Methodology and future developments

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A. Introduction

1. Monitoring the use of public funds

Public investment affects all citizens. The good or bad use of these funds has repercussions not only on the ruling class that has so far made the choices on what and how to finance but above all on the communities of citizens, the final beneficiaries of these resources.

It is therefore essential that citizens develop an **awareness of the use being made of these funds**, which today mainly concern not only the Recovery Plans but also the current 2014-20 EU programming cycle, to be closed in 2023 (including the resources of the REACT-EU), as well as that of 2021-27 still to be started. The national investments of the Development and Cohesion Fund also need to be added to this count. The participation of citizens in the implementation of these policies represents for the PA the source of a **wealth of knowledge and skills** to be actively used in the implementation of interventions.

In recent years, methods, practices, and tools have been developed that aim to monitor, verify and evaluate the use of these funds from the bottom up. This is called "civic" monitoring of public policies. It's a practice that was already experimented by various civil society initiatives. The word "civic" serves not only to distinguish it from administrative monitoring, which it does not replace but also to underline the participatory nature of these activities. This type of monitoring requires, in fact, active participation in public policies to **monitor the progress and verify the effectiveness of the individual interventions financed**, as well as to collect **suggestions, ideas, and proposals** to be discussed with the responsible administrations and thus improve the quality of public expenditure.

2. What is Monithon Europe ETS

Monithon is an independent and non-profit initiative created in 2013 during a hackathon of the "Spaghetti Open Data" network from an idea of the OpenCoesione government initiative team (Buttiglione & Reggi, 2015).

In 2020, Monithon was structured as a formal association ("third sector body", ETS).

Monithon aims at

- developing methods and tools for a participatory evaluation of public policies by local communities and the final beneficiaries of the interventions.

- offering specific training and support on public policy analysis, use of available data, and fieldwork investigation
- facilitating the collaboration between governments and citizens through the co-production and co-assessment of services and policies
- producing evidence and suggestions to improve the effectiveness of public policies on the ground.

B. Methodology

3. What we mean by civic monitoring of public funds

The definition of civic monitoring of public funds, which derives from Monithon's experience, is as follows: *"Civic monitoring of public funds consists in the control and verification of the effectiveness of the financed interventions, as well as in the collection of ideas and proposals to be discussed with the administrations responsible for policy planning and implementation"*.

Above all, civic monitoring is, therefore, a **practice of public participation** focused on evaluating the progress, results, and effectiveness of individual projects financed with public resources - an evaluation then shared with the responsible administrations.

Central to this practice is the request to the administrations to give an account of their work, as well as a public and open discussion of the results of the analysis developed by the communities. In line with Bovens' (2007) definition of social accountability, the method followed by Monithon, therefore, promotes: a) the use and request for quality public information on monitored investments; b) the formation of a judgment by the citizens on the use of the funds and c) the creation of a public and informed debate with the decision-makers, reached out to give an account of their actions.

This approach is configured as one of the possible applications of the concept of **"co-assessment"** of public policies, in which public administrations and other subjects interested in the successful outcome of policies are involved in common evaluation processes (Nabatchi et al., 2017). The search, if and when this is possible, for an open dialogue and collaboration with public administrations has been seen by some scholars who have examined the case of Monithon as a potential way to improve citizens' trust in institutions (Graeff, 2019; Zuckerman , 2021).

Monithon, since its inception, has leveraged the **availability of** open data from administrative sources on projects financed by Cohesion Policies, both in Italy and in other European countries, which feed an ecosystem of users (Dawes et al., 2016). For example, today in Italy it is possible to access some key information on almost 1.7 million public projects through a single access point, the site OpenCoesione.gov.it, with advantages on the accessibility and quality of data (Vetrò et al ., 2016 made a specific study of it). This level of transparency makes it possible

to know which interventions are financed, when and where, and therefore constitutes an already advanced basis for the subsequent civic analysis; therefore, it is considered as the starting point for selecting the monitoring "objects".

In this regard, the Monithon method introduces technological tools for the use of these data, now considered fundamental for strengthening participatory processes in the evaluation of public interventions (a review of comparable tools developed by the World Bank is contained in Gigler & Bailur, 2014). In particular, Monithon's practice has been extensively studied as **a case of (re) use of public data** in an open format also through a mix of off- and online instrumentation, underlining its strengths, limitations, and challenges for the future (Atenas et al., 2015; Gascó-Hernández et al., 2018; Reggi & Dawes, 2016; Zuckerman, 2021).

4. The project as a level of observation

The Monithon method focuses on projects financed by public policies, as generally represented in administrative monitoring systems, such as the [national monitoring system for territorial cohesion policies](#) managed by the Ministry of Economy and of Finance.

Although a shared definition of "funded project" ("operation" in European regulations) is not available, a "project" is the fundamental unit of public information systems. A Single Project Code (CUP) is associated with each project. From the point of view of civic monitoring, it also represents the ideal observation level, with **sufficient detail to effectively evaluate the results and effectiveness of the** use of public funds, **stimulating the interest of local communities**.

The projects are traced, with limited exceptions, in a [specific database](#), largely open to the public. Adopting a more aggregate level of observation (e.g. the set of projects financed under the same public call), is certainly useful but not effective, for the purposes of public participation, as much as considering individual projects, which usually differ in objectives, localization, subjects involved and result and impact indicators, just to name a few. For this reason, observation at the level of a single project is often also adopted by public institutions, at various levels of government, in the processes of verification and evaluation (e.g. audit, verification of implementation).

It is important to point out that civic monitoring of projects does not replace administrative monitoring or institutional mechanisms for verifying investments (see for example the [evaluation of effectiveness and efficiency](#) from the NUVEC-Territorial Cohesion Agency), but it has the objective of complementing public information with the point of view of the final beneficiaries of the interventions, who can contribute, with all the limits and potentials of the case, to the evaluation of the results and effectiveness of the investments made.

This type of civic monitoring does not even replace institutional or independent evaluations of policies, "measures" or individual interventions, which can instead represent a useful source of information for public judgment.

