other outcomes, outputs, results and indicators are regularly questioned in evaluations because the outcomes are often unrelated to each other and do not contribute together to a higher-level result, the outcomes do not always logically follow on from the outputs, and the indicators sometimes do not measure the stated results. What emerges from the evaluation reports throughout the period in scope, is a lack of connection in logframes that is

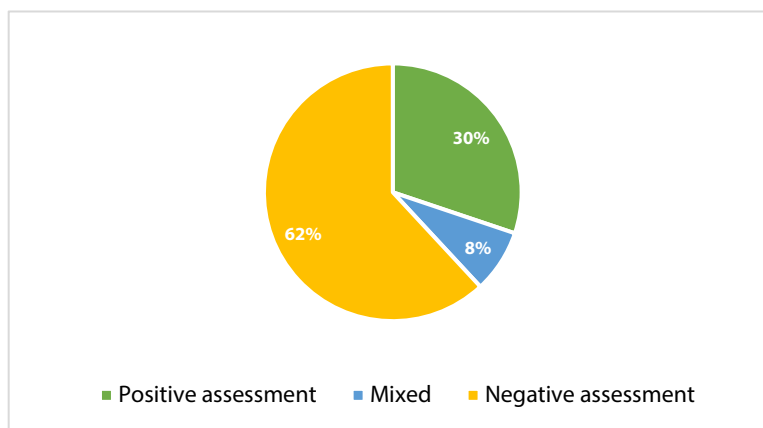
Figure 13: Assessment of PMM design - 120 references in 33 reports (source: meta-evaluation analysis of reports)



needed to prompt higher outcomes and progressive steps towards change. The logframe design needs greater attention from managers within the MAEs and in the final approval of projects in accordance with the contribution projects should make towards higher Organisational goals.

70. **Measurement and data collection are weak overall.** There is some positive assessment of data being integrated in reporting and providing evidence of progress in a limited number of cases in the evaluation reports. Mostly, however, the evaluation reports over the period assessed by the meta-evaluation identify problems with measurement and data collection as can be seen in figure 14. The lack of evidence of results leads to serious weaknesses in progress reporting and providing evidence of progress. The 2021 evaluation of results-based management also pointed to weaknesses in results measurement with a focus during the planning phase rather than during the implementation of projects.¹⁷

Figure 14: Assessment of PMM results-based management in evaluation reports - 126 references in 39 reports
(source: meta-evaluation analysis of reports)



71. **Lack of strong results monitoring and reporting risks producing evaluations that cannot demonstrate the level of project achievements.** There is a lack of presentation of results within the evaluation reports overall due to projects' failure to measure and collect data adequately, which leads to weaknesses in evaluative assessments of results and impact. Evaluations rely on the existence of adequate monitoring data, as it is difficult to collect such data retrospectively or within the limited timeframe and scope of individual evaluations. Evaluation would need reliable results data through project monitoring to go deeper in evaluative analysis. Indicators are sufficiently used to track performance and adjust approaches with evaluation reports very rarely referring to them. Some reports include quantitative data about activities either in terms of attendance or satisfaction levels of the activity, but outputs and outcomes are presented in a simplistic way without including data from indicators that provide either quantitative or qualitative information about these results or clarify their causal effects. These findings are reflected in frequent recurrent recommendations on project monitoring and outcome focus.

72. **The logical progression from outputs and outcomes to ultimate changes in behaviours, practices, and beliefs is rarely described in evaluation reports.** Often, evaluation reports focus on how outputs and outcomes are sustained, rather than on how they contribute to the development of long-term impact. In other cases, it mostly relates to the consequence of training of trainers leading to more training, or training programmes and curriculum becoming integrated into official training systems. Evaluation

17. [DIO-EVA\(2021\)32 - Evaluation of Results-based Management](#): "Less progress towards establishing a results measurement system. Some aspects are in place, but it is unclear how effectively they work. Budget lines to support measurement of results at the programme/sub-programme level are missing, and evaluation is not well integrated into results measurement. The implication is that the Council of Europe's result measurement system (at programme/sub-programme level, which is the most relevant for results-based management) has focused much more on results measurement as part of a planning exercise rather than results measurement as part of implementation, with a focus on output and not outcomes and impact."

reports rarely examine the follow-on effects: what happens as a result of the adoption of a law, for example, or how a new case management system affects the administration of courts.

