Guidance for a Monitoring and Evaluation System for Italy's Universal Civil Service

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Foreword

Governments are expected to demonstrate that their projects, programmes, and policies, are effectively and efficiently implemented and have a positive impact. As a result of this attention to performance, more and more governments across the OECD are building formal Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) systems to monitor and systematically evaluate their policy measures and interventions.

Rigorous M&E systems are key to sound policy decision making and ongoing learning and improvement. All decisions and implementation processes throughout the policy making cycle may be informed by and benefit from lessons learned on policies implemented earlier or elsewhere. M&E also contributes to making government action more transparent and accountable. M&E provides detailed information about how well governments are achieving their objectives, which in turn promotes public confidence in government decision making among all relevant stakeholders.

The body of literature on M&E concepts and methodologies and country experiences of building and strengthening their M&E systems are vast. The OECD is contributing to this expanding body of knowledge through a new series of reports on M&E. This report, “Guidance for a monitoring and evaluation system for Italy’s Universal Civil Service” is the third in the series and provides guidance on how to strengthen the M&E system of the Universal Civil Service in Italy. The report is accessible via www.oecd.org/employment/youth.

This report was prepared by the Youth and Diversity Policies Unit in the OECD Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs (ELS). The report also draws on evidence from other project outputs prepared by colleagues from the OECD Public Governance Directorate.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

CCP	Civil peace corps *Corpi civili di pace*
DG REFORM	European Commission's Directorate General for Structural Reform Support
DGSCU	Department of Youth Policies and Universal Civil Service *Dipartimento per le politiche giovanili e il Servizio civile universale*
EU	European Union
EUR	Euro
HELIOS	DGSCU computer system
INAPP	National Institute for the Analysis of Public Policies *Instituto Nazionale per l'Analisi delle Politiche Pubbliche*
LD	Legislative Decree
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
NEET	Not in Employment, Education or Training
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
NRRP	National Recovery and Resilience Plan *Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza*
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OLP	Local Project Operators *Operatori Locali di Progetto*
RRF	Recovery and Resilience Facility
ToC	Theory of Change
UCS	Universal Civil Service

Executive summary

Young people in Italy face considerable challenges making the first steps in the labour market, with many of them being trapped into unemployment or even worse in inactivity without any involvement in further education. Both the unemployment rate and the NEET (neither in employment, education or training) rate have declined considerably over the past decade. Nonetheless, Italy's unemployment rate for 15-24 year-olds, at 21.4% in the first quarter of 2024, remains double the OECD average (10.7%), and the NEET rate of 20.3% among 15-29 year-olds in Italy is fourth highest among OECD countries.

As part of a broader effort to create better opportunities for young people, Italy's Universal Civil Service (UCS) aims to promote the individual and professional development of young people and their acquisition of skills through non-formal learning experiences. The UCS offers volunteering opportunities for young people aged between 18 and 28, both in Italy and abroad and across many areas: from civil protection to cultural heritage and the promotion of peace. In 2022, nearly 51 000 young people started an UCS volunteering activity, representing around 0.8% of 18-28 year-olds in the country.

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis, Italy included a specific action on youth employment and employability in its Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP), in the framework of the economic recovery plan of European Union (EU). More specifically, the RRP aims to increase by 120 000 the number of young people undertaking a non-formal learning pathway by 2026. To support the design and implementation of the UCS element in the RRP, the OECD and the European Commission's Directorate-General for Structural Reform Support (DG REFORM) are providing technical support to Italy's Department for Youth Policies and the Universal Civil Service (DGSCU), focusing on: (i) reducing procedural, regulatory, institutional and governance barriers for UCS to improve its effectiveness and impact for youth outcomes; (ii) improving the implementation of UCS-supported initiatives, and improved conditions for current and future UCS participants; and (iii) improving the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework for the UCS.

This report focuses on the last element and provides an assessment of the M&E elements currently in use for the UCS, as well as suggestions for the establishment of a robust and comprehensive results-based M&E system for the UCS. Results-based M&E systems can help policy makers track progress and demonstrate the impact generated by a specific intervention. They can also assist in setting and co-ordinating policy goals, identifying promising practices, detecting weaknesses, and designing corrective actions, as well as promoting transparency and accountability of policy making.

Overall, Italy's DGSCU and the organisations implementing the UCS programmes/projects are making significant efforts to monitor the implementation of the UCS. Regulatory and programmatic documents inform on key elements of the UCS's policy logic. However, an analytical framework describing the UCS "Theory of Change" – i.e. how the UCS is expected to bring about the desired outcomes and impact in its context – has not been fully developed. Evidence on UCS outcomes and impacts is increasing but scattered and not produced in a systematic way, and monitoring is seen as a formality by some stakeholders. The reporting and dissemination of M&E findings are also limited.

Various actions could be implemented to build a comprehensive and robust M&E system for the UCS. In particular, the OECD recommends Italy to:

- Ensure a clear and shared understanding of the UCS' Theory of Change;
- Identify and define SMART (i.e. Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time bound) indicators for all levels of the results chain;
- Systematically structure monitoring activities and define a forward-looking evaluation plan, allowing for evaluations throughout the programme cycle;
- Strengthen M&E communication efforts through existing and new channels, and strategically invest in institutional capacity and policy learning.

1 Introduction

Youth unemployment in Italy is very high compared with most other OECD countries, even though the rate has been gradually declining over the past decade. At 21.4% in the first quarter of 2024, the unemployment rate for 15-24 year-olds stood at double the OECD average (10.7%) and considerably above the EU-27 average (14.7%). Even so, youth unemployment in Italy has seen a steady downward trend since the mid-2010s when the rate peaked at more than 40%. A similar observation can be made for the share of young people who are neither in employment, education, or training (NEETs), accounting for 20.3% of all 15-29 year-olds in Italy in 2022 (compared to 12.8% on average across the OECD). While Italy is fourth highest in the OECD ranking, the country's NEET rate has seen a considerable decline over the past decade (27.4% in 2014).

Italy has launched various initiatives supporting youth employment and the government also engaged in delivering the goals of the European Union Youth Strategy 2019-27. Complementarily, Italy's Universal Civil Service (UCS) aims to involve young people in volunteering activities, to foster practical skill development for future employment as well as civic engagement and social cohesion. The UCS represents an opportunity for personal growth and training and is an important tool to address youth unemployment and skills gaps. The successful engagement of young people in the labour market, public and political life, and society more generally have been at the forefront of the policy debate in Italy over the past years, and even more so in the context of the COVID-19 crisis (OECD, 2020[1]; 2022[2]).

In this context, the European Commission's Directorate-General for Structural Reform Support (DG REFORM) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) are providing technical support to the Department for Youth Policies and the Universal Civil Service of Italy regarding the design and implementation of the UCS project of Italy's Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP). In particular, the project focuses on: (i) reducing procedural, regulatory, institutional and governance barriers for UCS effectiveness and its impact for youth outcomes; (ii) improving implementation of UCS-supported initiatives, and improved conditions for current and future UCS participants; and (iii) improving the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework for the UCS.

As part of Output 1 of the project ("Report on the design of indicators and the development of a Monitoring and Evaluation framework covering the UCS RRP project overall, and the compliance and outcomes of UCS-supported requests", unpublished), the Youth and Diversity Policies Unit of the OECD Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs has prepared this technical report with guidance for an M&E system for Italy's Universal Civil Service. This report provides an assessment of the M&E elements currently in use for the UCS, as well as suggestions for the establishment of a robust and comprehensive results-based M&E system for the UCS. The report draws on various sources of information: methodological documents on M&E, such as the OECD Recommendation on Public Policy Evaluation (OECD, 2022[3]); desk research on the UCS and good practice examples in other OECD countries; as well as interviews with UCS managers, stakeholders and researchers conducted by the OECD between July and October 2023.

The report sets the scene with a brief overview of the UCS, followed by an explanation on the purpose of an M&E system for the UCS. The report then explains the necessary steps to be considered for a comprehensive M&E system, including understanding and outlining UCS results chain through a Theory of Change; setting SMART indicators based on UCS' Theory of Change; planning for the collection and

processing of data; establishing an evaluation plan; communicating and disseminating UCS progress and results; and strengthening human, financial, and institutional capacities, mechanisms, and policy learning. A concluding section summarises the main messages of the report and provides key policy recommendations. It is important to highlight that there is not a unique way to build and maintain a results-based M&E system: this task should rather be understood as work in progress and under continuous improvement.

A short overview of Italy's Universal Civil Service

Italy's Civil Service was established in 1972 as part of efforts to foster social cohesion, promote civic engagement, and address societal challenges through non-military service (Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana, 1972[4]). The Civil Service aimed to provide young people with opportunities for personal development, social integration, and active participation in community-building efforts.

Initially, the Civil Service primarily focused on roles related to civil protection, environmental conservation, cultural heritage preservation, and social welfare activities. Over time, its scope expanded to encompass a wider range of sectors and activities, reflecting evolving societal needs and priorities.

In 2001, Law 64/2001 established the National Civil Service, significantly expanding the scope and objectives of the Civil Service (Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana, 2001[5]). Specifically, the National Civil Service was designed as a voluntary service for young men and young women aged 18 to 26 (later raised to 28 years by Legislative Decree no. 77/2002), intending to undertake a social, civic, cultural and professional training through social solidarity, national and international co-operation activities, and the protection of national heritage. Law 64/2001 expanded the range of activities and sectors in which civil service volunteers could be engaged, while aligning more closely with broader national and European policies on youth empowerment, social cohesion, and community development. The year 2005 saw the suspension of the mandatory military service.

Another crucial development occurred with the enactment of Law Decree 40/2017 (Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana, 2017[6]), which transformed the Civil Service into the Universal Civil Service (UCS). Similar to the National Civil Service, the UCS involves young people aged between 18 and 28 in social, civic, cultural, and professional training activities through social solidarity, national and international co-operation, and the protection of national heritage. Volunteering projects, in Italy and abroad, belong to various areas – from civil protection to cultural heritage to the promotion of peace. Young volunteers are asked to commit for 25 hours per week, to be divided into at least 4 hours per day for 5/6 days a week, for a period of 8 to 12 months. Volunteers receive a monthly allowance of approximately EUR 500 (as of 2024) and a minimum of 80 hours of training, as well as other benefits including but not limited to the recognition and possible certification of the skills acquired through the UCS, university training credits if envisaged by the project, a certificate of participation in the UCS, preferential access for young people with fewer opportunities in a number of projects, and the reservation of a 15% quota in the recruitment of non-managerial personnel within public administrations (DGSCU, 2024[7]). In 2022, 50 972 of volunteer workers were initiated in the UCS (slightly above the 49 984 volunteers initiated in 2021), representing around 0.8% of the reference population (DGSCU, 2023[8]; 2019[9]; De Luca, 2024[10]).

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that the UCS benefits from support from Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP) (Italian Government, 2021[11]). To address the high NEET rates and the further threats posed by the COVID-19 crisis, Italy included a specific action (Component 1 of Mission 5) targeting inclusion and cohesion and aiming at improving employment and employability especially among young people aged between 18 and 28, in line with the Recommendation of the Council of 22 May 2018 (2018/C/189/01) (Council of the EU, 2018[12]). The RRP aimed to increase by 120 000 the number of young people undertaking a non-formal learning pathway (in other words, the UCS) for the development of

transversal skills. Available financial resources dedicated to these actions between 2021 and 2023 amounted to EUR 650 million.

Purpose of a Monitoring and Evaluation system for the UCS

Governments are expected to demonstrate policy results. Systematic data collection, analysis, and interpretation are fundamental for policy makers to monitor progress, identify outcomes, evaluate the impact of public interventions in relation to established goals, and adjust where needed.

Result-oriented Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) systems serve these purposes, by generating feedback on the progress and outcomes of public interventions. Monitoring and evaluation are distinct yet complementary practices. Monitoring is "a continuing function that uses systematic collection of data on specified indicators to provide management and the main stakeholders of an ongoing (…) intervention with indications of the extent of progress and achievement of objectives and progress in the use of allocated funds" (OECD, 2002[13]). Evaluation consists of "the structured and evidence-based assessment of the design, implementation or results of a planned, ongoing or completed public intervention" (OECD, 2022[3]).