5. A predominantly qualitative approach

Monithon promotes a qualitative approach to explore the progress and effectiveness of funded projects, without excluding the collection and analysis of quantitative data and indicators in specific cases. The reason for this choice is to encourage participation aimed at solving specific problems or, more generally, for improving the effectiveness of individual projects through the **analysis of the causal mechanisms** that lead to certain results.

This analysis leads to the development of "civic monitoring reports", somewhat similar to case studies on the individual interventions financed (the ideal methodological reference is Yin, 2017) in order to build subsequently, by the editorial staff of Monithon or by any other subject, comparisons between multiple projects to highlight common problems or solutions (e.g. on the same topic or encountering similar problems, see George & Bennett, 2005, chapter 3).

In particular, the analysis is based, for now, mainly on qualitative research methods based on desk analysis and field research through semi-structured interviews. Civic communities use the MoniTutor online guide to set up the interview trace, starting with a list of suggestions and guiding questions to be customized for the specific case.

The selection of the interviewees among people responsible for the planning and implementation of the project takes place through the method of purposeful sampling (Duan et al., 2015) and it is based on the information collected regarding the administrative procedures implemented. In some cases, the communities also turn to stakeholders and final beneficiaries of the interventions, collecting data through interviews or questionnaires, without giving themselves objectives of representativeness of the sample. The purpose of this data collection is to explore the perception of the effectiveness of projects by a wider group of people and to collect "good ideas" and suggestions.

At the end of the civic monitoring process, the authors of the reports are invited by the Monithon editorial staff to fill in a questionnaire on the results and impacts obtained through their activities.

6. Our civic monitoring in the policy cycle

The figure shows, in a stylized version (the reality is much less linear and the cases may vary), the main phases of the policy cycle, referring in particular to European policies. Technology-mediated public participation initiatives can be applied to each phase - in the outer circle (see Macintosh, 2004; Mureddu et al., 2014; Osimo, 2021).

Fig. 1 - Phases of the policy cycle
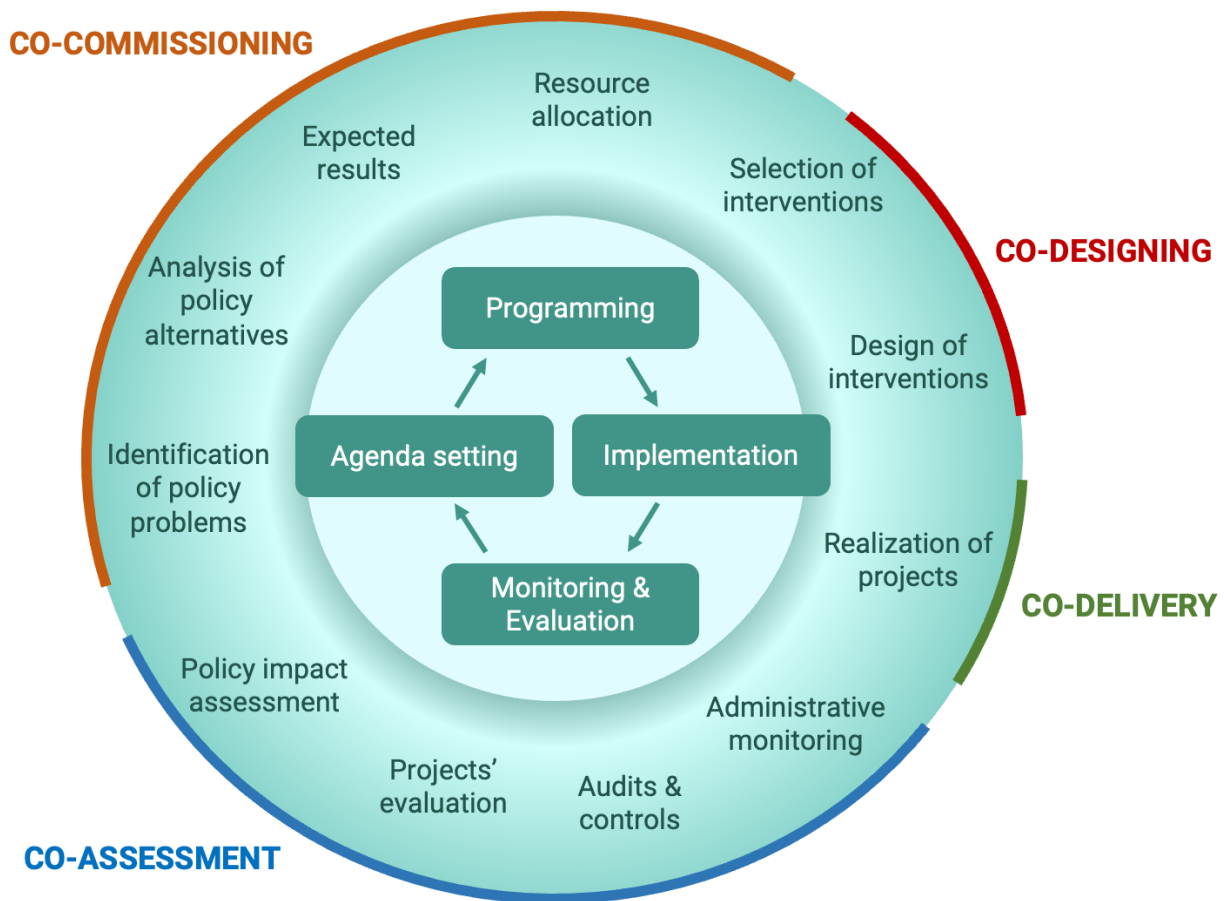
Adapted from Macintosh, 2004 and Osimo, 2021, Nabatchi et al., 2017

The Monithon method is applied primarily to the **implementation phase**, starting from the moment in which interventions are selected through administrative procedures. The contribution in terms of participation can be applied to various processes managed by public administrations (with reference to the figure: "planning of interventions", "public tenders", "implementation of interventions", "administrative monitoring", "audits and controls").

