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**LEARNING  
FROM IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION  
OF THE EU COHESION POLICY**

**LESSONS FROM A RESEARCH-POLICY DIALOGUE**

Edited by  
Nicola Francesco Dotti

Regional Studies Association

**COHESION***POLICY*

Research Network

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Lessons from a research-policy dialogue.**

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## 13. POLICY LABS: THE NEXT FRONTIER OF COHESION POLICY DESIGN AND EVALUATION

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### ABSTRACT

The fundamental challenge for policy practitioners is how to obtain research-based feedback on “what works and why” early enough to allow for improvement of policy solutions. This chapter proposes ‘policy labs’ as a solution to this challenge. It draws on the established tradition of program evaluation, the emerging practice of social labs, and insights from institutional analysis and applied behavioural science. Policy labs offer three tools to assist Cohesion Policy practitioners: a new framework for designing policy interventions, space for safe, collaborative learning from implementing experimental solutions within existing programs, and a diverse research method to provide credible knowledge.

## PRESENTATION

<small>Regional Studies Association</small>
<b>COHESION</b> <i>POLICY</i>
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<h1><b>POLICY LABS: THE NEXT FRONTIER OF COHESION POLICY DESIGN AND EVALUATION</b></h1>
<p>Karol OLEJNICZAK (University of Warsaw), Kathryn NEWCOMER (George Washington University), Sylwia BORKOWSKA-WASZAK (Strathclyde University)</p>
<b>LEARNING FROM IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION OF THE EU COHESION POLICY LESSONS FOR A <i>RESEARCH-POLICY</i> DIALOGUE. Brussels, 13 June 2016</b>

## THE CHALLENGE

**PROBLEM:** INSUFFICIENT FLEXIBILITY  
AND LEARNING FROM EVALUATION  
IN COHESION POLICY (CP)

**AIM:** PROVIDING POLICY DESIGNERS WITH  
FEEDBACK ON *WHAT WORKS AND WHY* EARLY  
ENOUGH IN THE PROCESS TO IMPROVE POLICY

**IDEA:** POLICY LABS – SPACES WHERE  
PRACTITIONERS MEET RESEARCHERS  
AND USERS, TO CO-CREATE SOLUTIONS  
AND TEST THEM ON A SMALL SCALE

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## L1: FRAMEWORK OF THINKING

### WE CAN INFLUENCE BUT NOT ADMINISTER THE CHANGE

- TYPICAL POLICY DESIGN AIMS TO CHANGE BEHAVIOURS
- RECENT STUDY FINDINGS: PEOPLE HAVE BOUNDED RATIONALITY AND USE SHORTCUTS IN DECISION-MAKING
- IMPLICATIONS:
  - TREAT POLICY INTERVENTION AS ONE OF MANY TRIGGERS
  - UNDERSTAND BENEFICIARIES AND THEIR CONTEXT
  - IDENTIFY MECHANISMS TO TRIGGER
  - DESIGN ENABLERS, DRIVERS AND CHOICE ARCHITECTURE
  - TEST YOUR THEORY

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## L2: SPACE FOR LEARNING

### WE NEED SPACE FOR SAFE, COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

- PRACTITIONERS BRING TO LABS A POLICY ISSUE THAT NEEDS TO BE ADDRESSED
- PRACTITIONERS FORM A TEAM WITH RESEARCHERS AND STAKEHOLDERS, TOGETHER THEY:

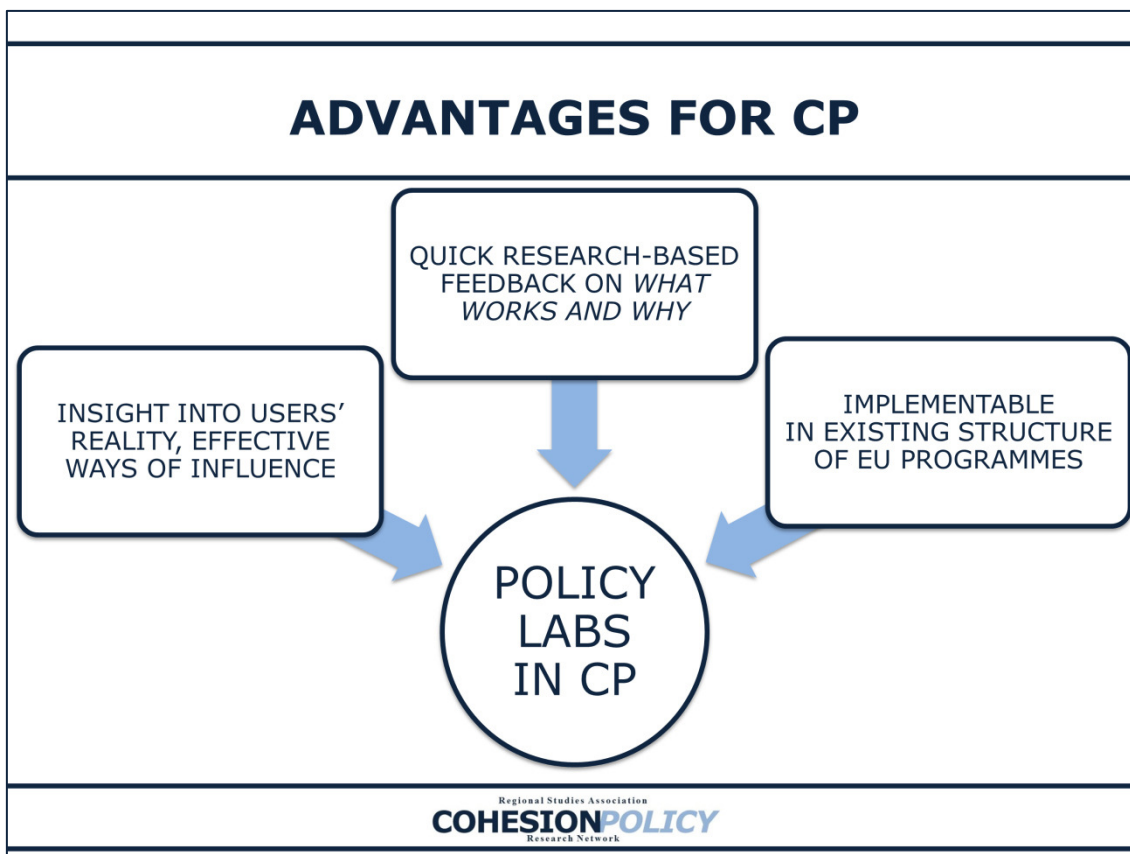


- SMALL SCALE EXPERIMENT = LOW RISK & LOW COST OF FAILURE

## L3: METHODS FOR LEARNING

### WE NEED DIFFERENT RESEARCH FOR DIFFERENT TYPES OF KNOWLEDGE NEEDS

- **ANALYSIS** (*KNOW ABOUT* THE ISSUE)  
ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDIES, CASE STUDIES
- **CO-CREATION** (*KNOW WHY* THINGS COULD WORK) SYSTEMATIC REVIEWS, CREATIVE SESSIONS
- **TESTING** (*KNOW WHAT* WORKS)  
EXPERIMENTS AND SIMULATIONS



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**POLICY LABS: THE NEXT FRONTIER OF COHESION  
POLICY DESIGN AND EVALUATION**



## INTRODUCTION

Public policy making is a trial and error process of finding solutions for socio-economic challenges. The main tools of policy are public interventions - projects, programs or regulations. The tools are designed to deliver services that address the needs of citizens, create a favourable environment for economic development, and guide citizens towards socially desirable behaviours. In order to design interventions to be effective in reaching espoused goals, public practitioners need knowledge on “what works, why and in what context” (Pawson, 2013).

The fundamental problem for practitioners of public policy is that evidence on the effectiveness of applied solutions comes late in the implementation process, giving very limited space for adaptations and improvements. This problem is common in all public policy areas, however, in Cohesion Policy it is particularly severe due to its complexity - the multi-objective orientation of the interventions, multi-level governance arrangements and the long timeline of the policy cycle.