Result-oriented M&E can support evidence informed decision-making, strategic planning, and policy design by providing timely information on an intervention; strengthen accountability and legitimise the use of public funds and resources; facilitate policy learning; ensure adaptable management; and increase the efficiency and effectiveness of spending. It can cultivate transparency, engagement, and responsibility towards internal and external stakeholders (OECD[14]; OECD, 2022[3]).

The DGSCU and UCS entities are making important efforts to monitor the implementation of the UCS and its programmes/projects, with key information on inputs, activities and outputs being regularly collected and reported. At the same time, there is room for improvement as regards the definition of the UCS' results chain and collection of additional data allowing to better analyse its outcomes and impacts. Existing evaluations of the Civil Service prior to the UCS, for instance, find evidence of a positive correlation between active citizenship for employability (De Luca, 2023[15]; De Luca and Ferri, 2021[16]; De Luca, 2023[17]); similar analyses and data collection methods could be capitalised for the evaluation of the current version of the UCS.

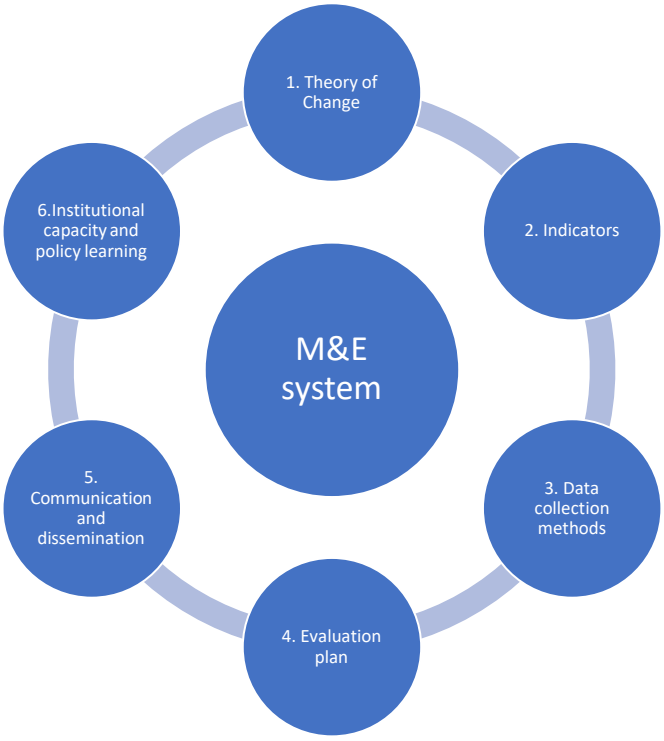
The following sections focus on the key steps for building and implementing an M&E system for the UCS (Figure 1), namely:

- **Understanding and outlining the UCS results chain through a Theory of Change (ToC)**: Identifying the UCS rationale and objectives and building its ToC – an explicit description (in the form of a graphical display, matrix and/or summary) of the intervention logic of the UCS.
- **Setting SMART indicators based on UCS ToC:** Defining specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) indicators to measure progress towards UCS objectives, based on its ToC.
- **Planning for the collection and processing of data**: Identifying methods to gather information on such indicators before, during and after the implementation of UCS actions, allowing to track changes over time and establishing quality standards and mechanisms to generate robust and credible results that can be trusted and used with confidence.
- **Establishing an evaluation plan**: Planning different types of evaluation to analyse the intervention based on a selection of evaluation objectives, questions and criteria and ensuring that evaluations are timely and proportionate to the intended objectives.
- **Communicating and disseminating UCS progress and results**: Reporting and communicating results to target audiences, for instance through data dashboards containing key information on UCS outputs and outcomes, or reports summarising the M&E findings.

- **Strengthening human, financial, and institutional capacities, mechanisms, and policy learning**: Ensuring that i) the sufficient institutional mechanisms are in place to embed M&E in decision-making processes and ii) the UCS is endowed with the human, time, technical and financial resources needed to conduct, commission and use M&E activities effectively and in a credible manner. This should also support the use of M&E evidence to learn as well as adapt and improve the UCS.

Each of these sections illustrates the key elements to consider, analyses these elements in the framework of the UCS, and provides a set of recommendations to build a robust and regularly updated M&E system for the UCS. In this context, it is important to acknowledge that building or improving an M&E system is resource-intensive and requires consensus building, analytical support, and technical instruments. The availability of such resources as well as strategic determination will inevitably affect whether the recommendations can be acted upon and the timeline of related actions. Moreover, an M&E system should be flexible and adaptable to changing intervention needs. As the UCS evolves, the M&E should be updated to ensure its relevance and alignment with UCS goals.

Figure 1. Key elements and steps for the UCS M&E system



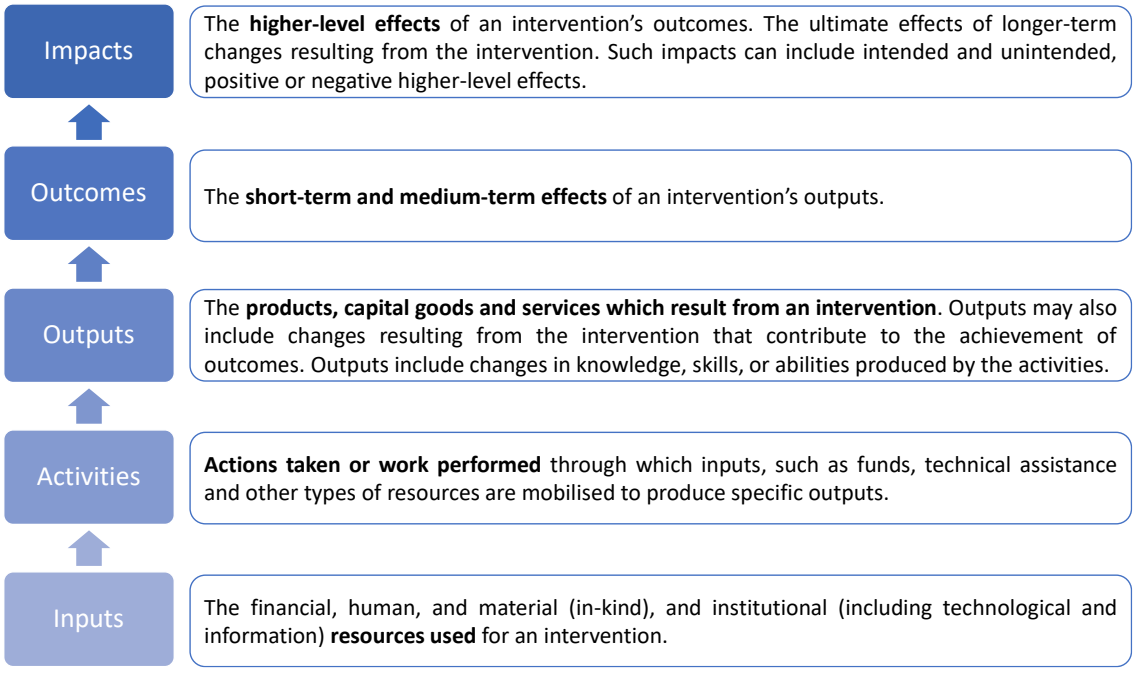
Source: Authors.

2 Understanding and outlining UCS results chain through a ToC

A first step to build an M&E system is to set out the logic of the intervention by describing its results chain: how inputs and activities will produce outputs, which will lead to specific outcomes and, eventually, impacts (Figure 2). Each element of the results chain contributes to the next, and the links between elements are as important as the results themselves (OECD, 2023[18]; World Bank, 2012[19]). Identifying these elements and their linkages is fundamental, as they will be the main focus of M&E activities.

A common method to structure a results chain is through the "Theory of Change" (ToC) approach.[1] The ToC is an analytical framework aimed to model the process of change, describing and explaining how an intervention is expected to bring about the desired outcomes and impact in a particular context (Belcher, Claus and Davel, 2020[20]). A documented ToC makes explicit what a policy does (inputs, activities, and outputs) and what it aims to achieve (outcomes and impacts). It allows to test and review the hypothetical causal linkages and underlying assumptions between activities, outputs, and outcomes during implementation. This approach is particularly important in complex contexts where the expected change can be influenced by multiple factors. The ToC provides the basis to defend that a particular policy is making a difference, while capturing unintended and unexpected results.

Figure 2. The results chain



Source: OECD (2002[13]), *Glossary of Key Terms in Evaluation and Results Based Management (in English, French and Spanish)*; OECD (2023[18]), *Impact by Design: Effective Results Frameworks for Sustainable Development*.

Defining the ToC for any intervention requires a process of consultation, exchange, and consensus-building among key stakeholders. Being typically iterative and involving various actors, the process can be time- and resource-intensive.

The UCS key elements are set in regulatory documents, but an explicit and comprehensive ToC has not been elaborated

The Italian UCS has existed for a long time and has evolved over time. Key information on the current intervention logic of the UCS is provided in Legislative Decree (LD) 40/2017 (Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana, 2017[6]) and other programmatic documents,[2] as well as the annual reports to the Parliament. However, an official and comprehensive description of the UCS ToC has not been elaborated.[3]

Defining a clear ToC is fundamental to ensure consistency in the understanding and implementation of the UCS across all key stakeholders (including the DGSCU, the entities and young people themselves), especially in view of UCS evolution over time as well as the different perspectives and interests at stake (for instance, the impact of the UCS on territories and young people). A clear ToC would also orientate the design, evaluation and selection of programmes, projects, and activities, to which the UCS devotes considerable attention (OECD, forthcoming[21]). Finally, a ToC would provide a solid basis for UCS updates and adjustments. For instance, the existence of a ToC for the UCS could have eased the adaptation process during the COVID-19 pandemic, by providing a solid basis for discussions on the adjustment of specific elements of the UCS.

Although it is best to outline the ToC in the early stages of an intervention, there is still merit in undertaking such a process now for the UCS – especially since it is undergoing a reform process (DGSCU, 2021[22]).

Suggestion for an outline of UCS ToC based on UCS key elements

Desk research and stakeholder consultations undertaken for this report allowed for the identification of elements of the UCS results chain and make a first attempt to outline its potential ToC (Figure 3). This initial outline is intended as a resource to stimulate discussion and further work on the definition of an official ToC for the UCS: it will need to be adapted based on internal feedback, further stakeholder consultations and UCS developments.

In brief, this initial outline of the UCS ToC captures the following results chain: the set-up of volunteering projects, training activities and mentoring (activities) will allow for the delivery of volunteering placements, programmes and projects, and training and development (outputs). Such outputs are expected to strengthen young people's human capital and improve the provision of services of public utility (outcomes). Overall, this results chain would contribute to strengthen young people's active citizenship, employability, and employment, as well as social cohesion and resilience, ultimately supporting the "unarmed and nonviolent defence of the homeland" (Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana, 2017[6]) (impacts). Various assumptions would sustain the feasibility of this model: a continued government commitment to the UCS, the availability of quality placements, sustained volunteer motivation, supportive entities, and stable legal and regulatory environment are key enabling factors.

Defining the UCS ToC would support a better understanding of the building blocks and significant aspects of the intervention – including, among others, the contribution of UCS actions to the ultimate goal of unarmed and nonviolent defence of the homeland; UCS impact on young people and territories; and the focus on various groups of young people, such as those with disabilities, migrant background, or not in employment, education or training (NEETs). For example, interviews conducted as part of this project emphasised that the UCS can enhance various aspects of young people's lives – active citizenship, employability, as well as psychological and physical well-being, among others. Being a multifaceted matter,

it is essential for UCS authorities to reach consensus on the priority areas (which are likely interconnected and not necessarily mutually exclusive) that the UCS should focus on, monitor, and evaluate. Clarifying these priorities would allow the identification of the strategies that would need to be pursued to achieve the desired change. For instance, enrolling as many young people as possible in the UCS could be expected to maximise the intervention's value; yet, targeting specific groups could be a relevant alternative approach to support those young people who would benefit most from the interventions.