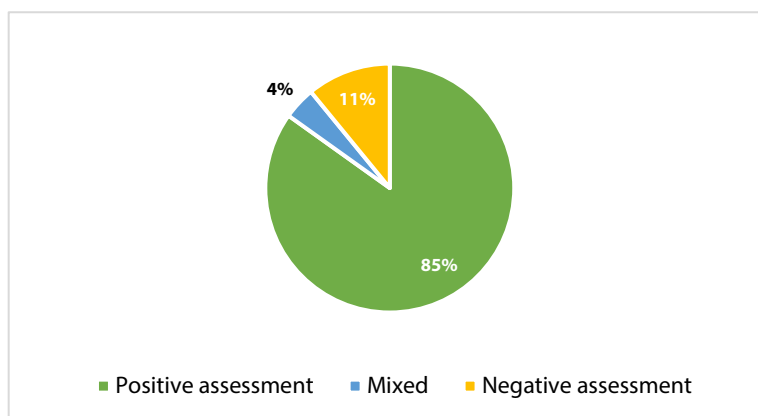
73. To some extent the lack of data is due to limitations of the evaluations themselves, but solid results data ought to be provided by project monitoring. There is no reason to suggest that this is caused by the multiple crises during the meta-evaluation period. According to PMM, regular monitoring and data collection to provide evidence of results is mandatory. Reporting occurs at least annually – and often more frequently – where data is expected against all indicators, and outputs and outcomes achieved during the period. There is longstanding work to address the weakness in the application of results-based management approaches including a PMM handbook, a PMM IT platform, and PMM training both at a foundational level and advanced training specifically on results-based reporting, which has been in place since the beginning of this meta-evaluation period¹⁸. PMM is now well understood among staff, however, these issues are not being overcome according to the persisting evaluation findings. Exceptional support is provided for the Eastern Partnership region through one dedicated monitoring and evaluation officer based in Georgia, recognised in one evaluation.

Continuity and trust

74. **There are consistency and regularity in projects and programmes, reflecting the longstanding commitment, and relationships with member states that has generated significant trust and confidence in the Organisation’s knowledge and understanding of the country.** The evaluation reports provide substantial evidence that this adds value.

75. **The Council of Europe provides continuity and stability through its relationships with member states, including through co-operation and technical assistance.** This is presented as the most significant enabling internal factor, appearing in 40 evaluation reports in a positive way in 85% of cases, see figure 15. Most of these positive assessments relate to the length of the Council of Europe’s involvement in the topic over many years. This often translates into trust and recognised knowledge and understanding of the country. Negative assessments, though rare, cite overly close relationships that hinder accountability and cause delays, often rendering projects outdated by the time they are implemented.

Figure 15: Assessment of continuity of relationship as enabling factor - 119 references in 40 reports
(source: meta-evaluation analysis of reports)



18. More specifically, DPC provides training, guidance and coaching on different aspects of RBM, with three new curricula and indicator coaching in the Field in 2025. More resources (self-learning) are being integrated into the internal Learning Management System. The Handbook update is ongoing.

76. **Council of Europe legal and technical expertise is highlighted as an important strength and added value of Council of Europe technical co-operation.** The blend of international and national expertise, taking into account different contexts and legal frameworks, helps to support practical and concrete measures at local level to comply with international standards. The combination of international expertise and local knowledge is evidenced in 20 evaluation reports and is positively assessed in over 90% of cases. The positive assessments are due to the usefulness of adapting international expertise to local contexts, making work practical for member states. The practical approach leads to greater engagement, ownership and adoption of project proposals.

77. **The headquarters brings status and high profile to the Organisation's projects.** Strasbourg is referred to as a centre of international standards and member states' commitments to these standards in 24 evaluation reports and its influence is positively assessed in over 80% of cases. This is due to the high esteem for the Council of Europe, giving it legitimacy and credibility in promoting international standards. The negative assessments mostly related to the failure to sufficiently blend the international and local expertise, leading to a failure to adequately interpret theory to local and national contexts. This suggests that the process of interpreting international standards at national level is an important element of technical co-operation with member states.

78. **Greater responsibility for substantive content of projects decentralised in the field offices** helps in a small number of cases already, in line with audit recommendations¹⁹ for decentralisation. It features in 22 reports with positive assessments when field offices contribute to the continuity and trust between the Organisation and national stakeholders and translate Council of Europe expertise to the national and local level. Assessments are negative when field offices are not empowered to do so or are prevented from doing so.