Key questions of Monithon's civic monitoring concern, for example, the objectives and planned implementation methods of each project - to be systematically compared with the more general objectives of the policies that finance them - and the administrative procedures underlying their selection (Rajaram et al., 2010). The civic monitoring then also consider the implementation of the interventions, by evaluating the effectiveness of the outputs already achieved and analyzing any tender procedures and the subjects involved, the methods and processes with which the projects are implemented (for example by questioning the reasons for any delays in the realization of public works, see for example Carlucci et al., 2019). The sources of the information include not only administrative monitoring data, which often constitute only the basis

for subsequent investigations but also, for example, the analysis of procedures, qualitative research in the field, the request for civic access to data, and public information.

A great deal of attention is also paid to **the evaluation phase**, both in itinere and ex-ante, of the results produced, collaborating with the administrations in the activities of "Projects' evaluation".
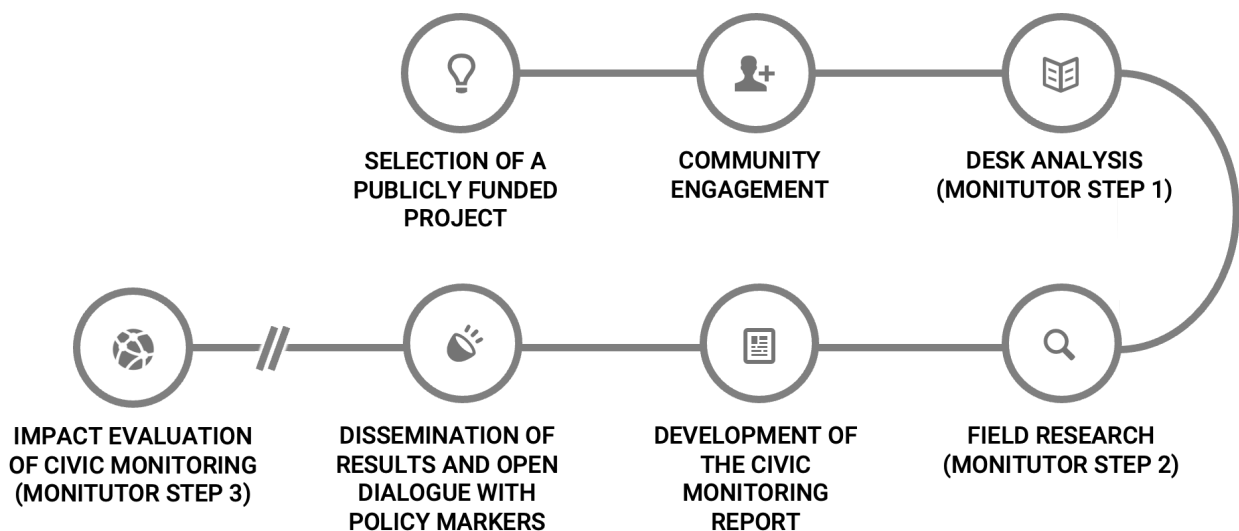
In particular, at the end of the project the effectiveness of the results is assessed **from the point of view of the "final beneficiaries"**, answering questions such as "Has the intervention actually improved (or worsened) your life or your community in general?"," Are complementary interventions necessary to make the intervention effective?". The data are collected through interviews with planners, stakeholders, and end-users. In addition to people's perceptions, official data and indicators are analyzed, when available. Where possible, further quantitative data is collected and analyzed directly by civic communities.

The results of these civic monitoring activities are also useful for the subsequent **"agenda-setting" and "programming" phases** because they help inform the debate on the policies to be implemented, on the allocation of resources, and on the overall design of investments, based on the evidence gathered in the field of "what works" (Parkhurst, 2017) and on the aspects to be improved.

7. The phases of our method

The Monithon method consists of 7 phases, usually consequent to each other. This is a method that has been gradually improved starting from a first attempt to construct a "civic monitoring form" in January 2013 and has been consolidated over the years, thus ensuring the comparability of the results over time.

Fig. 2 - Phases of civic monitoring of public projects

SELECTION OF A PUBLICLY FUNDED PROJECT

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

DESK ANALYSIS (MONITUTOR STEP 1)

FIELD RESEARCH (MONITUTOR STEP 2)

DEVELOPMENT OF THE CIVIC MONITORING REPORT

DISSEMINATION OF RESULTS AND OPEN DIALOGUE WITH POLICY MARKERS

IMPACT EVALUATION OF CIVIC MONITORING (MONITUTOR STEP 3)

a. Selection of the project to monitor

The first step consists in choosing one or more projects to monitor. In other words, it is a question of "adopting" a project and following its evolution over time.

Any publicly funded project can be observed. To date, 99% of the monitoring reports published on Monithon concern interventions financed by European or national funds for Territorial Cohesion (Cohesion Policy or Regional Policy), for which a large set of starting information is already available thanks to the government portal OpenCoesione.

Today **OpenCoesione.gov.it** publishes data on almost 1.7 million projects, which can be viewed on the site through filters and a map with municipal detail. For each project, there is a "card" with the main information, while other detailed data are accessible in CSV format or via APIs.

Monithon also offers everyone an interactive map - **Project Finder** - in which projects on specific themes are precisely georeferenced. It is therefore possible to discover the projects financed in your area, city, or neighborhood; filter them by size, theme, and other characteristics; and start civic monitoring activities (the user is directly directed to the report creation page).

The project can be chosen indifferently from OpenCoesione or from the Project Finder.

The **criteria** suggested for the choice of the project are:

- Interest of the local community in a particular theme or project. Eg a public work of particular relevance/impact on people's lives; an unsolved problem that public policies intended to address through specific funding; projects related to a topic of particular interest to a local association (eg. Sustainable mobility)
- Possibility of building alliances and bringing together the interest of several subjects towards civic monitoring (eg. Local media, third sector organizations, committees or groups informal of citizens, etc.)
- Feasibility of monitoring within the scheduled times. Some projects, such as incentives for companies to acquire qualified human capital, are less accessible than the construction of an infrastructural work, which is "tangible" by nature and accompanied by a large set of public information on its state of implementation.