Once the UCS ToC has been defined and agreed, M&E efforts can be structured around its key elements, allowing for systematic tracking and assessment of progress. In a cascade process, the ToC helps to: (i) identify the appropriate indicators, data collection methods, baselines for comparison, and evaluation approaches; (ii) set realistic expectations; and (iii) identify potential risks and challenges. It also supports adaptive management, as any deviations or unexpected outcomes can be analysed and addressed promptly. Ultimately, it should enable UCS managers and evaluators to understand the logic of the UCS, assess its effectiveness, and make evidence-based decisions for UCS improvement.

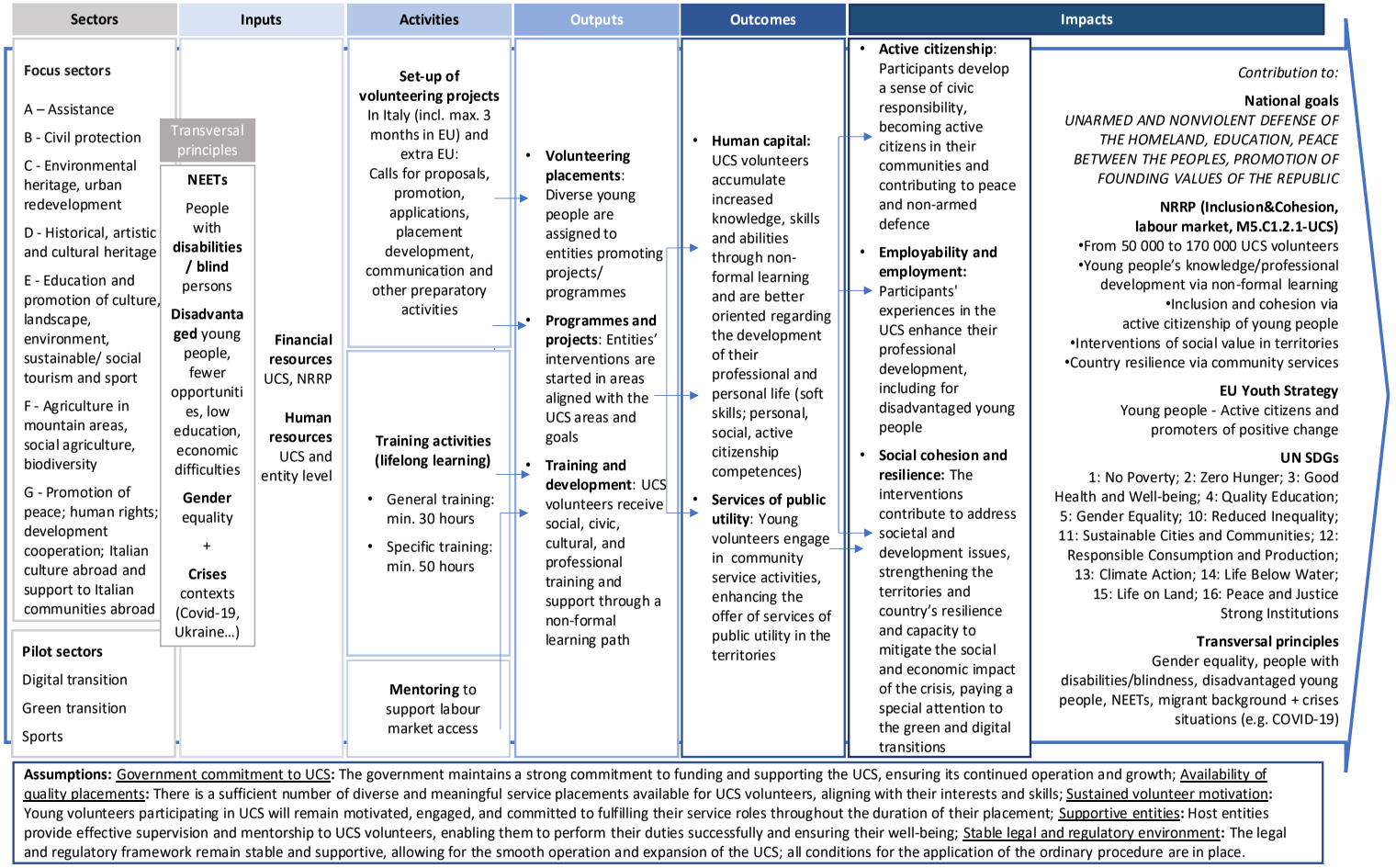
Recommendation 1: Ensure a clear and shared understanding of UCS ToC, to be used as a reference for implementing UCS programmes/projects and as a basis for M&E activities

Outlining a ToC for the UCS can ensure a clear and shared understanding of the nature, objectives, and logic of the intervention. This ToC can serve as a key reference for programming, implementation, monitoring and evaluation activities. Therefore, **it is recommended that UCS authorities ensure a clear and shared understanding of the UCS ToC, to be used as a reference for implementing UCS programmes/projects and as a basis for M&E activities.** In this process, UCS authorities are advised to:

- **Ensure that the development process of the ToC for the UCS is inclusive and participatory**.
- **Clearly identify specific elements under each component of the ToC and the subsequent links** between these elements.
- **Enumerate the assumptions** behind the model.
- **Accompany the visual representation of the ToC with a narrative description** of each of its items.
- **Regularly review and update the ToC** as the UCS evolves and more evidence becomes available.

Internal discussions at the DGSCU level will need to be complemented with consultation of key stakeholders, such as representatives of the entities that are implementing UCS programmes, young people, and researchers. This participatory and iterative process (e.g. in the form of consultations, workshops and focus groups) will be fundamental for consensus building and buy-in. This process could benefit from moderation by an expert in M&E or consultation processes. The draft ToC outline in Figure 3 could be used as a basis for the refinement of the UCS ToC.

Figure 3. Visual representation of the UCS Theory of Change: An initial outline



Note: This diagram is an example of a ToC outline for the UCS as prepared by the authors, to be potentially used as a basis for discussion by UCS authorities for the definition of the UCS ToC.
Source: Authors, based on consultations with UCS managers and desk research on UCS documents, including LD 40/2017 (Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana, 2017[6]), NRRP (Italian Government, 2021[11]) and DGSCU (2022[23]).

3 Setting SMART indicators based on UCS ToC

Indicator development is the next core activity that follows from the definition of the ToC. Indicators guide data collection, analysis, reporting and dissemination of evidence (Kusek and Rist, 2004[24]), hereby enabling organisations to accurately monitor and report on how an intervention is performing (OECD, 2023[18]).

Indicators (quantitative and/or qualitative) should be developed for each level of the ToC, as they will inform on progress related to inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, and impacts (Kusek and Rist, 2004[24]). The set of indicators should provide a comprehensive picture of the intervention's progress and effectiveness. Indicators should be well-defined, directly linked to the intervention, and measured periodically, with specified measurement units. Regularly tracking indicators enables decision makers to understand the performance of the intervention, identify any deviations from the expected performance, and adjust if needed. If indicators are not on track, it prompts reflection on implementation strategies, the suitability and effectiveness of interventions, and even the appropriateness of selected indicators and targets themselves (European Commission, 2021[25]; 2021[26]).

When developing the set of indicators, it is important to consider the following methodological guidelines:

- **Define "SMART" indicators** (World Bank, 2012[19]), meaning indicators that are:
  - Specific: Clear, direct, as unambiguous as possible; reflecting simple information that is communicable and easily understood.
  - Measurable: Objectively verifiable.
  - Achievable: Achievable and sensitive to change during the lifespan of the intervention.
  - Relevant: Reflecting information that is relevant to the intervention, and likely to be used by managers and decision makers.
  - Time bound: Trackable at a desired frequency for a set period.
- **Select an appropriate number of indicators**, considering the costs of data collection and processing, and their added value in terms of informative capacity. There must be a balance between the need to monitor all aspects of the intervention and the potential drawbacks of having too many indicators.
- **Consider the feasibility of data collection**. If data collection is too burdensome, it might lead to inconsistent or incomplete information. Monitoring should start with straightforward, quantifiable variables. Complementary qualitative information is key, but its acquisition and measurement are more complex and time-intensive due to the involvement of subjective judgments and perceptions.
- **Ensure traceability and comparability** over time and potentially with other interventions, facilitating consistency and learning. When available, baseline data serve as a reference for comparison, facilitating a more accurate assessment of the effectiveness of the intervention. Indicators that reflect both short- and long-term impacts contribute to ensure a long-term perspective in M&E.

- **Employ proxy (indirect) indicators thoughtfully**, only when direct indicators lack data or regular collection is impractical. While helpful in tracking the desired outcome, proxy indicators might be influenced by other factors, making it challenging to attribute changes solely to the intervention.

UCS monitoring mainly tracks inputs, activities and outputs

Monitoring UCS interventions is mandatory (DGSCU, 2021[27]). At the UCS level, once the programmes/projects have been selected, monitoring mainly consists of ordinary and extraordinary inspections and the centralisation of basic entity data on programme/project implementation in databases. The key indicators used to monitor the UCS at the central level are included in *Helios*, the main database of the UCS, and presented in the annual report to the Parliament (Table 1). The DGSCU also monitors the general progress of the training provided to volunteers, to ensure that it complies with the requirements of the legislation, the guidelines, and the content of programmes/projects.

The current UCS monitoring mostly covers a managerial function to track progress in implementation via descriptive indicators, which are collected on a regular basis, allowing for comparisons over time. The UCS regularly monitors inputs, activities, and outputs (see Table 1, which lists the main indicators from the 2021 report to the Parliament and matches them with the ToC elements presented in Figure 3). A similar level of detail can be found in comparable interventions in other OECD countries, such as the Canada Service Corps[4] and the French *Service Civique*.[5] At the same time, UCS outcomes and impacts are not systematically monitored.

Table 1. Matching key UCS indicators from the report to the Parliament with the UCS ToC outline

Main indicators in the 2021 report to the Parliament	Correspondence with UCS ToC as per Figure 3					
	Description	Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcome	Impacts
Annual financial allocation to the UCS	• Inputs: Financial resources					
UCS interventions: Projects and calls for the selection of volunteers • Number of available/required positions for volunteers, Italy/abroad, by sector • Number of interventions (programmes and projects) and distribution by: • Region and macro-region (North, Centre, and South and Islands) • Distribution of projects by sector and scope of action • Focus on vulnerable young people (NEETs and unemployed young people as part of the Youth Guarantee) • Status of the intervention (programme: not admissible, excluded, not activatable, activatable; project: rejected, withdrawn, not evaluable, not activatable, activatable) • Presence of qualifying elements (co-programming, networks, opportunities for young minors, mentoring, service period in an EU country) • Objectives aligned with the Goals of Agenda 2030 (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16) • Projects with reserved positions for young individuals with fewer opportunities (low education and economic difficulties)	• Focus sectors • Activities: Set-up of volunteering projects • Outputs: Volunteering placements • Transversal principles					
Entities • Number of owner entities (*Enti titolari*, listed in the Register, *Albo*), by type (third sector/public) • Number of host entities (*Enti di accoglienza*), by type (third sector/private – public) • Number of implementing sites (*sedi*) • Number of entities conducting additional measures (as per LD 40/2017): ○ Mentoring of volunteers, to facilitate their labour market entry ○ Employment of young people with fewer opportunities within UCS programmes ○ Management of volunteers, including the provision of sustenance and accommodation for the entire duration of stay in EU countries	• Focus sectors • Activities: ○ Training activities ○ Mentoring • Outputs: ○ Volunteering placements ○ Training and development					
Volunteers	• Focus sectors					