Thus, the key challenge can be framed as follows: **How can researchers provide feedback on “what works and why” early enough in the policy process allowing policy designers and implementers to improve policy solutions?**

To address this challenge, we propose the strategy of policy labs. **Policy labs are practitioner-centric learning systems incorporated within existing programs.** In policy labs practitioners come together with researchers and program stakeholders, including beneficiaries, to quickly identify and analyse problems with policy design or implementation, collaboratively create solutions, and then rigorously test new solutions. Tests are done on a small scale to get quick feedback, and limit the costs of failure.

The policy lab framework builds upon a rich tradition of program evaluation and the emerging practice of social labs. The strategy offered here reflects current knowledge obtained through: a review of experiences with emerging social labs; a systematic review of evaluation practices in the EU Cohesion Policy, with complementary evidence from the US; a literature review of institutional analysis and social mechanisms; and a review of cases of governments’ use of applied behavioural science in policy design.

**Implementing policy labs** entails adopting three key components: **(1) a new framework** for designing public policy interventions, **(2) space for safe, collaborative learning** from implementing experimental solutions, and **(3) a diverse set of methods to help practitioners co-create useful and timely knowledge**. These three components are discussed in more detail in the next sections of this chapter. Each section begins with an assessment of current challenges, then discusses solutions offered by policy labs, and closes with examples from recent policy practice. The chapter ends with a summary of the potential contributions of policy labs for Cohesion Policy.

## A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR POLICY DESIGN

The majority of public interventions are based on a logical, linear framework consisting of inputs, program processes, outputs, and outcomes. With this model both program implementers and final beneficiaries are assumed to be rational actors, who are well informed, able to assess all options and follow instructions laid by program designers. This logic assumes simple, automatic reactions of the implementers to instructions and of the end users to the activities undertaken in programs. However, these assumptions do not match either the complex reality of social life, or the biology of human cognition and decision-making (Kahneman, 2011; World Bank, 2015). Thus, there is a need for a better conceptual framework to guide policy design.

A more realistic, and likely successful, approach to policy design needs to be informed by knowledge about five key areas.

**(1) Understanding context.** We should understand the socio-economic entities in which we impose policies as complex systems of actors and factors that interact over time in often-unexpected ways (Ostrom, 2005). Public interventions present only small impulses within these dynamic evolving systems. Policy tools need to be designed intentionally to be embedded effectively in each particular context in order to bring about intended change.

**(2) Understanding users.** We should focus on the perspective of the final users affected by each intervention. It is crucial to recognize how those users make decisions, what behavioural models drive their choices, and what

cognitive heuristics and biases shape their judgments (Shafir, 2013; World Bank, 2015).

**(3) Triggering mechanisms.** Policy interventions cannot directly change the behaviour of users, but they can, if well designed, trigger mechanisms that will lead to change in thinking, and ultimately, change in behaviours. When designing policy interventions we should think about the mechanisms we want to activate in intended users, or beneficiaries (Pawson, 2013; Lourenco et al, 2016).

**(4) Designing the game.** When designing interventions we should not think solely in terms of investing static inputs. Rather, we should think in terms of building a set of required actions, or games, that involve users and guide them towards behaving in desired ways. The game, or desired set of interactions, is composed of: (a) enablers (required resources), (b) drivers (users' internal motivations or external motivators) and (c) choice architecture (ways the choices are structured and presented to users). Together, those elements can then trigger mechanisms for behaviours, and facilitate changes in users' behaviours (Ostrom, 2005; Olejniczak and Sliwowski, 2015).

**(5) Testing theory.** The design of an intervention is essentially a "theory" - or set of assumptions about a chain of causal interactions. The desired effects are produced from the interactions of users who are provided with enablers, drivers and choice architecture, and the results can be validated through real life application (Donaldson, 2007).

The framework we describe here has already been used in some social labs for prototype building and experimenting with solutions to influence behaviour. Two examples of the application of this framework are presented in Table 14.