Stakeholder management and communication

79. **Stakeholder management and communication contribute significantly to good relationships with member states.** The evaluations reveal a positive trend in the improvement of stakeholder management and communication, with substantial evidence that the relationships established between the Council of Europe and key stakeholders in member states are strong and meaningful. There is good participation in planning and design of projects, with a good range of different stakeholders including civil society in many cases. Evidence suggests there is a good blend of senior officials and technical specialists and experts.

80. **Good stakeholder engagement in projects was found to improve their design, focus, outcomes and ownership.** The evaluation reports show that the participation and inclusion of wide-ranging stakeholders first contributes to better project design, through consultation and needs assessments. It leads to better targeted activities and outputs, and stronger outcomes as a result²⁰.

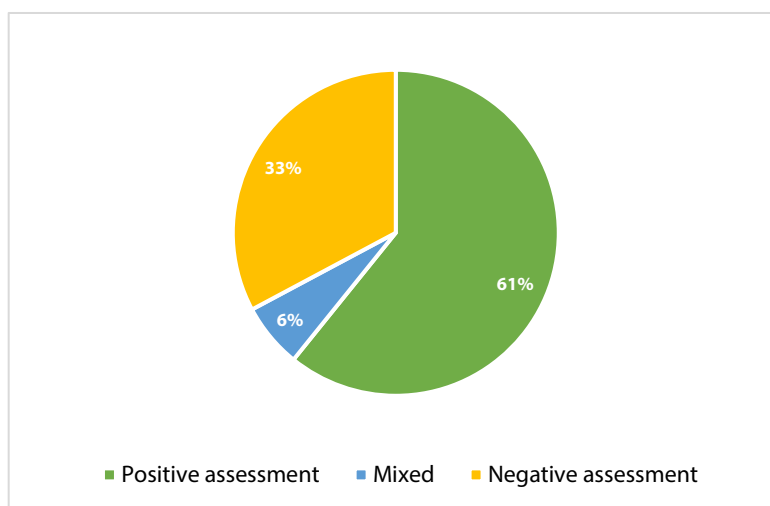
19. For example, Recommendation 6 of the External Audit Report on Decentralisation 2024: "Review the current signature delegation system and assign responsibility: (i) for financial management of regional programmes to a lead office; (ii) for the operational management of projects to heads of offices supported by managers with skills in the relevant subjects"; and Recommendation 15: "Consider gradually transferring the management of project content to the country offices so as to refocus operational MAEs on their remits in terms of project design, supervision and evaluation."

20. This approach is emphasised in PMM.

Moreover, evaluation reports positively assess the level of ownership of authorities and the oversight that civil society brings to interventions. The Council of Europe is successfully maintaining strong relations with key stakeholders despite both political challenges such as anti-European movements and turbulent times resulting from conflict and health crises. Evaluation reports signal this as a key strength of the Organisation and a significant added value.

81. External communication of projects is a promising aspect of the Organisation but remains relatively limited. There is evidence on external communication in 39 of the evaluation reports, with over 60% of data points presenting a positive assessment, see figure 16. The positive aspects relate to the processes and efforts to ensure external communication through website and social media presence and communication plans, and multi-level and high-level stakeholders that bring attention to projects and programmes. Negative aspects of external communication to national audiences about projects being implemented in member states presented in the evaluation reports highlight the poor visibility of the Organisation due to the large volume of highly technical complicated issues that make it very difficult to follow what is happening in projects, and the challenges in reaching beyond specialist audiences. The lack of communication of the Council of Europe's broader goals means that stakeholders do not fully grasp what Council of Europe projects are working towards. This is linked in evaluation reports to the co-ordination and mutual support between donors and other international organisations. Recurrent recommendations frequently emphasise the need to strengthen external communication.

Figure 16: Assessment of impact of external communication - 125 references in 39 reports (source: meta-evaluation analysis of reports)



Administration and resources

82. Evaluation reports are more critical in terms of the slowness of administrative processes impeding swift responses and adjustments. The slowness is due to long authorisation chains which sometimes transfer more than once between field offices and headquarters as financial validation is delegated to the Council of Europe external offices²¹ in the member states with the highest volume of projects, whilst content validation needs to come from headquarters. This reflects on the extent of decentralisation.