Main indicators in the 2021 report to the Parliament	Correspondence with UCS ToC as per Figure 3					
	Description	Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcome	Impacts
• Number of young people aged 15-29 years receiving support, by gender (non-binary, female, male) – indicator No. 14 of the set of common indicators related to the objectives of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF)* • Number of hours of volunteering activities • Number of received applications by geographical area, submitted by Italian and foreign citizens (EU/Non-EU) • Number of volunteers initiated relative to number of received applications • Number of volunteers initiated into the UCS, Italy/abroad, by call and demographic and socio-economic characteristics: gender, age, origin (Italy by region/abroad), education level • UCS volunteers in Italy: number of volunteers by region, sector, and by disadvantage status (disabilities, low education, economic disadvantages) • Number of projects and volunteers abroad by sector, geographic area (Africa, Europe, South America, Asia), gender, age, education level • Coverage level of advertised positions, by territory • Number of dropouts (withdrawals, interruptions), by region, causes (optional: inability to balance study/work and UCS; family reasons; finding a job) • Number of UCS closures (termination of relationship volunteers/entity), by reason • Number of replacements • Number of disciplinary proceedings against volunteers	• Activities: Set-up of volunteering projects • Outputs: Volunteering placements					
Training • Number of volunteers who received training • Hours of general and specific training provided	• Activities: Training activities • Outputs: Training and development					

Activities supporting the deployment of the UCS**
• Activity by Region and Autonomous Province, including:
  ○ Evaluation of intervention programmes
  ○ Training
  ○ Promotion and information
  ○ Human and financial resources committed for the UCS, by year
  ○ Control and inspection activities
  ○ Specific activities related to the COVID-19 emergency and additional activities
• Activity within the DGSCU, i.e.
  ○ Human resources by category (managers/staff) and contractual type
  ○ Financial resources, by source
  ○ Initial allocations, final forecasts, committed sums, and payments
• Inspection activity aimed at verifying compliance with regulatory provisions related to proper project management and correct use of volunteers:
  ○ Number of conducted inspections (planned/disposed after irregularity reports)
• Communication
• Regulatory activities
• Litigation concerning UCS
  ○ Reduction of disputes
• Register and programme/project appraisal:
  ○ Number of UCS entities registered in the Register of UCS entities
  ○ Average duration (days) required to complete registration in the Register
  ○ Average duration (days) for appraisal of interventions proposed by entities
• Composition of the National Consultation for UCS (*Consulta*)
	• Inputs:
	  ○ Financial resources
	  ○ Human resources
	• Activities: Training activities
	• Outputs: Volunteering placements					

Notes: The list is not exhaustive and includes the indicators that are deemed most relevant for the purpose of this exercise.
* See https://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/recovery-and-resilience-scoreboard/common_indicators.html?lang=en and the methodological fiche at www.italiadomani.gov.it/content/dam/sogei-ng/indicatori-comuni/Scheda_RRFCI14.pdf.
** Some indicators reflect administrative procedures as per programmatic documents such as Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri (2017[28]).
Source: Authors based on DGSCU (2021[22]), NRRP (Italian Government, 2021[11]), Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri (2017[28]), interviews with UCS stakeholders and Figure 3.

UCS indicators could be improved in terms of coverage and disaggregation

As shown above, the UCS monitors its inputs, activities, and outputs regularly, providing a good overview of the progress in implementation. Indicators could nonetheless be improved as regards the i) coverage of young people, ii) disaggregation of the information, and iii) availability of qualitative information:

- **Coverage**: the information collected on young people mainly relates to volunteers admitted to the UCS. Collecting information not only on volunteers who completed the experience, but also on those who were selected but did not take up the volunteering opportunity and volunteers who withdrew from the UCS before finalising the experience could provide useful information on the UCS relevance and effectiveness. Similarly, collecting complementary information on applicants who were not selected into the UCS can enhance the understanding of UCS outreach and provide a foundation for further evaluation research.
- **Disaggregation of the information**: the information collected is disaggregated by demographic profile of young volunteers, year and call, region, and entity type. Whenever possible, it is advisable to ensure disaggregation according to the following factors:
  - Demographic and socio-economic characteristics of young people: age, gender, level of education, activity/occupation status at the time of the application (in employment, in education, NEET, other), origin (Italy by region/abroad), disadvantage status (disabilities, low education, economic disadvantages). The employment and educational situation may also reflect the economic sector of employment, the type of contract and field of study. Disaggregation could also encompass the family background, e.g. the education level and occupational status of both parents and/or volunteers' assessment of the economic situation of their family (De Luca, 2022[29]). Overall, this information allows to profile young people and to analyse the inclusivity and reach of the UCS by:
    - Clustering the volunteers according to key characteristics (for instance: students, experienced workers, NEETs, disadvantaged groups, etc.).
    - Identifying the diversity of young people in UCS interventions compared to the diversity of the overall young population in Italy.
    - Analysing the gender dimension of the UCS.
    - Identifying the "missing volunteers", i.e. any groups that should be better targeted.
  - Year and call. This information allows to consider the specificities of each call for applications by entities and young volunteers and to provide a time perspective to the analysis.
  - Stage in the UCS process: application, interview, before the placement, during the placement, at the end of the placement and 6-12 months after the placement. This information allows to identify issues that may arise at different times along the UCS cycle and the effects of the UCS after the placement.
  - Region and municipality. This information allows to reflect the geographic spread of UCS interventions and, indirectly, inform on its relevance to the territory. The level of disaggregation in UCS monitoring already allows to track the "Southern quota", whereby 40% of NRRP investments must be allocated to the southern regions of Italy.[6] As the UCS intends to have an impact on the territories, it compels entities to make structural investments, such as increasing the number of implementing sites throughout the territory and in specific regions. Collecting information by municipality can provide a nuanced overview of the distribution of the interventions, for instance allowing to identify urban/rural differences.
  - Sector and sub-sectors. This information provides an overview of the thematic focus of UCS interventions.

  - Entity type: private, public, third sector. This information provides an overview of the typologies of entities involved, supporting reflections on whether the involvement of more/diverse entities is needed.

- Insights on the **qualitative dimensions of the UCS**. It is possible to collect qualitative information both through open or closed questions in questionnaires to volunteers and Local Project Operators (*Operatori Locali di Progetto*, OLPs), but closed lists of options would facilitate response aggregation. For instance, when inquiring regarding young people's motivation to apply to the UCS, pre-defined options could encompass: personal growth; need to give; need to receive; need to change/do something new/find a new meaning in life; have a better idea of the future; acquire new skills; try an alternative holiday; live an different experience; ensure an income; find employment; be prepared for the labour market; put the educational competences into practice; engage in social solidarity/active citizenship; defend one's homeland; experience nonviolence; religious or spiritual reasons; others. A similar approach could be used for other dimensions of the UCS, for instance the content of the specific training provided to volunteers. A list of key thematic areas could be identified in entities' reports on specific training provision (DGSCU, 2023[30]).

Additional indicators would be needed to monitor UCS outcomes and impacts

Table 1 highlights that additional indicators are needed to monitor and report on how the UCS contributes to achieving the desired change (outcomes and impacts). Although such information is not systematically collected by the UCS at the time of writing, existing regulatory documents provide a foundation for future improvements of UCS M&E (Box 1).

Selecting and feeding SMART indicators on outcome and impact indicators is often challenging. First, selecting relevant indicators is challenging because of the intangible nature of some outcomes, the possibility of unintended consequences, the interconnectedness of various components of the ToC, and difficulties related to causal attribution. Second, collecting related data is challenging due to the reliance on self-reported information, the need to involve UCS applicants and volunteers in various stages of the M&E process, and the difficulty to collect specific data on sectors and territories.

Using the ToC and each of its elements as a reference to define the UCS M&E system can help overcome some of these challenges. An example of such application is illustrated in Table 2. Following the outcomes and impacts presented in Figure 3, Table 2 provides a menu of additional indicators to consider (based on examples from entities' reports and other examples in the literature). This list can be used as a basis for discussion with the DGSCU to enhance current M&E efforts. The list is not prescriptive nor exhaustive and should be refined based on indicator relevance, feasibility of data collection and considerations on available technical and financial resources, IT systems and data protection.

Once indicators have been selected, the table should be completed with information on "data collection frequency", a "baseline", a "target" (a pre-agreed value for an indicator to be achieved at the end of the period under consideration), a "milestone" (an intermediate value to be achieved at a given point in time during the period under consideration), a "date to achieve targets" and "reporting channels". A reflection would be needed of which indicators could be monitored regularly, and which other indicators would need to be collected through additional evaluation activities.

Indicators such as those presented in Table 2 are intended to apply to all UCS programmes/projects. Nonetheless, such set of indicators would not be able to summarise additional information that entities may collect individually on their UCS actions. A strategy to best use such additional information would be to adopt a double set of indicators, with specific indicators complementing UCS common indicators:

- A core set of common indicators for all interventions, along the lines of Table 2, would allow for consistent data collection across entities and their programmes/projects, facilitating cross-comparisons, and providing an overview of the overall progress and performance of the UCS.
- Complementary sets of specific indicators by sector of intervention and territory would allow for a more detailed overview of the activities, beneficiaries of programmes/projects, and results in the different sectors, territories, and communities.

Box 1. Regulatory documents and pilot initiatives support improvements in future M&E activities of the UCS

The regulatory framework in Italy acknowledges the importance of M&E and the need to make progress in this domain. Regulatory documents focus on the needs to collect information on various UCS results, including participants' satisfaction upon completion of their placement; the social, territorial and community impact of the UCS; and UCS ability to reach specific groups of young people. In parallel, DGCSU pilot actions are showing promise for more advanced monitoring in future editions of the UCS:

The impact analysis of LD 40/2017 suggests assessing the satisfaction of UCS participants through online questionnaires to be completed at the end of their placement. In also highlights the importance of tracking the percentage of UCS volunteers who secure employment within 12 months of completing the service (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 2017[28]). As a pilot action, end-of-placement questionnaires have been administered to volunteers from the first call of applications of the NRRP (see section "DGSCU is implementing promising pilot initiatives focusing on results").

- The three-year UCS plan mentions that the DGSCU will adopt, as a pilot initiative, common indicators to assess the outcomes of UCS interventions. This pilot aims to assess the achievement of UCS objectives and response to social challenges, while considering their different territorial dimensions (DGSCU, 2022[23]).
- The three-year plan also mentions that, in alignment with the DGSCU obligations related to the implementation of cross-cutting principles of the NRRP and the Disability Directive, the DGSCU may work to enhance the Civil Service Information System's capacity to collect disaggregated data throughout the lifecycle of programmes/projects. This effort aims to capture details such as gender participation and measures supporting disadvantaged young people, particularly those with disabilities or other vulnerable conditions (DGSCU, 2022[23]).
- Improvements in evaluation planning and practice are expected as the available NRRP funds should allow for a "reallocation of (…) national resources towards strengthening activities such as programme monitoring and the evaluation of results in the territories and communities" which would "ensure the acquisition of best practices for the quality of future programmes" (DGSCU, 2021[22]).
- DGSCU is also involved in M&E activities for the experimentation of the Civil Peace Corps (CCP), in co-ordination with the CCP Monitoring Committee. Such experimental CCP projects, under the UCS actions conducted abroad, assign volunteers to actions related to non-governmental peace in areas at risk of/in conflict, or environmental emergencies (Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, 2015[31]; DGSCU[32]). The monitoring activities of CCP actions have predominantly entailed the identification and analysis of CCP volunteers' profiles, expectations, and assessment of the CCP experience. Such information was collected through short questionnaires administered to volunteers at the beginning, midway point, and end of the CCP experience (DGSCU, 2019[9]).