In this phase, the **planning of monitoring activities** usually takes place through the development of a plan (also called "canvas") which includes the object of the analysis, the strategies, and timing, the subjects to be interviewed, the experts to be involved, the alliances to be built on the territories, the communication of results, etc. The plan includes initial planning of the activities of the following 6 phases.

b. Community Engagement

Communities choose the projects to monitor and conduct civic monitoring activities using Monithon as a tool to pursue their goals and objectives.

It is useful for civic monitoring activities to be conducted by groups of people with multi-disciplinary skills (e.g. experts in policy, communication, data analysis, visualization, field research methods, etc.). In the case of schools or universities, students can take on specific roles (e.g. project manager, data storyteller, social media manager, etc.).

An individual or group who wants to be part of a monitoring initiative can refer to initiatives already underway, for example by exploring the map of published reports and consulting the biographies of monitoring groups that have already completed a path. Middle and high schools have as a reference the initiative A Scuola di OpenCoesione (ASOC), in which Monithon has participated with its own methods, tools, and its own editorial team since 2014.

Interested citizens can propose the civic monitoring method as part of more extensive public participation initiatives, advocacy on specific policy issues, journalistic inquiries, etc.

The evaluations of the Monithon method underline the importance of putting in place adequate **training activities** not only on civic monitoring methods and field research but above all on the technical aspects related to the functioning of policies, on the mechanisms for allocating public funds, and on the interpretation and processing of public data (Gascó-Hernández et al., 2018).

Monithon, also through participation in coalitions and common initiatives with other civil society organizations, offers specialized training on public policies, on the application of the method and the use of tools for the benefit of communities or in the context of university courses. The training materials, case studies, and exercises are included in a **syllabus**, developed for university courses. For all, on the Monithon website, there are guides, video tutorials and in-depth materials on the main phases of this monitoring, while a repository of structured materials to support training activities ("MoniLab") is being developed.

c. Desk analysis (MoniTutor Step 1)

The first step in the civic monitoring of the chosen project is the analysis and interpretation of the information available via the desk. They include, for example:

- Data from administrative monitoring
- Contextual data and/or data on the reference topic (e.g. statistics with regional or local representativeness)
- General and specific objectives of the policies that finance the implementation of the project (e.g. problems intended to be resolved)
- Information published on the websites of the responsible administrations (e.g. the managing authorities of European programs)

- Publicly available documents or procedures that initiate the funding of the project
- Data on contracts possibly referable to the project or other public data available
- Information and stories published in the media
- Ongoing campaigns by civil society.

This information is useful for putting the analysis in the right context and conducting some fundamental activities to enter into the merits and deepen the relevant aspects of the project, such as the reconstruction of the "administrative history" (procedures and any bureaucratic bottlenecks) and systematic comparison of the objectives of the project with the more general objectives of the public policies that financed it. Our main reference for the planning and implementation phases of public projects is the World Bank paper *"A Diagnostic Framework for Assessing Public Investment Management"* (Rajaram et al., 2010).

Once the project has been chosen through the Project Finder or on OpenCoesione, the MoniTutor guide **(Step 1)**.

The guide is generated dynamically based on the characteristics of the project as represented in the official administrative monitoring system. Therefore, the structure and information displayed on the MoniTutor vary according to the characteristics of the chosen project (eg theme, progress, source of funding).

The first step of the MoniTutor now includes:

- information on the programs and policies that finance the specific project
- links to relevant policy documents
- information on the "activation" administrative procedures that gave rise to the financing
- suggestions on how to set up the survey

In the final part of the report creation page (Step 1), the first questions of the **questionnaire**. The questions are open-ended and sufficiently generic to adapt to projects with different characteristics:

- Title of the Report
- Author of the Report
- Description of the monitored project
- Is the project part of a broader intervention plan? If so, what is the overall goal of this plan?
- Project location (georeferencing)

d. Field research (MoniTutor Step 2)

The second step concerns the collection of primary data in the field.

On the same web page, by clicking on "Step 2" you access the second part of the **MoniTutor guide (Step 2)**, which accompanies the citizen in monitoring the progress of the project, in

evaluating the results produced and its effectiveness (whenever the project has already achieved results, even partial), thus generating an overall judgment on the chosen project.

The MoniTutor shows specific suggestions, always different according to the characteristics of the project. For example, different tips on how to set up field search are displayed depending on whether the project is just starting (selected), in progress, or finished.

Making use of the research work carried out in step 1, citizens are invited to conduct a **SWOT Analysis**, identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Of particular importance is the reporting of any critical issues, including the weakness of upstream strategic planning, implementation (e.g. presence of delays), difficulties in starting the work, results that are inconsistent or unsatisfactory compared to the objectives initials (Baum et al., 2020; Rajaram et al., 2010).

A key part of the MoniTutor concerns the **subjects involved** in the planning and implementation of the project, to be interviewed as part of the field analysis. Based on a mix of information taken from OpenCoesione, the website of the European Commission, and the websites of the Managing Authorities of European and national programs, today the guide shows, for each of the 1.7 million projects on OpenCoesione, the list and description of the responsible parties and, when available, their contacts to facilitate interviews (e.g. address and telephone number).

MoniTutor proposes some **guiding questions** to use as an outline for the interviews. The **general questions** are contained in a table (shown here in table 1), and potentially applicable - after contextualization and customization - to all themes. Part of the questions is addressed to responsible administrations and the other part to stakeholders and end-users.

In addition to the more general questions, MoniTutor includes some **specific guiding questions by policy topic**, which result from interviews with a group of thematic experts selected by the Monithon editorial staff. The development of the MoniTutor varies according to the theme: for some themes (eg environment), each project is further classified into "sub-themes", each with specific guiding questions. On other topics there are guiding questions referring in general to the topic. Other topics are currently not covered by thematic guiding questions (see table 2).