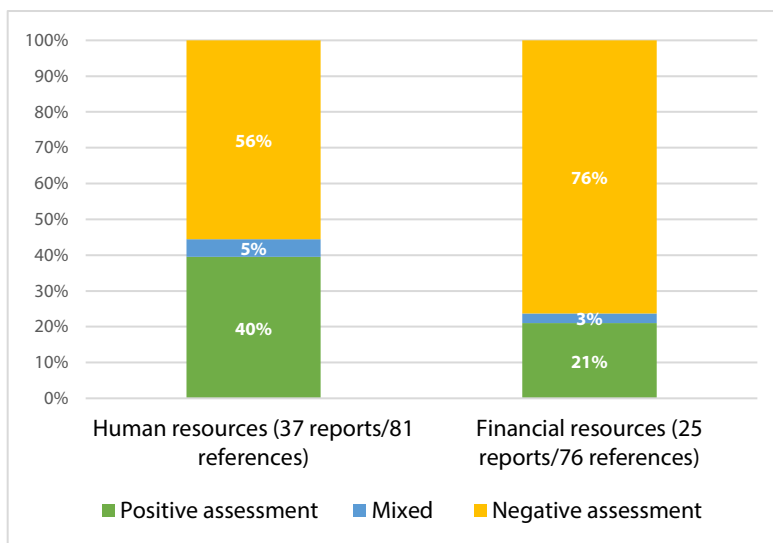
83. There are challenges in terms of human and financial resources for projects. Human resources are assessed in 25 evaluation reports and financial resources in 37, see figure 17. There is evidence of greater challenges in human resources, with over 75% of data points assessed as negative, than financial resources, with over 55% of data points assessed as negative. These challenges involve recruitment difficulties and

21. Council of Europe Field Offices that implement co-operation activities.

turnover of staff, not enough senior staff in the field, balance of staff costs in headquarters and in the field and overburdening of project staff given the amount of work expected and the range of tasks they are expected to fulfil. Whilst typically funding is proven to be adequate in individual projects there is evidence that funds often do not cover all parts of programmes, hampering some of the components of action plans for example. Funding is irregular which causes difficulties to retain staff or finance regular activities needed to support projects and programmes. For individual projects, funding sometimes

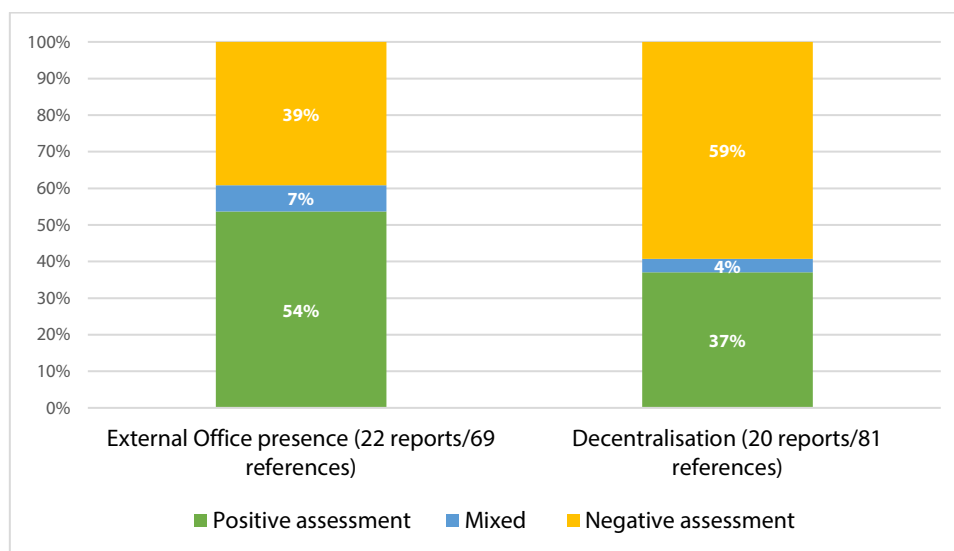
limits the reach or quality of infrastructure of projects (such as IT systems, interpreting and translation etc.).