Table 2. Menu of options to complete UCS M&E system with outcome and impact indicators

Indicators	Disaggregation*	Comments by authors
Outcomes		
Outcome – Human capital: UCS volunteers accumulate increased knowledge, skills and abilities through non-formal learning and are better oriented regarding the development of their professional and personal life (soft skills; personal, social, active citizenship competences)		
Volunteering placement completion rate	Sector, region, municipality, entity type, demographic and socio-economic characteristics	The indicator reports on the percentage of participants who successfully complete the placements. Monitoring this indicator helps assess UCS ability to provide meaningful experiences and support for volunteers. It also gives an idea of the continuity of the actions on the territory, indirectly suggesting the existence of potential impacts of the UCS actions.
% of UCS volunteers who self-report/ are assessed to have made improvements in personal and professional outcomes thanks to the UCS	Sector, entity type, general/specific training, demographic and socio-economic characteristics	The indicator seeks to demonstrate personal growth and capacity by tracking participants' acquisition of new skills and competences during the service period. Personal and professional outcomes can encompass a longlist and should be predefined to allow for clustering – options could include leadership, communication, problem-solving, teamwork skills; self-confidence, self-esteem, resilience, empathy, other aspects related to the psychological and emotional well-being of participants; and active citizenship skills and civic engagement. A way to measure these indicators is to use pre-, mid-term and post-placement questionnaires to measure volunteers' perceived improvement in specific skills. Allowing respondents to complement closed questions with an open question on this dimension would allow to better nuance the understanding of a dimension which is complicated to measure.
% of UCS volunteers having converted the UCS experience into educational credits		The indicator is based on the assumption that universities may, within the limits established by current regulations, award educational credits to volunteers who have undertaken UCS activities relevant to professional development and academic curriculum.
Level of satisfaction of UCS volunteers with the UCS experience		The indicator evaluates the level of satisfaction among UCS volunteers regarding their overall experience, training, and volunteering placement. It captures participants' perceptions of their experience, indirectly reflecting UCS effectiveness in providing opportunities for personal growth, skill development, and community engagement. Monitoring this indicator helps ensure that the UCS is meeting the needs and expectations of UCS volunteers. Further levels of disaggregation related with the characteristics of the programme/project could be considered, for instance asking volunteers to identify the main beneficiaries of the intervention (the volunteers themselves, the entity, the final beneficiaries, the community, etc.).
Level of satisfaction of UCS volunteers with training		The indicator provides an indication of the level of satisfaction of UCS volunteers with different aspects of the general and specific training received, for instance: preparation of trainers in their disciplinary fields; quality of training; consistency of contents with the activities carried out; timeliness and clarity of training planning; organisation and schedules; quality of teaching materials and support tools; adequacy of equipment; adequacy of spaces; relationship with other volunteers.
Outcome – Services of public utility: UCS volunteers engage in community service activities, increasing in the offer of services of public utility in the territories		
Number of UCS programmes/ projects concluded	Sector, region, municipality, entity type, demographic and socio-economic characteristics	The indicator counts the UCS programmes/projects that have been completed within a specified timeframe, offering an overview of UCS activity level. It provides insight into the volume of efforts successfully deployed to contribute to the desired change.
Number of volunteer hours contributed		The indicator quantifies the amount of time youth volunteers dedicate to the UCS. It helps demonstrate the level of commitment and contribution of UCS volunteers.
UCS volunteers' assessment of the impact of actions on the territory		The indicator tries to capture the impact of volunteers' efforts on the actual beneficiaries, providing insights on the effectiveness and relevance of the implemented actions. It could pre-identify a list of outcomes and measure them through a rating system/Likert scale.
Level of satisfaction of UCS volunteers with the UCS setting, tools and delivery		The indicator informs on the level of satisfaction of UCS volunteers with different operational aspects of the UCS programme/project delivery, including but not limited to: the reception by the entity; information received on the organisation and service; consistency between activities carried out and project description; relationship with people in the entity; working hours; co-ordination and organisation of activities; equipment and resources available; spaces; support received by the staff of the entity; support received by the OLP; climate and relations within the working group; existing rules in the place of service; compensation received; appropriateness of the role and activities performed; ability to express ideas suggestions, proposals (see UCS end-of-placement pilot questionnaire).

Level of satisfaction of UCS entities with the UCS volunteers' actions		The indicator assesses the satisfaction levels of the host organisations, measuring their perception of the volunteers' contributions and overall UCS effectiveness. It can indirectly inform on UCS volunteers' contribution to positive changes in the territory. In any case, a degree of caution is required with such indicators considering potential biases in the assessment due to various interests at stake.
Impacts		
Impact – Active citizenship: UCS volunteers develop a sense of civic responsibility, becoming active citizens in their communities		
% of USC volunteers reporting intention to participate in community projects (or similar) as a result of the placement	Sector, region, municipality, entity type, demographic and socio-economic characteristics	Gives an indication of UCS influence on long-term civic engagement by measuring UCS volunteers' intentions to continue their involvement in civic and community activities after completing their placement. It examines whether the UCS instils a sense of social responsibility and encourages youth to become active citizens in their communities.
% of USC volunteers who are engaged in community projects (or similar)		Gives an indication of UCS influence on long-term civic engagement by measuring the number of UCS volunteers who are involved in civic and community activities right after completing their placement and in following periods (at the end of the placement, and 6/12/18 months after the placement). It examines whether the UCS instils a sense of social responsibility and encourages youth to become active citizens in their communities.
Composite indicator measuring Active Citizenship	Demographic and socio-economic characteristics	See literature on the use of a composite indicator to measure Active Citizenship (Hoskins and Mascherini, 2008[33]), around the dimensions of Protest and social change, Community life, Representative democracy, and Democratic values. The indicator was adapted in research of the National Institute for the Analysis of Public Policies on the National Civil Service (De Luca, 2022[29]), encompassing all dimensions but the one on Representative democracy.
Impact – Employability and employment: UCS volunteers' experiences in the UCS enhance their professional development, including for disadvantaged youth		
UCS volunteers' occupational or education status at the end of the placement, and after 6/12/18 months, compared to situation before placement	Sector, region, municipality, entity type, demographic and socio-economic characteristics	The indicator assesses the longer-term effects of the UCS on individuals' career decisions and educational pathways. It highlights the potential for UCS to positively impact participants' professional trajectories and contribute to their overall development. It also allows to calculate additional indicators, such as the reduction in quotes of inactive youth after their participation to the UCS.
Multidimensional Employability index	Demographic and socio-economic characteristics	The construction of this multidimensional index requires information on the following variables: • Education and training: variables related to the "educational qualifications"; the condition of being "in training activities or not" at the time of the survey and to any competence certifications obtained. • Labour market experiences: "number" and "type" of working and traineeship experiences acquired before the UCS. • Labour market activation: active job search; CV review and update; career design planning, in terms of clearness of professional goals. • Mobility: mobility resources (foreign languages skills, experiences abroad and planning) and mobility "experiences" (experiences of mobility – from one city to another- already been made and if an individual has already left their household and the availability to move and live abroad). See De Luca, Ferri and Di Padova (2019[34]) for methodological specifications.
Number of agreements with potential employers to promote the employment of volunteers who have completed the placement	Sector, region, municipality, entity type, participating in the UCS or not	The State, Regions and Autonomous Provinces may enter into agreements with associations of private companies, associations representing co-operatives and other non-profit bodies, to facilitate the placement in the labour market of young people who have performed the UCS. E.g. provision in Law 74 of 21 June 2023, whereby UCS volunteers who have successfully completed the UCS without any negative record are entitled to a reserved quota of 15% in the recruitment of non-managerial personnel within public administrations, as well as within special companies and institutions instrumental to the activities of local authorities (Article 1, paragraph 9-bis).
Number of job posts created for UCS volunteers	Sector, region, municipality, entity type, participating in the UCS or not	Jobs created in supported entities as well as in other organisations who have signed agreements with the UCS.
% of UCS volunteers stating that the UCS majorly contributed to	Sector, region, municipality, entity type, demographic and	The indicator attempts to measure the contribution of UCS in terms of future educational and professional life choices in terms of career objectives or further education in specific areas.

future education/ career choices	socio-economic characteristics	
Skills and abilities acquired by the UCS volunteers	Sector, region, municipality, entity type	See the discussion around the certification of skills/competences in OECD (forthcoming[21]). Identification of the main types of skills and abilities that UCS contributes to strengthen. This would require advancing specific methodologies considering the complexity of the recognition of competences acquired through the UCS. Skills and competencies may include social, professional, communication, relational, digital, organisational and managerial, language skills, others. A complementary option would be for UCS entities to provide an assessment on those dimensions, yet with major complications related to the nature and measurability of soft skills and to establish a causality between UCS interventions and such outcomes, as well as potential ethical issues related to volunteers' assessment – see OECD (forthcoming[21]) for further information on the certification of competences.
Impact – Social cohesion and resilience: The interventions contribute to address societal and development issues, strengthening the territories and country's resilience and capacity to mitigate the social and economic impact of the crisis, paying a special attention to the green and digital transitions		
Territory/Community impact	Sector, region, municipality, entity type	Indicators related to community impact aim to evaluate UCS influence on the community or the beneficiaries it serves. They should measure the tangible and intangible benefits generated by volunteers' service activities for the community. Measuring such impact is methodologically complicated, as stressed in evaluations of other volunteering programmes – e.g. European Commission (2017[35]) – due to the informal nature of interactions between community/volunteers, and the lack of tools to measure impact at local level. Examples of indicators include: improved infrastructure, enhanced social services, or increased community engagement; they nonetheless require a cleared definition, while considering challenges for the collection of related information.

Notes: This list is intended to be a menu of options for consideration by UCS managers.
* See the explanation in the section above on UCS indicators could be improved in terms of coverage and disaggregation.
Source: Authors based on DGSCU (2022[23]; 2021[22]), other programmatic documents, examples extracted from reports by UCS entities, and European Commission (2017[35]).

Recommendation 2: Follow the UCS ToC to identify SMART UCS indicators along the results chain

In order to build a well-functioning and comprehensive set of indicators, **it is recommended that UCS authorities follow the key elements of UCS ToC and assign SMART indicators to each of them**. Particular attention would be needed to i) improve the existing set of input, activity, and output indicators in terms of coverage and disaggregation of the information; and ii) complement such indicators with a selection of outcome and impact indicators. In this process, UCS authorities are advised to:

- **Consider the principles of "SMART" indicators.**
- **Select an optimal number of indicators**, with a right balance between information needs and costs for the collection and processing of information and data.
- **Ensure that indicators are available for each level of the ToC,** expanding the exercise presented in Table 2 to cover inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, and impacts.
- **Ensure that indicators are disaggregated** according to key factors of relevance for the UCS.
- **Ensure a longitudinal perspective in M&E**, with indicators to be fed at different points in time.
- **Ensure a good coverage of the target population**, encompassing local project operators, young volunteers as well as young applicants who were not selected into the UCS, wherever relevant.
- **Consider the possibility to apply an approach with core and specific indicators** to better capture the effects of the UCS on the sectors, territories, and communities.
- **Identify complementary outcome and impact indicators** that could be of interest for collection through evaluation exercises.

4 Planning for the collection and processing of data

Once the set of indicators has been identified following the ToC, data collection and analysis need to be organised accordingly. Proper planning of the monitoring function should therefore describe the methodology for data collection and processing (FAO, 2023[36]), including data collection tools and their frequency, as well as roles and responsibilities for data collection and analysis.

When planning data collection, it is important to balance the use of existing secondary data against the need for additional primary data. Primary data can be tailored specific information needs but require resources for data collection, storage, and analysis (Markiewicz and Patrick, 2016[37]). Secondary data are resource-efficient but may pose challenges in terms of accessibility and quality.

Key data collection methods and tools for the UCS may include administrative records (e.g. volunteer registration forms for demographics, timesheets for hours of service, training attendance, etc.); feedback forms, interviews, and focus groups on volunteers' and entities' satisfaction and UCS results; pre-, during- and post-programme surveys to measure changes in employability and citizenship skills (or any other relevant impacts); and standardised programmes/projects reports, among others. Such tools are already in use in the UCS but would need to be enhanced in terms of thematic coverage; organisation and standardisation of data collection; as well as consistency and regularity in implementation.

UCS interventions are monitored, but there is room for improvement in data collection and centralisation

Entities' monitoring systems are validated by the DGSCU but tools and approaches for data collection vary across entities

At the programme/project level, each entity that is listed in the Register (*Albo*) is required to provide information on its monitoring system, whose adequacy is assessed by the DGSCU. Such information should encompass the monitoring functions and roles, key tools and data collection processes, planned analysis and dissemination activities, and their timeframe. In particular, monitoring systems are expected to enable the tracking of: progress in project activities, aligning with the indicators and timeline outlined in the project plan; delivery of training activities, tutoring and the certification of competences; as well as the satisfaction of volunteers and the overall context in which the UCS experience happens. Entities designate a person responsible for monitoring actions (on volunteers' demographic characteristics and on training provision), the preparation of the annual report on the UCS programmes/projects, and the administration of satisfaction questionnaires to volunteers.