**TABLE 14. EXAMPLES OF APPLYING BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCE INSIGHTS TO INFORM POLICY DESIGN IN SINGAPORE AND COPENHAGEN**

EXAMPLES	OVERCOMING SUNK COST EFFECTS IN THE TRANSPORT SYSTEM (Singapore)	ENCOURAGING PRO-ENVIRONMENTAL BEHAVIOUR OF CITIZENS (Copenhagen)
AIM	To minimize traffic congestion in Singapore.	To encourage inhabitants and tourists to dispose of their rubbish in bins, and contribute to keeping the city cleaner, thus generating savings in the local budget of funds allocated to street cleaning.
BEHAVIOURAL MECHANISM	When people are charged once for using a certain service, regardless of the number of times they use it, the sunk costs pushes them to use the service as often as possible, without thinking about the rationality of their actions.	Showing people the way to the trash bin in a simple, visible, engaging and humorous manner can trigger their emotional commitment, enhancing their desire to act appropriately.
METHODS	A small-scale experiment of changing the system of payment for using roads from a fixed-charge to pay-when-you-use scheme, in which the prices depend on the timing (higher in rush hours).	A small-scale experiment of placing colourful footprints leading to brightly marked garbage bins in the city and observing the reaction of 1000 pedestrians.
EFFECTS	The traffic volumes during tests decreased by about 7-8% in comparison to the control periods.	Enjoyment in following the steps encouraged 46% more people to throw trash in the bins, instead of disposing of it on the pavement.

*(Source: Olejniczak and Sliwowski, 2015)*

## NEW SPACE FOR LEARNING

Current public management provides little space for learning on “what works and why” from experimentation with innovative solutions. For example, the multi-annual, complex design of Cohesion Policy, once set in motion, makes experimenting a very costly, and unlikely, tool to support learning.

Designers of policy interventions are often isolated from users of interventions. They prepare multi-annual grand design programs, based on general trend analysis, and may solicit, at a later stage, feedback from stakeholders. Even at the level of project implementation, innovation is limited because: (a) initial selection criteria are pre-set, (b) rigid requirements drive the implementers to employ ideas that are already tested and safe, and (c) there is little flexibility - once projects start, they have to be executed in line with the initial plan.

**The evaluations of the utility and effectiveness of the solutions typically come too late for their findings to be used to improve current interventions, and often even too late to be used in planning of the next generation of programs. As a result, policy designers and implementers tend to view ex-post evaluation as an accountability exercise, with little learning value.**

**We propose policy labs to provide problem-driven learning space for safe development and testing of new Cohesion Policy solutions.** The labs offer two important benefits. First, they are the space for truly collaborative processes involving practitioners, researchers, and stakeholders, including final beneficiaries, in the co-creation of solutions (Hassan, 2014). Second, they provide space for safe experimentation, where ideas can be developed and tested, while mistakes can be made at low costs (Haynes et al., 2012).

Policy labs are not intended to replace existing programs. Instead, they can be designed as small entities within the structure of existing, multi-annual programs. They could have a form of an on-going project, funded within an existing program.

They could function as follows. Policy practitioners would bring particular policy problems to the open space. Then they would collaborate with researchers and representatives of stakeholders and final users to (a) analyse roots of the problem, (b) create a spectrum of solutions in the form of intervention prototypes, and then (c) test those solutions on a small scale with the use of credible research designs. Solutions that prove to be effective at addressing the problem could be scaled-up to support mainstream program operations.

The approach to problem solving offered here is similar to existing innovative projects within Cohesion Policy. However, there are five substantial

differences: (a) policy practitioners who identify the policy problem are involved in the deliberative process, (b) solutions are co-designed with final users, (c) ideas are thoroughly tested with the use of rigorous research methods, (d) failures are viewed as acceptable as a learning opportunity, and (e) the learning cycle is quick.