Figure 17: Assessment of impact of project resources on projects
(source: meta-evaluation analysis of reports)



84. **Work in the external offices of the Council of Europe is praised but decentralisation issues hamper results.** Field offices significantly contribute to the relationships and trust built with member states, as well as strengthened communication. The negative assessments are linked to decentralisation issues which also appear in 20 evaluation reports and are negatively assessed in almost 60% of cases, see figure 18. Local staff are not empowered to take decisions on content, nor to communicate on content beyond the scope of projects and programmes, nor to implement activities smoothly without lengthy administrative processes often requiring authorisation in Strasbourg. Positive assessments revolve around more senior staff working in field offices, more responsibilities given to external office regional hubs, and increased progress in decentralisation in some offices. Evaluation reports describe the high turnover and difficulties to recruit staff in the field, as well as the lack of senior staff and the little authority on content given to external offices. The very nature of project funding being of fixed duration over relatively short cycles exacerbates these issues because it cannot guarantee job security, nor enable attractive salaries in some countries. This means that there is a very high ratio of local staff to international staff, and length of service of local staff is low in comparison to international staff.

Figure 18: Assessment of impact of external offices and decentralisation on projects
(source: meta-evaluation analysis of reports)



Human rights-based approach

85. **Council of Europe project management integrates a wide range of human rights-based approach²² elements in practice.** 45 evaluation reports make quite extensive references to aspects of a human rights-based approach which reflect the existence of the approach and processes that enable it. These aspects are rarely classified directly as a human rights-based approach. Descriptions of the human rights approach in reports are not concrete and provide little evidence. Evaluations do not capture the straightforward aspects, such as linking rights-holders to participation in project implementation, ensuring inclusion of vulnerable groups, providing access to information about projects and supporting queries about management and decisions made, of the human rights approach even though they are strong in assessing levels of participation, diversity of stakeholders, and accountability of governments.

22. The Council of Europe uses the term Human Rights Approach (HRA) to refer to its specific human rights-based approach.

Table 7: Council of Europe Human Rights Approach (source: Council of Europe)

Four principles of the Human Rights Approach	Explanation
Participation and inclusion	The aim is that rights-holders are enabled and empowered to hold duty-bearers accountable and to claim rights from duty-bearers. Engagement with civil society is essential, due to their capacity to reach out to, empower, represent, and defend vulnerable persons.
Equality and non-discrimination	Discrimination, which can occur in many different forms, should be actively counteracted in all projects. Vulnerable persons should be included and empowered to claim their rights, to ensure that no one is left behind (in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals).
Accountability	Duty-bearers should be enabled to respect, protect and fulfil rights, as well as fulfil their responsibilities towards rights-holders. The Council of Europe is accountable to its partners, beneficiaries and the public for its projects.
Transparency and access to information	Decision-making within the project should strive to be transparent. Information about projects should be made available and accessible.

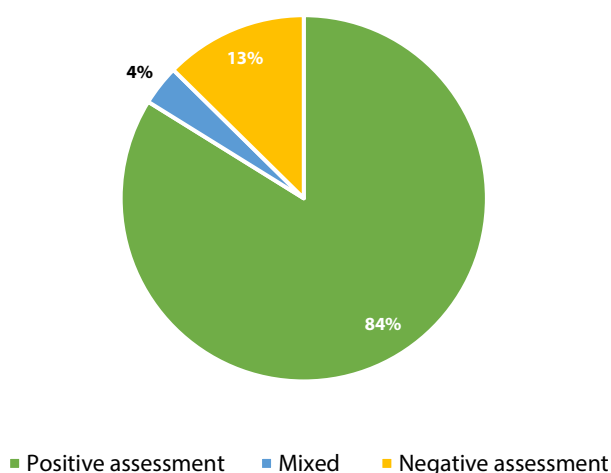
Figure 19: Basis of the Council of Europe's Human Rights Approach (source: Council of Europe)

The Council of Europe's Human Rights Approach:

- ✓ Based on European human rights **standards** and human rights **principles**
- ✓ Focus on **vulnerable persons** - leaving no one behind
- ✓ **Do no harm**: Projects should not cause any unintentional human rights harm, imbalance or negative impact

86. **Projects are evaluated as benefitting from a human rights-based approach due to stronger interaction with civil society, better access to vulnerable groups, meaningful participation and enhanced inclusion of diverse stakeholders and greater recognition of responsibilities and duties to rights-holders.** Evidence shows that this approach helps align project goals with diverse needs and priorities. Civil society involvement strengthens links to rights-holders and supports the empowerment of vulnerable groups, see figure 20. When implementation was found to fall short, it is typically due to limited stakeholder engagement or challenges in meeting the approach's objectives rather than a lack of design.