Tab. 1 - General guiding questions for the interviews

Type of subjects	Subjects	Expected results	Actual results	Problems encountered	Elements for improvement
Actors responsible for the programming and implementation phases (public administrations, implementing actors)	Executive / administrative director in charge of policy programming	What are policy objectives related to the selected project?	With regard to planning, do you think this intervention was relevant/useful? Under what conditions would this intervention have been more useful?	What prevented the expected results from being achieved? What was the weakest point of implementation?	After having seen the results, what elements of policy improvement do you consider useful to introduce? What would you change?
	Public manager in charge of the project	What were the initial expectations for the realization of the project?	How much has been achieved compared to what was planned?	What administrative problems have you encountered? Have you solved them and how?	After having seen the results, what elements of policy improvement do you consider useful to introduce? Would he do the project the same way or what would he change?
	Actors in charge of project realization / implementing bodies	What were the surrounding conditions that facilitated or slowed down the development of the project?	What results have been achieved with respect to the results expected in the work program?	What were the possible problems (in particular technical) that did not allow you to reach 100% of the expected results?	After seeing the results, what improvement elements do you consider useful to introduce? what would you have changed?
Stakeholders and end-users	Local economic actors	What did you expect from the implementation of the project in terms of new opportunities for your company or in general for the economic development of your area or city?	How do you think the intervention has improved the context in which it operates? Has it brought you direct benefits? Which ones?	What problems did the project cause? What negative aspects did you encounter once the project was completed? Did it meet your expectations?	What elements do you think you can identify so that this type of intervention can represent an advantage for your business or for the economic context?

Civil society and their representatives	What advantages did you expect from the implementation of the intervention? How much was your point of view considered in the planning phase?	Are the results produced in line with expectations?	What problems do you consider useful to highlight?	What elements would you improve or what solutions would you like to propose to improve the effectiveness of the monitored project? What other projects should have been financed instead?
Final beneficiaries	Were you aware of the project? What concrete effects you can recognize?	Has the intervention actually improved (or worsened) your life or the life of your community in general?	What problems do you want to highlight?	How could it be done better, from your point of view? What other projects should have been financed instead?

Tab. 2 - Presence of thematic guide questions by theme and sub-theme

Theme	Sub-theme	Already in the MoniTutor
Transport	-	√
Research and innovation	Infrastructures for research and innovation	√
	Business investments in research and innovation	√
	Climate and risks (hydrogeological instability + risks)	√
	Bike paths and pedestrian paths	√
	Integrated water service	√
Environment	Waste	√
Employment	-	
Education	-	
Social inclusion	-	
Culture and tourism	-	√
	Infrastructures	√
Digital agenda / ICT	Services	√
Competitiveness of enterprises	-	
Administrative capacity of Public Administration	-	
Energy	-	
Cities and rural areas	-	
Childhood and elderly	-	
Mafia's confiscated assets	-	√

BOX - Example of guiding questions for the theme "Digital Agenda", sub-theme "Digital services"

If your project concerns digital services for public administration, citizens and businesses, your questions could be:
- Who are the recipients of the funding (eg public administration: region, municipalities in the region; citizens; businesses)?
- What kind of project is being carried out? (for example: provision of hardware and software to digitize the internal processes of the institution, management of data and databases of public interest, national enabling platforms for the provision of services, digital services for citizens, services for businesses, technologies for smart cities, digital stations available to citizens, etc.)
- What changes occured after the conclusion of the project? (e.g. the internal processes of the public body are simplified and response times are reduced, the citizen can use an online service instead of going to the counter, the city has a sensor system capable of collecting data for delivery of services in real time..etc)
- Is there a physical and / or digital space where to have information on the project?

- if it is a digital service that can already be used, with what tools can it be accessed?
- Has an information / training initiative been planned on the project?
- Did the project take into account the impact of its activities on the end user? How do you measure this impact?
- Are impact data made public?

If the project concerns digital services for schools,
- What type of project is being carried out (for example: technological laboratory, digital environments for innovative teaching, connectivity networks, etc.)
- How many schools are involved?
- Does the initiative cover the potential needs of schools that would need interventions? to what extent?
- What are the criticalities that may emerge downstream of the intervention (eg management of technologies and activated laboratories; safety of the environments where the technological devices are located)
- Are there assessments on the impact of technologies on teaching?
- Can schools provide feedback on the effectiveness of interventions in relation to needs?

If your project concerns specific sectors such as tourism and culture, your questions could be:
- Who are the target audience of the project?
- What is the goal?
- What do the new technologies and / or digital services introduced by the project bring in?

If your project concerns specific sectors such as social inclusion, your questions could be:
- Who are the target audience of the project?
- What is the goal?
- On which dimension of social unease and / or the digital divide is action taken?
- Does the initiative cover the potential needs of those who would need interventions?
- What do the new technologies and / or digital services introduced by the project bring in?

Finally, MoniTutor contains links to "exemplary" civic monitoring reports published in the past and chosen by the editorial staff, as well as a list of reports already sent on the same project chosen.

Step 2 closes with the remaining part of the **questionnaire (step 2)**, to be filled in on the basis of the indications and guiding questions of MoniTutor. The complete list of fields follows

- Progress of the monitoring project based on the information collected
- How the project is progressing based on the information you have collected - Result of the project - If the project is finished, what result did it achieve?
- If the project is finished or you have been able to assess some of its results anyway, what is your judgement about the effectiveness of the project?
  - Harmful - Only negative consequences
  - Useless - A waste of public money
  - Useful but also shows some minor problems
  - Useful and effective
  - It hasn't produced any results yet
- Strength of the projects - What did you like about the project monitored?
- Weaknesses - What difficulties did you find during the implementation?