**TABLE 15. EXAMPLE OF COLLABORATIVE POLICY DESIGN FROM MINDLAB IN DENMARK**

EXAMPLE	CO-CREATING A REFORM TO KICK START ENTREPRENEURSHIP	RETHINKING THE REFORM OF DISABILITY PENSIONS AND FLEXIBLE WORK SCHEMES
KEY PRACTITIONER	Ministry of Economics and Business Affairs	Ministry of Employment
MOMENT OF LAB'S ACTIVITY	Before the policy was designed & implemented.	After the first period of implementation
AIM	How government initiatives can help growth entrepreneurs realize their businesses potential.	How the reform was implemented and how to further improve effectiveness.
STAKEHOLDERS	8 growth entrepreneurs, 3 potential growth entrepreneurs, Experts in innovation and entrepreneurship. Danish Enterprise and Construction Authority, Min. of Economics & Business Affairs	6 clients, 7 dept. managers of job centres and local authorities, 5 managing case officers, 5 operational case officers, Nat. Labour Market Authority, Min. of Employment
ANALYSIS AND CO-CREATION OF USER-ORIENTED SOLUTIONS	Visit and interviews with growth entrepreneurs. Brainstorming session to co-create potential support. 8 ideas chosen to be tested.	After desk research, 5 case studies with interviews and ethnographic observation of 7 meetings of the new rehabilitation teams.
CONCLUSIONS FOR POLICY	Implement an entrepreneurs-driven network. Public sector's role should be limited to supportive background; entrepreneurs should be active in sharing knowledge and experiences.	Active participation of the client is the key for success. Pursue the benefits application process not only through paper, but also interviews with clients.

(Source: [www.mind-lab.dk/en](http://www.mind-lab.dk/en))

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## NEW METHODS OF LEARNING

The credibility of social science findings is largely determined by the match between research design and research questions. For example, case study research is appropriate to implement when in-depth knowledge on how policies are being implemented is needed. And the optimal design for establishing the extent to which a policy option produces the desired effect is an experimental design (in EU policy often called “counterfactual analysis”).

Typically when evaluating the impact of public policies, including Cohesion Policy, the credibility of the methodology is limited. Many, if not most, of the evaluation studies collect data without adequately tailored research designs. They frequently try to address too many questions, and try to achieve descriptive breadth at the expense of producing analytically targeted, in depth knowledge.

As a result little credible knowledge is gained on what works, under what circumstances, and why. Evaluation studies in Cohesion Policy provide mostly technical knowledge on implementation processes, and little insights to inform strategic decision-making.

**We propose employing a collaborative process to design and implement smaller studies that provide practitioners with the knowledge they need to solve specific policy problems.** Each study would be designed to produce the knowledge needed at a certain stage in policy design and testing. Appropriate research designs would be used to ensure the study results are credible and immediately useful.

Policy labs can provide at least three types of knowledge useful to inform practitioners (Nutley et al., 2003). Within the policy lab the design process starts with understanding the context and target group of an intervention. The first type of knowledge to generate is about the policy issue and context (know-about). It covers the users of the policy, their expectations, motivations and context in which they operate. The most useful way to

generate this first type of knowledge is through exploratory, ethnographic research that allows seeing the world through the eyes of users.

Generating knowledge about potential solutions is the second task. Knowledge of triggers and mechanisms that could drive users to certain behaviours (know-why things will work) is needed. Within policy labs brainstorming sessions that involve diverse stakeholders to generate solutions can be employed. In addition, systematic reviews may be used to inform practitioners about solutions that have worked in similar contexts.

The third type of knowledge comes from obtaining information on how well trial solutions work. The optimal research approach for this purpose is a controlled comparison between situations with and without a trial intervention. Depending on the policy domain, and resources available, research approaches may include randomized controlled trials, quasi-experiments or simulations.