Figure 20: Assessment of integration of the human rights approach - 198 references in 45 reports (source: meta-evaluation analysis of reports)



87. **Civil society is an important factor in the human rights approach.** Evaluation reports highlight the benefits from civil society participation due to involvement in project governance, operationalisation of CSO skills and connections to communities, reinforcement of results through CSO attention and sustainability as civil society provide continuity to project work beyond their duration. CSO engagement is also assessed positively from a human rights-based approach perspective through bringing projects and programmes closer to the end-users, to gaining status and authority with public authorities, to contributing to needs assessments and project and programme delivery. Evaluations are critical when there is a lack of CSO engagement, a limited number of CSOs involved through the engagement, or constraints to that engagement such as limited input, recognition or resources.

88. **There is good evidence of duty-bearer/rights-holder conceptualisation though occasionally that is simply the recognition that the duty-bearer/rights-holder distinction exists.** In some project evaluations, project design is more sophisticated through considering different outcomes according to whether target groups are duty-bearers or rights-holders. Evaluation reports are critical about poor relationships between duty-bearers and rights-holders, widening gaps between the two categories or weaknesses in favouring one over the other.

89. **Participation is evaluated positively given its breadth and inclusivity, particularly through multi-stakeholder engagement.** Participation is demonstrated through important decision-making powers including through steering committees, key roles in delivery of activities through partnering and grants, and objectives specifically related to participation. Many evaluation reports determine that there is strong ownership among stakeholders resulting from these participatory approaches. Evaluations are critical when participation is not encouraged or not meaningfully encouraged.

Table 8: Different types of participation presented in evaluation reports (source: meta-evaluation analysis of reports)

Forms of participation identified in the evaluation reports
Contributing to needs assessments
Implementing project activities through grants
Attending steering committee meetings (with decision-making rights)
Delivering training programmes or units in training programmes
Acting as facilitators and community contact points
Inclusion in dialogue and roundtables
Carrying out election observer roles

90. **Vulnerability and “Leave No One Behind” principles of the human rights-based approach are substantially praised** in 27 evaluation reports for attention to and efforts to reach the most vulnerable groups, through adjustments in approach such as using a regional focus rather than national ones where socio-political factors make inclusion more difficult, working with stakeholders in more remote regions of countries. Evaluation reports describe the difficulties and challenges to reach vulnerable groups, rather than weaknesses in attention or design.

91. **Overall, the quality of the human rights approach is more strongly evidenced in project evaluation as opposed to programme evaluations,** reflecting more concrete evidence of the human

rights-based approach in individual projects. Evidence is strongest in projects specifically focused on democracy, education, children and Roma.

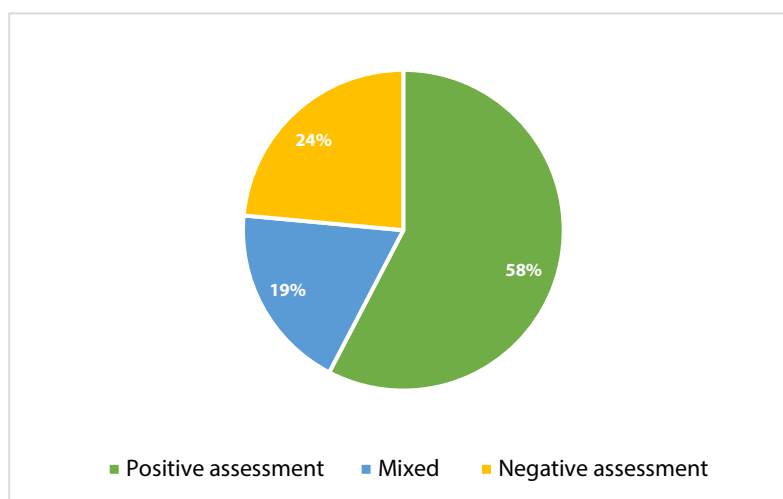
92. Evaluations do not examine **accountability and transparency** in any great deal as principles of the human rights-based approach, though positive results are described around communication, sharing of information and feedback mechanisms that enable stakeholders, and especially CSOs to hold projects and duty-bearers accountable. Some evaluation reports also describe a lack of information, adequate processes to ensure fairness of selection, for example, and lack of stakeholder oversight. The limited evidence and extent of negative assessments suggest that there is room for improvement in accountability and transparency from the human rights-based approach perspective.

93. In terms of gaps, the evaluation reports rarely mention persons with **disabilities or examine how environmental measures may contribute to discrimination or undermine human rights**. Evaluations do not look into these, but also it is very unlikely that specific measures exist in projects, since there are no references when evaluations look into inclusion and “do no harm” principle.