- Risks - What problems may the project face in the future?
- Your suggestions - Ideas to improve the projects and solutions to the problems you have found
- [If project judged negatively] What are the reasons why the project is not effective enough?
    - Administrative problems during the implementation phase
    - Technical problems during the implementation phase
    - The results of the project are not satisfactory
    - Implementation was successful but not really responding to the needs of final users
    - Results are useful but "more of the same" is needed to be really effective (e.g. more investments on the same project or kind of projects)
    - Results are useful but complementary interventions are needed to reach effectiveness
- Your synthetic assessment
    - Just started
    - Ongoing with no major hiccups
    - Ongoing with some problems
    - Blocked
    - Completed and useful
    - Completed but ineffective

In the final part, the form requires the **uploading of photos, documents, videos, and other attached materials** to highlight the information collected in the field. The structure of the materials is inspired by the Ushahidi initiative (see Okolloh, 2009).

The questionnaire ends with a series of questions on **the survey methods** followed:

- How was the information collected?
    - Web research
    - Visit to the project's location, documented by pictures or videos
    - Interview with the Managing Authority of the Programme which financed the project
    - Interview with people responsible for the project's planning
    - Interview with the users and/or final beneficiaries of the intervention
    - Interview with other types of people
    - Interview with people responsible for the project's implementation
    - Interview with political leaders
- Who did you interview? What is the role of these people in the project? E.g. Mayor, government employee, informed citizen, journalist. Report the roles of all the people interviewed
- Transcription of the two main questions to the interviewees - please specify which interviewees
- Transcription of the main two answers to the questions above

e. Finalization of the civic monitoring report

The indication is to fill in the questionnaire in full and send it, once the first ones have been completed two steps, to the Monithon's editorial staff, which will review it. The editorial staff has a **back office site** for the division between publishers, for viewing and commenting on reports. In most cases the reports are returned to the authors with suggestions or questions related to each field (question) of the questionnaire. Once the report has been validated, it is published.

Step 3 of the monitoring, on the other hand, concerns the self-assessment of the impacts obtained, and is to be sent at the end of the course, once the comparison with the institutions and other subjects involved has also been completed (phase "Evaluation of the results of civic monitoring").

Once published, the report (step 1 and step 2) is accessible via an interactive map and a list of the latest published reports.

If a project is **monitored more than once over time**, multiple civic monitoring reports are created, each with its observation date.

Each monitoring group (associated with a platform account) has a dedicated web page in which to tell their goals and results, and list their social contacts. The list of reports published on one or more projects is also available on the same web page.

f. Dissemination of results and open dialogue

The monitoring reports approved by the Monithon editorial staff are automatically published on the website in an **interactive map** that allows them to be searched, filtered and accessed based on the main characteristics of the monitored projects.

At the same time they are exposed via Application Programming Interfaces (APIs), a common standard for data interoperability. The **data produced are therefore open and freely usable** under the terms provided for by the CC-BY-SA license, and allow any other website or platform to view, aggregate or process them at will.

However, the publication of the civic monitoring report represents only the starting point for obtaining a real impact on the effectiveness of the project or policy. Monithon's method suggests the organization of a **public event**, sometimes called "Accountability Forum", in which political representatives and administrative managers are invited for an open discussion on the results obtained and published in the civic monitoring report. We hope for the creation of stable collaboration processes and citizen participation in public decisions - the last, weakest and most challenging feature of this complex ecosystem (Reggi & Dawes, 2016).

In this phase, all the energies collected in the phase of community creation should be gathered for building alliances in the territories to promote advocacy and lobbying initiatives that may possibly arise from emerged critical issues or from other requests that emerged as a result of

civic monitoring. In this sense, **each community is free to choose its own method of engagement and to set up the relationship with the institutions** according to its interests and existing initiatives to which the monitoring is connected.

The wealth of evidence, knowledge and civic capital acquired during the activities can also be usefully used to participate in the planning of subsequent policies or projects (see the previous representation of the policy cycle).

g. Evaluation of monitoring results (MoniTutor Step 3)

Since 2016, a final phase has also been introduced, which concerns the self-assessment of the results and impacts of civic monitoring activities.

Two main criteria are used to evaluate the impact obtained:

1) The creation of **civic** and **social capital** in the territories, measured in terms of new connections generated within the local ecosystem (Burt, 2000)
2) **Impact of the results obtained on the media** as information intermediaries (Attard et al., 2016; Lassinantti et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2017)
3) **Evidence of an improvement in the monitored project or of the acknowledgment of feedback from the** responsible administrations or other parties involved (the so-called closing of the feedback loop ", see Gigler & Bailur, 2014 and Fox, 2015).

Here are the questions of the questionnaire:

1. New connections generated

- How did you disseminate or are you disseminating the results of your civic monitoring?
    - Twitter
    - Facebook
    - Instagram
    - Territorial events organized by the teams
    - Open Administration Week
    - Blog / Website
    - Flyer or other offline methods (not via the Internet)
    - Request for auditions or closed-door meetings
    - Media interviews
    - Other
- With whom you have created connections to discuss the results of your monitoring?
    - Subject ...
    - Role ...
    - Organization ...
- Did the media talk about your monitoring?
    - Yes

- ○ No
- If yes, the results of the monitoring were reported by the following media:
  - ○ Local
  - ○ TV National TV
  - ○ Local
  - ○ Newspaper National Newspaper
  - ○ Blogs or other online news outlets
  - ○ Other

2. Outcomes of the dialogue with the administrations

- Have you had contact with the Administrations (eg the mayor or regional managers) to present or discuss the results of your monitoring with them?
  - ○ Yes
  - ○ No
- Did the Public Administrations respond to your requests or to the problems you raised?
  - ○ They did not answer
  - ○ Some answered, others did not
  - ○ They gave us formal or generic answers
  - ○ At least one Public Administration made us concrete promises
  - ○ They put our suggestions into practice and the project is now more effective
  - ○ We reported a problem which has now been resolved
  - ○ Other
- Describe your case. Which material facts or events lead you to believe that your civic monitoring had (or did not have) an impact on the organisations that manage or implement the project you monitored?