Since the entities are responsible for the implementation and monitoring of their programmes/projects, the UCS currently does not impose a single, comprehensive monitoring system with pre-defined tools for data collection. This set-up responds to DGSCU's decision to grant autonomy to entities considering their specific characteristics and diverse missions and is in line with other international practices (e.g. the

Canada Service Corps), where organisations implement and monitor their activities autonomously. Nonetheless, using heterogeneous data collection tools risks the dispersion of relevant information. A good balance needs to be struck between the central collection of information and the degree of autonomy left to the entities, taking into account the often-scarce resources at their disposal to carry out in-depth M&E.

Every year by the end of March, entities are to submit to the DGSCU an annual report on the results achieved with projects in the previous year. The report should clearly inform (among other aspects) on the objectives, indicators and targets related to the outputs produced; the activities conducted; the resources committed; the training courses provided; the entity's self-assessment of the achievement of the objectives; and the level of satisfaction of volunteers (DGSCU, 2021[38]). A summary report also needs to be published on the entity's website. Monitoring by entities should consist of a flow of continuous observation of the system, highlighting its strengths and the gaps that need to be addressed. Consultations with entities, however, highlight that monitoring is often seen as a burdensome and formal exercise to fulfil the requirements of the law. Consequently, in various cases monitoring reports only consist of a description of the demographic characteristics of the volunteers (e.g. distribution by age, regions, and sectors) or a summary of the projects.

Together with data on programme/project implementation, questionnaires to volunteers represent a key source of information for such annual reports. Pre-selection,[7] follow-up[8] and satisfaction[9] questionnaires are key to understand: a) the characteristics, motivation, expectations and level of satisfaction of candidates/volunteers; b) the outcomes and impacts of the interventions on young volunteers and the territories; as well as c) success factors and areas for improvement (Table 2 shows that questionnaires to young people are relevant to feed various indicators on the UCS performance). Questionnaires (in paper or online) are sent out to volunteers every three or four months: at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the service. Entities also send out questionnaires to their staff in charge of the UCS (including the local project operators) to collect data on the implementation of the project and verify its progress in relation to the initial plan. By being administered at different stages of the interventions, the questionnaires can collect information on the same question at different points in time and allow to detect emerging issues over the course of the projects. Administering such questionnaires also some time after the end of the placement would provide valuable information from an evaluative perspective, for instance allowing to understand young people's education or labour market status of young people, or their motivation for active citizenship, at different points in time.

Yet, some issues can be identified regarding the current use of such questionnaires. First, there is a variable amount of information generated at a programme/project level, which is currently not summarised in a UCS-level dashboard or database. Second, the use of such tools varies across entities, from cases where questionnaires are just treated as a formal step, to virtuous cases where they are used for evaluation and leaning purposes (see examples in sub-section below). And third, follow-up of volunteers finishes at the end of the placement without capturing effects over a longer period.

There are good examples of M&E systems for UCS programmes/projects

LD 40/2017, Article 7 states that the regions and autonomous provinces of Trento and Bolzano, after signing one or more agreements with the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, may perform functions including monitoring the management of the activities carried out by the UCS in the territories of each region or autonomous province, as well as evaluating the results of the interventions carried out by UCS entities carried out in their territories. At the time of writing, a technical working group is working on such an agreement.

Meanwhile, there are already good examples of thorough monitoring exercises conducted by Regions and Autonomous Provinces, which are collecting a wealth of information on the different elements of the UCS ToC. Two of them (by the Friuli-Venezia Giulia Region and the Autonomous Province of Trento) are presented below.

The *Friuli-Venezia Giulia* Region collects data to assess the quality and value of the UCS experience in the Region, through questionnaires on expectations and different evaluative aspects of the experience to all volunteers involved in UCS projects in the Region (DGSCU, 2021[22]), see Box 2. This example also highlights the risk of dispersion of information mentioned above: since the data are not aggregated at a central level, valuable information risks not being exploited at its most by UCS authorities.

Box 2. Questionnaire for end-of volunteer service: A virtuous example from the Friuli Venezia Giulia Region and relevance for M&E indicators

The final questionnaire administered by the Friuli Venezia Giulia Region has a high level of detail and covers the following sections with a mix of closed and open questions. The themes and subthemes covered in the questions could be used to build and feed related indicators.

Area and information	Relevance for indicators following the ToC outline (Figure 3)
Personal details: educational attainment; participation in programmes abroad; employment status; recent participation in training or professional development; involvement in internships or work abroad; previous voluntary work experiences; paid roles in social contexts; additional employment during the year of UCS	Output – "Volunteering placements"
Project information: sector, entity; service location; weekly service days and hours	Output – "Programmes and projects"
Civil service: before the UCS, motivation for: nonviolent defence, collaboration and teamwork, solidarity, association involvement; familiarity with the UCS history and nature; how awareness of the project was gained; reasons for joining the UCS	Outcome – "Human capital"
Commencement of service: start date; role within the project; primary activities; consistency of activities with project description; activity alignment with project objectives; conforming to expectations of involvement in activities; interaction frequency with project beneficiaries; reception by hosting entity; interaction with others in the entity; supervision by the LPO; participation in project activities; satisfaction with service conditions; assessment of various project aspects; assessment of the project in various areas; assessment of project strategy	Outputs – "Volunteering placements" and "Programmes and projects" and outcomes – "Human capital" and "Services of public utility"
Training: hours of project-specific and of general training; assessment of training quality; training provider	Output – "Training and development" and outcome – "Human capital"
Project suspension and resumption	Output – "Volunteering placements"
Overall assessment: importance of the UCS; comprehensive project assessment; evaluation of project outcomes; acquired skills; future applicability of training; rating of overall UCS experience; recommendations of UCS experience to others; intentions for future civic engagement; identification of encountered difficulties; suggestions for project enhancements; concluding remarks.	Outcomes – "Human capital" and "Services of public utility" and impacts – "Active citizenship", "Employability and employment" and "Social cohesion and resilience"

Source: Authors based on Regione Autonoma Friuli Venezia Giulia (2021[39]) and Figure 3.

While some organisations limit themselves to administering questionnaires, others organise additional monitoring activities, such as face-to-face and online meetings with young volunteers and local project operators. The Three-Point Monitoring system built in in 2020 by the Autonomous Province of Trento is another positive example, which focuses on the volunteers, the local project operators, and the civil service office (Box 3).

DGSCU is implementing promising pilot initiatives focusing on results

It is worth mentioning that the DGSCU has recently taken significant first steps towards the collection of information on UCS outcomes and impacts. In addition to the above-mentioned monitoring activities, UCS authorities have piloted actions to collect information on volunteers' satisfaction at the end of the service (as mentioned in section "Understanding and outlining UCS results chain through a ToC"). The DGSCU prepared and administered end-of-placement satisfaction questionnaires to volunteers who participated in the first UCS call for applications under the NRRP in 2021. These questionnaires were administered to

volunteers on a trial and voluntary basis and covered aspects such as demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the volunteers, involvement in volunteering activities prior to the UCS, motivations for joining the UCS, activities developed as part of the UCS, assessment of the training and of the activities, level of satisfaction with the project delivery and the UCS experience, UCS contribution to obtaining a job offer, and suggestions for improvement. The administration of such questionnaires may be extended to all the UCS interventions and, although at the time of writing there are no concrete plans by the UCS authorities to make such questionnaires mandatory, this option is under consideration. Such questionnaires have the potential to collect information on outcomes and impacts of the UCS and set a useful basis for further developments of tools for regular data collection.

Box 3. The "3P" Monitoring system in Trento for the Provincial Civil Service

The Three-Point (abbreviated to 3P) Monitoring is the digitalised monitoring system in Trento's civil service. Its objective is to accompany the UCS activity with the aim of continuous improvement.

Monitoring of local project operators (OLPs)

The OLPs must organise a monthly meeting with volunteers to check progress of activities, analyse the learning process, and discuss proposals for improvement. They also fill in the following digital tools:

- Standard monthly OLP report: eight questions in the form of a check list (on specific training, the monitoring meeting, volunteer's electronic attendance register, evaluation of the project's progress), completed in three minutes.
- Mid-Project OLP Report: five sections (on the coherence between project proposal and implemented activities; OLP efficiency; OLP satisfaction; impact on the entity; improvement) with a total of 29 questions. The report helps to make any corrections along the way.
- Final OLP report on project progress: five questions (on project implementation; results achieved; effectiveness – or not – of the projects and reasons behind it; relationship between the project and the entity's activity; any proposals for redesigning). The report gives an assessment of how the project has progressed and whether it should be replicated.
- Final OLP Report on the participant: seven questions (on the activities carried out by the volunteer; his/her contribution to the realisation of the project; his/her maturation; the technical and transversal skills acquired; indications to the volunteer for the development of the work and citizenship dimension; the reporting of skills related to active citizenship acquired during the project). The report provides an evaluation of the volunteer's participation in the project.

Monitoring of UCS volunteers

Volunteers in service must fill in several different forms depending on the month of the project:

- At the end of the first month, they complete the initial diary form to assess the placement phase.
- Halfway through the project, the mid-project questionnaire is sent by the civil service office.
- At the end of the project, the end-of-service questionnaire is sent to them by the same office.
- In the other months, they complete the "Standard diary form".

After all the forms have been completed by the volunteers, the system sends an email with the content just entered, which must be forwarded to the responsible OLP.

Source: Authors based on project website: https://servscup.wordpress.com/2020/08/29/monitoraggio-3p-cose/.

Only some monitoring data are collected in the UCS central database

The monitoring efforts for the UCS are collated in different datasets belonging to the central database "*Helios"*; including:[10]

- A primary dataset, part of the Single IT system, used by the UCS to collect and manage data related to volunteers, projects, and participating organisations.
- Accredited entities dataset, storing information about the host entities participating in the UCS.
- Project dataset, including information on the call, evaluation, and approval.

As they belong to the same database, the above datasets are fully interoperable. The data primarily support administrative reporting. Yet, the possibilities to conduct analyses on the UCS outcomes and impacts – also from a longitudinal perspective – based on these data are scarce, because UCS monitoring efforts mainly focus on inputs, activities, and outputs (see "Setting SMART indicators based on UCS ToC").

Recommendation 3: Systematically structure monitoring activities

Data collection, treatment, aggregation, and reporting efforts within the UCS can become more effective and efficient if they are systematically structured and managed along the ToC and across all entities. Therefore, **it is recommended that UCS authorities systematically structure monitoring activities.** In this context, fit-for-purpose IT tools and systems represent a precondition for data collection. In this process, UCS authorities are advised to:

- **Ensure co-ordination of UCS M&E activities** through a clear governance system. Central co-ordination ensures consistency and homogeneity in data collection methods, instruments, and reporting requirements across all dimensions and actors of the UCS. As M&E tasks are identified more in detail, the roles and responsibilities for data gathering and management – within the UCS and at the entity level – should be identified accordingly, to make sure that all actors involved contribute M&E efforts in the most constructive way.
- **Prepare indicator fiches or a summary table of the set of indicators** to facilitate effective data collection, detailing each indicator's name, its description/rationale, data collection methods/tools/sources, the level of disaggregation, and the frequency of data collection.
- **Ensure that enhanced tools, such as unified data collection tools, are implemented across all entities/programmes/projects**. A first example would be the standardisation of the mandatory questionnaires for volunteers and OLPs, which could also include questions on outcomes and impacts.
- **Explore agile systems for the administration of such questionnaires** (i.e. through a mobile app). Entities should be given the choice to use these tools in addition or in replacement of their usual monitoring tools and to explore technical compatibility between them. The use of IT tools that are compatible with data processing needs should be prioritised. While open-source tools have advantages, ensuring compatibility and functionality for data management, treatment, analysis, and reporting should take precedence.
- **Store data in a central system**, following such structured approach to data collection, in order to prevent the dispersion of information across different levels of the UCS. Opportunities for interoperability and links to complementary administrative databases could also be considered.
- **Recognise the sensitivity of data treatment and consider data protection and privacy regulations** while enhancing data collection. Accordingly, protocols should be established to protect sensitive data, ensuring compliance with relevant laws and regulations.
- **Implement a quality assurance system** to ensure data reliability and consistency.