Gender mainstreaming

94. **Gender mainstreaming in evaluation reports is approached mechanically with little consideration for its influence on efficiency, effectiveness, relevance or coherence.** While generally assessed positively, see figure 21, this does not hold up to qualitative scrutiny. It is neither systematically measured nor framed within the broader principle of gender equality. Evaluations are not drawing on gender analysis tools such as SWAP assessments used by the United Nations, neither do they attempt to measure progress against the Council of Europe gender strategy.

Figure 21: Assessment of gender mainstreaming in projects - 120 references in 36 reports (source: meta-evaluation analysis of reports)



95. **Projects show limited attention to gender mainstreaming – occasionally through mechanisms that enable gender mainstreaming or outcomes that attempt to systematise it.** However, many evaluations reveal poor implementation and a lack of understanding, with some reports describing initiatives as gender neutral. Overall evaluations tend to assess gender mainstreaming at a basic level, focusing on balanced participation rather than deeper integration. This reflects the limited depth of gender mainstreaming in projects, despite the evaluations posing relevant questions. Recurrent recommendations frequently call for more substantive gender mainstreaming.

96. **The action plans and programme facilities demonstrated more effective gender mainstreaming than individual projects.** This is likely because of the resources invested in gender mainstreaming at action plan and facility level, in the form of gender advisors. Projects aimed at

strengthening democracy that integrated gender mainstreaming were the most successful among individual projects, thanks to their tailored strategies for promoting equal opportunities in politics.

97. **Many evaluations outlined a range of tools and measures designed to advance gender mainstreaming and promote the human rights approach.** Integrating mainstreaming objectives within or together with project objectives is positively assessed. The objectives are integrated through target groups that reflect mainstreaming, and outcomes that enhance gender equality or participation and inclusion within the projects and programmes' legislative, policy, institutional, capacity, and awareness-raising results. Whilst the nature of the project may lend itself more to such a combination, promoting the inclusion of Roma, for example, it is important to emphasise that a human rights-based approach and human rights objectives are not the same thing, and this is captured in some evaluation reports referring to "a presumption among respondents that a human rights-themed project entails a human rights-based approach by its very nature."

98. Evaluation reports describe **emerging tools** and measures for gender mainstreaming and a human rights-based approach without supporting the descriptions with adequate evidence. Nonetheless, the tools and measures described may provide inspiration for ways to strengthen gender mainstreaming and a human rights-based approach (e.g. gender analyses to refine logframes and approaches, and adapting methods to facilitate participation and inclusion such as **creating positions of trust in projects that support specific vulnerable groups to engage, selection processes that consider different availabilities and needs**).

99. **Performance measurement of gender mainstreaming and the human rights approach** is also only occasionally described. Those evaluation reports praise the measuring of the quality of gender mainstreaming itself and criticise the lack of systematic checks or analysis of gender mainstreaming. Interestingly evidence is almost entirely about gender mainstreaming rather than a human rights-based approach, which may suggest the expectations are greater at this stage for gender mainstreaming. Performance measurement of a human rights-based approach could enhance awareness and promote the good elements of the approach indicated above. Such measurement is not currently described in the Results-based management strategy nor PMM. Recurrent recommendations frequently call for greater systematic monitoring of gender mainstreaming and the human rights approach.

6. Lessons learned

100. There are lessons learned in terms of what the Council of Europe does well to support implementation of the Convention that could be replicated and adopted more widely:

- There is value in using national implementation of the Convention as the common overall goal for all co-operation activities, that unites projects through a shared logic and objectives and communicates the bigger picture of Council of Europe projects and programmes.
- Investing more substantially in the decentralisation of substantive and content-related functions – beyond the focus on mobility, skills, and competencies – could enhance the Organisation's capacity to support and co-operate effectively with member states, as highlighted in the External Audit recommendations.

- The action plans and programme facilities demonstrated more effective gender mainstreaming than individual projects. This is likely because of the resources invested in gender mainstreaming at action plan and facility level, in the form of gender advisors.

7. Conclusions

101. The meta-evaluation highlighted the contributing factors for success in supporting the national implementation of the Convention. Among external factors a **favourable political context** and the **leverage provided by the EU and donors**, and among internal factors, **the combination of standard-setting, monitoring and co-operation as a basis for projects, the long-standing relationships with member states, the facilitation of civil society interaction with authorities, and the human rights-based approach enhance the effectiveness of the support.**

102. The most successful activities and outputs are those that contribute to changing practices within member states. The technical expertise, connecting international standards to local contexts, providing training and awareness-raising to key national stakeholder groups, and developing multi-agency networks are strengths in the Council of Europe's implementation modalities.