**TABLE 16. EXAMPLES OF APPLYING BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCE INSIGHTS TO INFORM POLICY DESIGN IN THE UNITED KINGDOM**

EXAMPLE	LABOUR MARKET REFORM	BUILDING YOUTH SKILLS THROUGH SOCIAL ACTION
KEY PRACTITIONER	Job Centre Plus in Loughton, Essex	The Cabinet Office’s Social Action Team
AIM	To identify obstacles that beneficiaries of unemployment benefits face during seeking for jobs.	To measure the impact of youth taking part in social action on building their key skills for work and adult life.
MOMENT OF LABS’ ACTIVITY	During every day work of the unemployment centre.	After first implementation, before its next edition.
METHODS	User-perspective analysis to identify demotivating obstacles; Co-creation of a prototype of a new procedure; Experiment: six month randomised controlled trial to test the new procedure in comparison to existing one.	Data analysis combining the collected data with the conclusions from the programme evaluation; Experiment: randomized controlled trials, testing behaviours and decisions of the programme’s participants.
EFFECTS	The new procedure increased the centre’s effectiveness by 15-20%. Main changes: 1. Meeting already on the 1st day of unemployment (instead of after 2 weeks); 2. focus on planning new job-seeking activities (instead of reporting); 3. additional psychological support.	Providing evidence that young who take part in social action initiatives develop skills for employment and adulthood. Distinction between eagerness to commit time for voluntary job and to support a charity financially.

*(Sources: The Behavioural Insights Team, 2015; World Bank, 2015; Kirkman et al. 2016).*

## CONCLUSIONS

A fundamental problem for public policy practitioners is how to get research-based feedback on “what works and why” early enough in the policy process to inform the adaptation and improvements of policy solutions. In this paper

we proposed policy labs as a solution for this challenge. We offer three main lessons for the Cohesion Policy context.

**Lesson 1: Influencing but not administering change.** Policy labs provide a new, more realistic way of thinking about public interventions. Interventions are small impulses that trigger changes in complex socio-economic settings. The focus of policy designers should be on the intended users and beneficiaries of policies - their actual behaviour. Policy designers should think in terms of behavioural mechanisms they want to activate in policy users and beneficiaries. The design itself needs to include enablers, drivers and choice architecture to guide users. Proposed interventions can be tested at a small scale to see if the assumptions of designers are realistic.

**Lesson 2: Space for safe, collaborative learning.** Policy labs provide spaces within existing programs that allow co-creation of innovative solutions and safe experimentation. Practitioners come together with researchers and stakeholders, including beneficiaries, to quickly analyse problems, creatively develop solutions, and rigorously test innovative ideas. They do it on a small scale to get quick feedback, and limit the costs of failures. The knowledge on “what works and why,” gained in policy labs, can be then scaled up to be implemented more broadly.

**Lesson 3: Matching research approaches to addressing knowledge needs.** Different questions arise at each stage of policy processes that can be addressed by matching research appropriate to informing specific knowledge needs. To foster understanding of the nature of the policy problem (know-about the issue) labs can support exploratory, ethnographic approaches. For development of solutions (know-why things could work) they offer systematic reviews of existing practices, and stakeholder brainstorming sessions. For testing of prototype solutions (know-what works) they can support controlled comparisons, e.g. experiments, simulations.

There are at least four benefits that policy labs offer to enhance the design and implementation of Cohesion Policy.

- Policy labs provide policy designers with **better insight into the context** in which Cohesion Policy users operate. As a result, the designers can choose better instruments to trigger the desired changes with more targeted and efficient tools.

- Policy labs provide practitioners with **quick, research-based feedback** on what works and why, moving the role of evaluation research from ex post accountability to truly learning function.
- Policy labs combine **quantitative and qualitative methods of enquiry**, providing a fuller, richer picture of the socio-economic systems in which policies operate, and the role of public programs in addressing societal problems.
- The implementation of **policy labs does not require substantial changes** in the structure or procedures of the multi-annual programs. Labs can be used within the structure of existing programs.

To conclude, the development of policy labs could enhance Cohesion Policy implementation through the use of these practitioner-centric learning systems. Evaluative thinking can be employed in real time to provide practitioners with research-based evidence about what works and why. Ultimately, such timely innovative feedback could increase the effectiveness and utility of public policies.

## AUTHORS

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