8. Application cases of the method

a. Some results

From 2013 to 2021, **912 civic monitoring reports** were published in the Monithon website. They were developed by students and national and local associations in Italy, Spain, Croatia, Greece and Bulgaria. Overall, the total funding received by monitored projects exceeds **10 billion euros.**

Monithon's practice and method of civic monitoring has been **cited in over 20 international scientific articles** and in an OECD report (see list at the bottom of the page), with extensive national press coverage and, in some cases, international.

About 60% of the projects are judged positively. Most of the reports of the last 3 years have been picked up by the local media, while over 70% of the reports have triggered a dialogue with the administrations. There is evidence of **cases of impact** of monitoring activities, which have

led to an improvement in projects or to the initiation of processes of real collaboration between communities and public administrations, especially at the local level.

b. At the school of OpenCoesion (ASOC)

The main initiative that uses the Monithon method and tools as well as the main source of civic monitoring reports is [At the School of OpenCohesion](#) (ASOC), an educational path promoted and managed by the government initiative OpenCoesione at the Presidency of the Council of Ministers - Department of Cohesion Policies. Monithon has participated in the evolution of ASOC since its origins and has also been influenced by it in its methodological choices and in the development of tools (Ciociola & Reggi, 2015).

ASOC is aimed at promoting and developing principles of active and conscious citizenship in Italian schools, through the civic monitoring of European and national public funding. In particulare, it is focused on the implementation of civic monitoring activities of projects financed by the [Cohesion Policy](#). ASOC programs includes more general objectives such as those of developing digital, statistical and civic education skills, as well as helping students to know and communicate through journalistic techniques.

Monithon is at the heart of the third part of the ASOC program, which focuses on civic monitoring in the field.

In recent years, the ASOC program has also been conducted in other European countries such as Croatia, Spain, Portugal, Greece and Bulgaria, thanks to the involvement of local governments and funding from the European Commission. In the last 8 editions, over 30,000 students and 2,500 teachers have been involved.

c. A comparison between some initiatives that use the Monithon method

The Monithon method has been tested in initiatives that are quite different in terms of purpose, target, duration and geographical coverage. In addition to the ASOC program, in the examples shown in the following table we find a university laboratory (Turin), an experimental exercise of application to the monitoring of the use of funds from the EU Operational Programme Emilia-Romagna for post-earthquake reconstruction in 2012, a project funded by the European Commission to encourage civic monitoring on environmental issues in some European countries. The table also shows the different role and activity of Monithon in the various initiatives.

Tab. 3 - Selection of initiatives that use the Monithon method and tools

Initiative	Year	Target users	Duration	Geographical coverage	Role of Monithon
ASOC	Since 2014	Middle and high school students, teachers	School year	Italy, Spain, Portugal, Croatia, Bulgaria, Greece	● Provides methods and tools for the "Lesson 3" of the course. Approve and publish civic monitoring reports. ● Member of the Evaluation Commission of the documents produced.
University of Turin Department of Cultures, Politics and Society	Since 2015	Students of the Laboratory "European cohesion policies and territorial communication strategies"	3 months	Turin	● Participates in the training activities ● Review and approval of the reports ● Collaborates in the organization of a public dialogue event with the responsible subjects
Post-earthquake reconstruction in Emilia-Romagna - Action Aid	2013	NGOs, activists	1 month	Emilia-Romagna	● Data analysis aimed at picking a projects to be monitored monitor ● Accompanies the activities in the territories ● Review and approval of the reports sent
"Civic Monitoring for Europe" project - Mobius Circle and Demostene association	2021 - ongoing	Environmental NGOs	6-8 months	Italy (Lecce, Milan), France, Poland, Croatia, Portugal, Greece	● 4-day training course ● Supports the choice of the project in the EU countries ● Permanent tutoring

C. Future developments

9. Our approach in relation to other experiences of civic monitoring

Monithon's methodological approach relates in a complementary way to other experiences of participation, analysis and "civic monitoring" of public funds already developed by other civil society organizations, universities and media.

Compared to **more aggregate analyzes on the advancement or impact of public funds** (e.g. degree of resource absorption, impact of a certain measure or policy on economic growth, geographical distribution of investments, data visualization and storytelling), Monithon is focused on applying qualitative methods. **Quantitative analysis**, however, is often used by Monithon as a privileged source to attribute relevance to specific aspects of the research and guide its approach. Furthermore, the analysis of secondary data is a pillar of the representation of the context (eg regional benchmarking) in which the projects are implemented and the communities are located.

Furthermore, the data collected through the Monithon method can be analyzed in aggregate forms by Monithon itself or by other parties (eg media partners). Methods focused on **the collection of primary data and quantitative indicators** (eg to measure the quality of a health service) are complementary to the Monithon's approach and may in the future have more relevance within the Monithon method.

To date, the object of observation, as mentioned above, are public investment projects. Civic monitoring **of law interventions or "reforms"** (think of those contained in the Recovery Plans) requires a different approach. However, information, data and judgments on the progress and effectiveness of policies not necessarily based on financial investments are important to inform the monitoring of related investments. For example, it is easy to imagine how the civic monitoring of an intervention for the digitization of a specific public service is strongly influenced by the outcome of the public administration reform; or how the analysis of a loan for the reuse of an asset confiscated from the mafias cannot ignore the governance mechanisms for the management of such assets. The same logic can be applied to the use of ordinary resources of the state and local authorities for **current expenditure**.

Monithon's approach focuses on evaluating the effectiveness of projects from the point of view of end users. Other approaches related to the legal and technical verification of administrative procedures, and in particular to **tenders** with the main purpose of **fighting corruption**, can complement the Monithon method, especially in the case of large-scale interventions (e.g. major projects as defined by the European Commission).

A decisive factor for the application of the method is obviously the ability to **engage or create from scratch civic communities** interested in monitoring public policies. In this sense,

Monithon's activities today tend to specialize more in the co-creation of methods and tools than the engagement of people in the territories. Therefore, **civil society initiatives** for the mobilization of the energies of the territories or **courses already structured** - for example at university level or with institutional actors for the management of feedback - would be fully complementary which could integrate in whole or in part the Monithon method in activities of information and training. The same applies to **training schools** or other initiatives organized with or for the third sector or **investigative journalism**.