103. **Project design and results-based management are not substantially improving over time.** There is very little theory of change integrated in practice into the projects and programmes. There is awareness and understanding of results-based management, but this is not translating into practice.

104. **The human rights approach is stronger than gender mainstreaming.** While both gender mainstreaming and the human rights approach receive attention through evaluations and institutional guidance, the human rights approach has demonstrated greater depth. Gender mainstreaming efforts remain superficial, despite the existence of tools such as gender analyses and dedicated advisors. To ensure meaningful impact both approaches must be more systematically and comprehensively applied across programmes and practices.

8. Reiterated recommendations

105. Based on the analysis conducted for this meta-evaluation, **the most frequently recurring recommendations [and still relevant despite organisational changes/time] are highlighted as particularly relevant and deserving of renewed emphasis.** Table 9 shows the complete list of reiterated recommendations.

106. The validation interviews and consultation with the reference group complemented what the meta-evaluation revealed. Careful extrapolation of the meta-evaluation data, along with analysis of recommendations, management responses and follow-up reporting on recommendations allowed the evaluation team to analyse in more depth the connection between evaluation reports and reporting from the main co-operation stakeholders.

107. Considerable effort has been invested in the management responses to the recommendations with noticeable improvements and developments in the last few years. Workshops are being held to establish standard indicators for different programme sectors. There is a regional RBM advisor for projects based in Tbilisi. Gender markers are under development. The meta-evaluation demonstrated that methodological resources are plentiful.

108. There are, however, persistent challenges and obstacles to improving project design, monitoring, communication, participatory approaches and gender mainstreaming and HRA, some of which are beyond the control of the Organisation. There are few resources dedicated to project design and planning because most such costs are ineligible for extrabudgetary resources as they fall outside the project time period for which project funding is given. With other resource demands it is unreasonable to expect ordinary budget resources to be allocated to project design. Within the control of the Organisation, the quantity of project requests reaching DPC is unmanageable. A push for a higher quality of project proposals rather than the current large volume may help.

109. RBM efforts are separated between ordinary budget programming, led by the Directorate of Programme and Budget and extrabudgetary programming, led by DPC. There may be some inefficiencies in awareness-raising and capacity building that could improve project design per se, and project design processes such as the co-ordination of project proposals and prioritisation of extrabudgetary requests.

110. These obstacles underlie the overall finding of the meta-evaluation that an overarching framework for projects based on supporting the national implementation of the Convention would strengthen project design and theories of change that contribute to greater impact.

Reiterated Recommendations

Recommendation 1. Project teams should aim for interconnected outcomes that cause a chain of effects and contribute more collectively to impact. Project supervisors should further integrate Council of Europe Project Management Methodology (PMM) into their supervision and approvals processes to align efforts with Council of Europe goals and enhance project design and evaluation. (High)

Recommendation 2. Project teams should enhance outcome-focused monitoring that is more practical and comprehensive and uses robust qualitative and quantitative indicators at output and outcome levels. Project supervisors should support more extensive monitoring in line with PMM with the help whenever possible of monitoring and evaluation officers for guidance and data quality. (High)

Recommendation 3. Project teams and supervisors should strengthen and systematise gender mainstreaming and human rights approaches, with the support of PMM and gender advisors. The objectives of gender mainstreaming and the human rights approach should be made more explicit in PMM with greater emphasis on the purpose of these approaches. (Medium)

Recommendation 4. Project teams and supervisors should strengthen co-ordination and communication about the link between co-operation projects and the national implementation of the Convention as a uniting concept of Council of Europe work with external stakeholders, including donors, other international organisations, and a broader range of national stakeholders beyond the immediate partners and target groups of projects. This should entail more involvement and communication with the Department for the Execution of Judgments. (Medium)

Recommendation 5. Project teams and supervisors should explore opportunities for different implementation modalities to best suit particular stakeholders, periods and domestic/local circumstances, not only in response to challenges and crises, while appraising evidence that different modalities lead to improved outcomes. (Medium)

Appendices

Link to the Appendices: <https://rm.coe.int/48802c0369>

www.coe.int

The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 46 member states, including all members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.