5 Establishing an evaluation plan

Complementarily to monitoring, the evaluation function seeks a clear understanding of the changes induced by the intervention and aims to form judgements on the intervention's performance. Evaluation evidence can: i) support decision making on competing alternatives, offering insights into which types of interventions prove more successful in attaining desired outcomes; ii) improve decisions on resource allocation by identifying the most effective and efficient types of intervention; iii) foster agreement on the causes of and solutions to a problem by illustrating causality; iv) detect emerging problems, including issues that may have not been covered in the intervention design and may require attention of policy makers; and v) support public sector reform, informing citizens on the effectiveness of reform efforts (Kusek and Rist, 2004[24]).

In the case of the UCS, the evaluation function will be crucial to complement the monitoring efforts on UCS outcomes and impacts. Evaluation could also be useful to understand if the processes and mechanisms of the UCS are functioning as expected. Depending on their information needs, UCS authorities would need to define evaluation questions, to be answered through appropriate evaluation methods and designs. Evaluations should be proportionate and appropriate for their expected use, and the aim, scope and analysis of the evaluation, as well as its format and resources, should be adapted to the needs of its intended uses (OECD, 2022[3]). Examples of evaluation questions for the UCS could encompass:

- What is the impact of the intervention on UCS volunteers and the territories?
- Does the intervention reach and affect different people in different ways? How effective is it for specific groups of young people?
- How are UCS initiatives contributing to specific transversal issues (e.g. gender equality)?
- Are there any unexpected effects generated by the intervention?
- What types of interventions are best contributing to the desired change? Could the outcomes be achieved through different approaches?
- How effective are the training modules?
- What are the key regulatory barriers to UCS implementation?

Evaluation efforts need to be planned early (to ensure that evaluation results are robust and available in a timely fashion) and strategically (to meet multiple evaluation needs) (OECD, 2022[3]). An evaluation plan is the strategic and management document used to summarise the approach to evaluation and to guide the evaluation efforts along the cycle of an intervention, taking into account the purpose, evaluation questions, evaluation type and timeline (for more information on evaluation types and timelines (see for instance UNDP (2009[40])). The plan can be updated by authorities as new evaluation needs emerge.

Evaluations can be designed and conducted internally or externally, but externally commissioned evaluations can ensure higher objectivity and independence. Various evaluation types suit different questions and purposes; ensuring clarity when commissioning such exercises to external evaluators will be a prerequisite for the usefulness and relevance of evaluation exercises.

Existing evaluation exercises on the UCS are scattered

Evaluation evidence on the UCS is scattered but increasing. Formal evaluation activities on the UCS at the DGSCU level are limited, but additional evaluation evidence has been produced by INAPP and at a programme/project level. The list below includes a non-exhaustive overview of analyses and exercises that create a first basis of evidence on the effectiveness of the UCS.

Formal evaluation activities on the UCS at the DGSCU level are limited but increasing

LD 40/2017, in its Article 21, mentions that the evaluation of results of UCS programmes in the territories and the local communities concerned is the subject of a specific annual report prepared by the Prime Minister's Office, with possible support from third-party organisations with proven expertise in the field, and published on the official website (Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana, 2017[6]). Nonetheless, there is no evidence of formal evaluation activities of the UCS having been conducted so far. Evaluation evidence on UCS contribution to the desired change is limited and an evaluation plan for the UCS is currently not in place. Therefore, the main report at a central level remains the relation to the Parliament (DGSCU, 2021[22]), whose function mainly relates to monitoring.

It is nonetheless important to note that the DGSCU has conducted some *ad hoc* exercises to collect information on the outcomes of the UCS on the young volunteers:

- In 2021, the Minister for Youth Policies requested the public consultation "Growing Youth, Growing Italy" (*Far Crescere i Giovani, Far Crescere l'Italia*). Although not an evaluation exercise, the survey allowed to obtain information from UCS volunteers who had been/were in placement, with the aim to improve the UCS. Conducted online in 2021, the survey involved 14 500 young people, asking about their knowledge of UCS objectives and the usefulness of UCS for youth empowerment (DGSCU, 2021[38]). The consultation revealed, among others, that:
  - More than 65% of respondents were overall satisfied with their UCS experience.
  - The main reasons to participate in the UCS was the desire to challenge themselves, enriching their CV and starting a new experience.
  - More than 60% of respondents were interested in pursuing a job in the same sector of activity as their UCS placement.
  - 40% believed that the period of service was useful for their personal growth.
  - 80% of young people saw the UCS as a way to approach the world of work and considered it essential to receive a certificate of competence at the end of the experience.
- In addition, the DGSCU has been administering new end-of-placement questionnaires (see "Setting SMART indicators based on UCS ToC" and "Planning for the collection and processing of data") on volunteer's satisfaction, collecting relevant data on UCS outcomes and impacts.

The INAPP project on M&E of the UCS provides a rich basis of analysis on the previous version of the Civil Service (National Civil Service)

The most systematic analysis and evaluation activities on the UCS are carried out by National Institute for the Analysis of Public Policies (INAPP), which has been aiming to strengthen the knowledge base related to the monitoring, evaluation and profiling of the volunteers involved in the National/Universal Civil Service.[11] With funds from the European Social Fund in the context of the Youth Guarantee initiative of the European Commission, INAPP promoted a methodological experimentation with two innovative multidimensional indices on active citizenship (built around the dimensions of democratic values, community life, and protest and social change) and employability (built around the dimensions of education, work experience, activation, and mobility). The data for the indices were collected through a

nationwide sample survey to 3 500 National Civil Service volunteers (run in 2016), which were linked to administrative data allowing to follow their employment status over time,[12] and complemented with information collected through additional consultations (interviews/focus groups). This research contributed to providing, among others:

- Information on the profiles of participants and their background, divided between "standard profile" and "NEET profile" and the identification of their family background (De Luca, 2022[29]).
- Measurements and analyses of outcomes and impacts (De Luca, 2023[15]; De Luca and Ferri, 2021[16]; De Luca, 2023[17]):
  - Identification of volunteers' motivations to join the UCS, the level of satisfaction related to the experience, its perceived usefulness, its re-orientation effect (i.e. making new education/professional choices as a consequence of participating in the UCS), and skills and competences acquired through the experience (based on volunteers' self-assessments).
  - Evidence of a positive correlation between active citizenship for employability, and of UCS effects on employability (mobility and activation). For instance, research finds that the level of employability of the UCS volunteers after the placement increases on average by 12%, while the share of "inactive" youth is drastically reduced. Moreover, interviews to a sample of volunteers show that, 12-18 months after the end of the experience, 52% of those interviewed who had participated to the SCU under ordinary calls were in employment.
- Policy messages and recommendations, such as for instance (De Luca, 2023[15]; 2022[41]):
  - The need to consider the gender and geographic dimensions of the UCS: women seem to choose SCU as a post-graduate experience, while men mainly do so to reactivate into the labour market; and UCS volunteers from southern regions have more disadvantaged family backgrounds and lower educational levels compared to those from central-northern Italy.
  - The need to pay attention at the candidate selection phase, to avoid benefiting well-performing profiles to the detriment of more disadvantaged young people, while ensuring project quality for the territories.
  - The potential to capitalise the UCS experience while designing other youth policies, given the relevance of UCS dimensions of "Participation" and "Active Citizenship" for youth employability.
  - The importance to move beyond employability as an abstract concept and start measuring it as a policy outcome.
  - The need to understand the UCS contribution to employability and other outcomes in comparison with other public interventions supporting young people.

The research provided an important evidence base for policy making, including for the 2023-25 three-year plan for the programming of the UCS (DGSCU, 2022[23]). Evidence of INAPP research was also shared with the *Consulta* and in dissemination material on the UCS[13] and received wide media coverage overall. Nonetheless, there is no information on how systematically INAPP results are considered in UCS programming, as also highlighted by the limited dissemination of INAPP reports on the UCS website.

It is important to note that the data collected by INAPP relate to previous versions of the Civil Service – i.e. prior to the latest provisions included in LD 40/2017. Looking ahead, this experience could be capitalised for the analysis of the current version of the UCS, including specific aspects that followed the 2017 reform, such as the multi-year planning or the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the UCS.

Evaluations at a sub-UCS level (programme/project, entity or territorial level) are rare

Desk research shows that only a few entities have carried out *ad hoc* evaluations or assessments of their interventions. Key examples show a positive impact of UCS actions on volunteers' employability and skills:

- An *ad hoc* analysis of UCS projects conducted under Centro Servizi Volontariato Torino (*Vol.To*) in 2019 (Brescia, Caria and Mapelli, 2020[42]) investigates the social impact achieved by the UCS, based on volunteer data collected through questionnaires, storytelling, reclassification of economic and financial data and the determination of Social Return on Investment. The analysis identifies a positive social impact on volunteers, including enhanced employability and skills development. A following study expands the evidence through a social impact assessment of *Vol.To* projects of the 2020 call (Calandra et al., 2023[43]), showing that despite no significant change in perceived self-efficacy, SCU enhanced human capital and employability; led to increased employment; fostered skill acquisition, career orientation, and networking, contributing to reduced precarious work; and aligned with the Agenda 2030 goals.
- An AnciLab survey of 3 276 volunteers and former UCS volunteers looks into youth policies that young people consider most important and explores various topics about UCS volunteers, including gender differences, the impact on education on employability and the representation of diverse groups of young people among volunteers. The research confirms the role of the Civil Service as a tool for acquiring skills and supporting youth employability (AnciLab, 2022[44]).
- A survey conducted by Associazione Mosaico (2022[45]) among UCS volunteers from the 2022 call in the Lombardy region showed that 73% of those who completed the UCS received a job offer within 5 months, and 88.5% of them accepted the offer. 52% of these young individuals considered the UCS experience as either significant or highly important in triggering the job offer.
- An impact assessment on former volunteers hosted by social co-operatives belonging to Confcooperative – conducted by CEVAS and Confcooperative (Leone and De Bernardo, 2017[46]) – shows that more than half of former volunteers continued to work in the non-profit sector after the National Civil Service experience, and therefore supports the idea that the UCS can be a powerful point of attraction and entry into the labour market. The analysis also highlights the role of entities and their networks for the employment opportunities of volunteers.

Most of the evaluations available at this level belong to entities from the third sector – given that, as required by the Third Sector Code, entities must produce a report on their Social Balance Sheet. Since these evaluations are scattered and mainly limited to third sector entities, extrapolating their conclusions at the UCS level is not possible. Expanding the body of project evaluations to all project and entity types would benefit learning and improvement at the UCS level.

At the same time, reasons for the lack of evaluation exercises by other entities may include their costly nature and the lack of evaluation competences among key stakeholders. In this respect, the evaluation culture and practice at the entity level should be better supported and encouraged (see “Strengthening human, financial, and institutional capacities, mechanisms and policy learning”).

Recommendation 4: Define a forward-looking evaluation plan, allowing for evaluations throughout the programme cycle

In order to manage evaluations effectively and maximise their usefulness, **it is recommended that UCS authorities develop a feasible evaluation plan** considering theoretical, practical, organisational, and budgetary aspects (European Commission, 2021[25]). UCS authorities are advised to specify the following elements in the plan:

- **Subject and rationale**: Evaluation’s purpose, background, and type, including key evaluation questions. Specific questions can be detailed further at a later stage, for instance in the evaluation’s Terms of Reference. Among others, of relevance for the UCS would be the analysis of the UCS impact on UCS volunteers’ personal and professional growth, active citizenship, and employment after the placement, as well as the evaluation of different UCS actions on the territories and sectors.