Finally, the feedback collected in the field must necessarily be channeled into the policy making institutions - better if formalized - to have an impact in public decisions. To this end, the results of civic monitoring through Monithon can form an evidence base as objective as possible that can be integrated into **initiatives of public participation, collaboration, co-production and co-creation of policies and services**, as well as **advocacy** and **lobbying**.

10. Towards the monitoring of the EU Cohesion Policy 2021-27 and Recovery Plans

a. Plans for updating the tools

In the future, we plan to confirm the general methodological framework already developed and tested in recent years - and in particular the questionnaire - thus guaranteeing the comparability of the achieved results.

Numerous adjustments will have to be made, however, to improve the **training and tutoring activities**, making them increasingly useful for specific topics or types of intervention (e.g. projects for the environment, digitization, health, internal areas) or for the Recovery Plans and the 2021-2027 EU Cohesion Policy.

In particular, the **MoniTutor** could not only be subject to an overall re-design, but could also contain new specific guiding questions, possibly integrating additional training materials such as infographics or videos. In this sense, Monithon's goal is to involve experts and activists, starting from those already engaged in the civic monitoring of Recovery Plans and other public policies, for the development of guiding questions and other common materials, clearly enhancing the contribution of all.

In Italy, the new funds that are being deployed will be subject to administrative monitoring (through the "REGIS" national information system managed by the Ministry of Finance), which will largely replicate the existing one for European funds, with some novelties in the data structure.

We also plan to increase the number of local instances of our platform - now including Italy, Portugal, Spain, Bulgaria, Greece, Germany, Austria, UK, France, Croatia, and Poland - and

customize them based on contextual data and needs. For doing this, we will rely on the partnerships with the ASOC EU governmental project and the EU-funded project called "Civic Monitoring for Europe".

Finally, it is planned to add new projects to the **Project Finder**, including projects related to new themes and those funded by the Recovery Plans.

b. The data we need

To apply the Monithon method to the new Recovery policies and 2021-2027 programming of Cohesion Policy, we need data from the administrative monitoring as the starting point of the civic monitoring, with **detail at the project level**. The data should be of acceptable quality, published in an open format and accessible through interoperability standards.

During the Festival of Participation 2021 in Bologna (Italy), in a working group made up of numerous representatives of Italian third sector organizations, some examples of data considered fundamental were identified.

Tab. 4 - Questions and fundamental data for the activation of civic monitoring

Examples of key questions for monitoring	Examples of related data not yet published
1. **How the decisions were made**: who decided that that project should be financed? How were the implementation methods chosen? Is there consistency between the objectives of the plan and the objectives of the project?	Information on planning processes and public decisions. Eg indication of public documents or publication of minutes or analyzes underlying the decisions taken. Information on the investment programs and objectives linked to the funded project.
2. **What is funded**: What is the object of the project? What are the objectives and implementation methods?	Description, in a language understandable to non-experts, of the objectives and activities of the project, with any details also in the form of infographics or design materials already developed by the beneficiaries.
3. **Administrative "activation"** procedures: which procedures gave rise to the project?	Precise references to resolutions, announcements, contracts or other administrative procedures that help to reconstruct the history of the project.
4. **The tender procedures**: which public tenders are (if any) connected to the implementation of the project? Which assignments and to whom? For example, which Italian Tender Identification Codes (CIG) are associated with each Unique Project Code (CUP)?	The data on tender procedures (public contracts dataset) must be easily associated with each funded project.
5. **Subjects involved:** which public and private subjects have a role (and which one) in the project? Eg local authorities or companies that carry out works or services, and any subcontracts.	List of the subjects involved divided by role: programmers, implementers, beneficiaries, implementers, any sub-contractors
6. **Location**: What is the address or area in which the project is carried out? What are the coordinates of the	Addresses and / or coordinates of the project and related parties

subjects involved?	
7. **State of progress**: What is the status of the project? (eg just started, in progress, finished, etc.). What has been achieved and what is missing to do? How much has already been spent? How did any administrative audits / checks (evidence, materials) go?	"Physical" (eg state of completion) and financial (eg amount of payments to beneficiaries) progress data. Evidence and criticalities collected during any audit visits and institutional evaluation.
8. **Results and expected outcomes of the project**: which quantitative indicators are used to verify that the project has produced results?	Indicators of output (result) and outcome (impact) foreseen by the project.

c. Collaboration scenarios with other civic monitoring initiatives

The huge resources deployed by the Recovery Plans and the resulting high media attention have led various actors - including universities and civil society organizations - to take a substantial interest in civic monitoring of public funds.

The more general considerations of the integration of our method with other methods of analysis and representation of information are contained in the previous chapter 7.

Regarding the Recovery Plans in particular, some organizations are implementing initiatives for the development of **tools** to monitor the reforms and investments envisaged in the plan. These platforms could be designed by providing "modules" that can be integrated with each other: among these, the Monithon tools, such as the MoniTutor guide, can be used in specific phases of civic monitoring, and in particular in the evaluation of individual funded projects. The integration can take place maintaining graphic consistency and giving visibility to the contribution of all partners (logos, links, etc.).

Furthermore, as specified above, the data collected by Monithon are public and available to everyone, immediately usable on other platforms for subsequent integration with other sources, graphic display, aggregation on an ex basis. territorial or thematic.

The same considerations reported in chapter 7 can also be applied to the **engagement and training** envisaged by some third sector entities with reference to the Recovery Plan. Monithon's method, tools and expertise can be integrated, if deemed useful, into existing engagement activities, referring for example to specific issues (environment, gender equity, fight against organized crime) or territorial areas (e.g. metropolitan cities, internal areas).

d. How to use our method

The method described here (including this document), the tools and data produced by Monithon are freely accessible and usable by anyone. They are released under a

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