- **Methods and data requirements**: Depending on evaluation type and questions, different methods will be employed to exploit and complement the monitoring evidence. Given the heterogeneity of the UCS programmes/projects, evaluation exercises will most probably require a mix of qualitative and quantitative information. Counting with a robust monitoring system will provide valuable data for evaluation purposes and optimise the efforts for the collection of additional data.
- **Data availability**: Arrangements to ensure necessary datasets are accessible for specific evaluations (e.g. when using counterfactual methods). Systematic and timely data collection is key, given the risk of higher costs and lower accuracy of data collected retrospectively. Ensuring that UCS data are collected regularly at the level of the candidates/volunteers is a prerequisite for successful evaluation.
- **Roles and responsibilities**: Clear definition of roles and responsibilities of the actors involved in the evaluation, including evaluation team members, stakeholders, and participants. This decision also involves the choice between internal and external evaluation. These aspects are relevant in consideration of LD 40/2017, Article 21, stating that the evaluation of UCS results in the territories and local communities could be supported by third-party organisations with proven expertise in the field (Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana, 2017[6]).
- **Timeline and milestones**: Schedule that includes key milestones and deadlines for each phase of the evaluation, from data collection to reporting. The milestones and deadlines should be related to the evaluation subject and methods.
- **Estimated budget**: This element is tied to the methods chosen and the duration of the evaluation service.

In addition, the DGSCU could also consider supporting evaluation practice at a programme/project level, for instance by providing guidance and training on evaluation to entities; raising awareness on the importance of such exercises; and making considerations on the potential allocation of funds to support the evaluation practice (see also section “Strengthening human, financial, and institutional capacities, mechanisms and policy learning”).

6 Communicating and disseminating UCS progress and results

Effective communication and dissemination of M&E results to key stakeholders ensures that evidence of performance is publicly available and, therefore, promotes greater utilisation for evidence-based policy making (OECD, 2020[47]; 2022[3]). Thus, M&E findings need to be made available to their intended users.

Hence, policy makers should strategically plan the use of M&E results to communicate progress and changes brought about by the intervention. A comprehensive communication and dissemination strategy should address critical questions, including a) who the intended recipients of the information are, b) in what format the information should be delivered, and c) when it should be made accessible.

Disseminating findings from M&E functions can take diverse forms, from periodic written reports to real-time dashboards or dedicated repository websites. Regardless of the chosen format, it is important to:

- Present evidence clearly and succinctly, highlighting the most relevant information. More detailed information can be provided separately if necessary.
- Ensure that the evidence is tailored to the specific needs of the target audience. If multiple audiences are involved, evidence should be tailored to suit each one.
- Provide necessary information to establish the context where the findings were generated, making it easier for stakeholders to understand the results.
- Prioritise comparisons of performance data over time, as they are crucial to identify trends and assess progress, in addition to specific quarterly or yearly findings.
- Acknowledge that key decision-makers may require recommendations alongside findings, in order to identify potential actions. Alternative options and their implications for addressing performance findings may also be of interest.
- Organise findings and recommendations in line with the results chain and its indicators.

There is scope to integrate M&E information in UCS communication activities

Like many other OECD countries, Italy has been creating rules to encourage data openness and transparency in the public sector. For instance, the Open Data Directive (EU) 2019/1 024 was transposed into Italian law through LD 200/2021, with the objective of increasing the amount of public sector data available for re-use, ensuring fair competition and easy access to public sector information, and enhancing cross-border innovation based on data. Similarly, Italy launched its Fifth National Action Plan (5NAP) for Open Government 2022-23, pledging to increase transparency and promote inclusive digital innovation. Italy also committed to the public monitoring of the NRRP funds (Open Government Partnership, 2022[48]).

Despite this legal framework, information from M&E activities on the UCS is mainly shared by publishing the report to the Parliament on a section of the DGSCU's website called "UCS in numbers".[14] Additionally, the website provides a glimpse of the UCS as "UCS in real time", by giving the number of volunteers in placement, owner entities, host entities and implementing sites.

Given the significant efforts made by the DGSCU to communicate and distribute information about the overall implementation of the UCS, there is substantial room for improving the communication of M&E results beyond the monitoring report.

Recommendation 5: Strengthen M&E communication efforts through existing and new channels

It is recommended that UCS authorities strengthen M&E communication efforts through existing and new channels. In this process, UCS authorities are advised to:

- **Use existing communication channels for communication on M&E activities and results**. The DGSCU could add M&E-related information to the existing communication and dissemination tools, such as posts on the websites of the UCS and Giovani 2030[15] (the digital platform for all young people, aged 14 to 35, residing in Italy, offering a centralised access point for young people to obtain key information on areas such as education, volunteering, employment, international initiatives, and culture), social media, and other promotional and dissemination material.
- **Create a dashboard with key UCS indicators.** Building a dashboard would enable communication of UCS progress by sharing real-time monitoring data, providing stakeholders with an overview of progress in UCS implementation, outputs, and outcomes. The dashboard could be incorporated in the "UCS in numbers" section of the DGSCU website,[16] which currently lacks graphical representations of UCS data and only refers to the written report to the parliament. As a starting point, this task could be piloted with a selection of indicators already in use, until a more comprehensive M&E system is defined.
- **Develop an open repository of M&E information and evidence**, centralising all relevant evidence, research and M&E reports on the UCS – from annual reports to evaluations. This repository could be included as a specific item in the drop-down menu "Servizio Civile" of the DGSCU website.

7 Strengthening human, financial, and institutional capacities, mechanisms and policy learning

The M&E function requires resources and technical capacity

Building and maintaining a monitoring system requires appropriate mechanisms and financial, human, time, and technical resources (Kusek and Rist, 2004[24]; OECD, 2022[3]). This requirement extends to both the UCS and the specific entities involved.

Technical capacity must encompass the ability to construct indicators, collect and process relevant data, consume, and translate M&E information and results. It also requires statistical and IT know-how. Building such capacity within government structures, but also in smaller entities, is a long-term effort. On some occasions, external technical assistance and training may be required to aid in these tasks. Such support should strengthen government and entities' capacities to create, implement, and use indicators and data.

Making use of M&E results is vital for improving effectiveness, which is why it is fundamental to foster learning within and between organisations. Such learning would allow the UCS and other entities to adjust their objectives, structures, and processes, and improve interventions accordingly. Mutual learning also encourages inclusive ownership, promotes locally-led problem solving, and guarantees sustainability.

Human resources available for M&E in the DGSCU are currently limited, due to a general shortage of staff and an insufficient organisational structure, which make it impossible to have staff exclusively allocated to the M&E function. The situation varies at the entity level. The size and type of entities are important factors to consider, as the staff in smaller organisations may have to carry out multiple activities with lower options to specialise in specific functions, such as M&E. On the other hand, larger entities often count with advanced internal M&E structures. These differences do not necessarily reflect the quality of the overall programmes/projects themselves.

Recommendation 6: Strategically invest in institutional capacity and policy learning

In order to strengthen the M&E function, **it is recommended that UCS authorities strategically invest in institutional capacity and policy learning.** In this process, UCS authorities are advised to:

- **Allocate sufficient human, financial and technical resources for M&E activities** by:
  - Strengthening M&E capacities at the UCS level: for the deployment of a comprehensive M&E, the DGSCU would benefit of a specific team dedicated to the M&E function, endowed with sufficient human and financial resources.

  - Strengthening M&E capacities at the entity level: the UCS could consider allocating a specific budget for entities to conduct quality M&E activities.
  - Allocating specific funds in the UCS budget for the implementation of the evaluations (preferably, by external experts), as per evaluation plan when available.
- **Strengthen awareness, institutional capacity, and use of M&E for policy improvement**, supporting a cultural change. The M&E should not be seen as a mere "tick-box" exercise but as a commitment to learning and adapting. In this respect, it will be important for the DGSCU to:
  - Develop guidelines, training materials, webinars, and other relevant tools to raise awareness and enhance the institutional and technical capacity for the deployment of M&E activities and the use of related evidence both at the UCS and at the entity level.
  - Consider seeking technical/expert assistance and establishing collaborations with M&E experts to support the processes of i) upgrading and expanding the UCS M&E system, and ii) selecting specific actions to implement the recommendations provided in this report in the short- and in the longer-term.
  - Establish follow-up mechanisms to respond to the results of evaluations, by defining a course of action where relevant, and assigning responsibilities for implementing and tracking recommendations (OECD, 2022[3]).
- **Facilitate policy learning and promote knowledge-sharing among UCS stakeholders.** The dissemination of M&E results, coupled with the exchange of experiences, innovative solutions, and best practices, can significantly enhance accountability, efficiency, and effectiveness of the UCS. To harness these benefits, UCS authorities could consider creating a community of practice as a forum for policy learning and M&E. Such community of practice could take the form of regular virtual meetings, providing a dynamic space for UCS entities to engage in peer-to-peer learning and collaborative discussions. By doing so, it would also facilitate bottom-up contributions, so that insights from entities are shared and potentially integrated into policy improvements. Community of practices are becoming increasingly common in the M&E function. Examples are available in the literature and in methodological repositories – see for instance Serrat (2017[49]) or the BetterEvaluation knowledge platform (Better Evaluation[50]).

8 Conclusions and recommendations

Comprehensive results-based Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) systems are a key public management tool that can help policy makers track progress and demonstrate the impact generated by a specific intervention. They can assist in setting and co-ordinating policy goals, identifying promising practices, detecting weaknesses, and designing corrective actions. M&E systems are a crucial tool to promote transparency and accountability of policy making.

Monitoring and evaluation are separate but complementary practices. Although there is not a unique way to design and implement a results-based M&E system, some basic and necessary steps have to be considered, including: outlining the intervention logic, setting indicators and data collection systems, planning for evaluation, and reporting and dissemination of findings. Such processes must be supported through well-functioning institutional mechanisms and sufficient capacities to conduct M&E activities.

Based on overall guidance and best practices in building results-based M&E systems, this report provides a general assessment of the M&E elements in Italy's Universal Civil Service (UCS). It highlights the strengths of the system currently in place, identifies gaps, and suggests areas for improvement.

Overall, the report comes to the following main conclusions:

Regulatory and programmatic documents inform on key elements of UCS' Theory of Change, but a complete development of the policy logic and results chain is lacking. The UCS has existed for a long time and its nature has evolved over time. Key information on the current intervention logic of the UCS is provided in Legislative Decree 40/2017 and other programmatic documents, as well as the annual reports to the parliament. However, an official and comprehensive description of the UCS' Theory of Change has not been elaborated. Therefore, the UCS current framework does not make it explicit why and how the UCS actions and transformational goals are expected to contribute to the identified outcomes, and eventually generate the desired impact.

Important monitoring efforts are dedicated to tracking UCS implementation, but evidence on UCS outcomes and impacts is limited. The UCS monitoring covers a managerial function via descriptive indicators collected on a regular basis, allowing for comparisons over time. The key indicators used to monitor the UCS at the central level are included in *Helios*, the main database of the UCS, and presented in the annual report to the parliament. While the UCS regularly monitors implementation focusing on inputs, activities, and outputs, it does not systematically monitor UCS performance in terms of outcomes and impacts. Moreover, the UCS currently does not have a comprehensive description of its monitoring system and indicators.

The Department of Youth Policies and Universal Civil Service and entities conduct monitoring activities on their interventions, but monitoring is sometimes seen as a formality, and only some information is aggregated at a central level. At the UCS level, monitoring primarily comprises inspections, centralising entity data on programme/project implementation, and preparing annual reports to the parliament. Central monitoring also involves monitoring the training provided to volunteers, ensuring compliance with legal requirements and guidelines. Entities are responsible for the implementation and monitoring of their programme/projects and the UCS currently does not impose a single, comprehensive monitoring system with pre-defined tools for data collection beyond basic data on implementation. As a result, tools such as questionnaire to volunteers – which play a crucial role to understand volunteers'

expectations and satisfaction, identify weaknesses to be improved and capture the UCS outcomes and impacts – vary across entities. This decentralisation has its merits in terms of giving autonomy to the entities given their specific characteristics and diverse missions, but risks dispersing valuable information and becoming a box-ticking exercise if entities are not sufficiently trained on the monitoring function and made aware of its importance. At the same time, the UCS is lacking specific tools to monitor changes that happen in the territories and communities thanks to its interventions. Such risks and limitations are amplified by the scarce human and financial resources dedicated to monitoring and evaluation at both the central and entity level.

There is growing interest in evaluation activities on the UCS, but evaluation evidence so far is scattered and not systematic. Evaluation evidence on the UCS is scattered. Formal evaluation activities on the UCS at the level of the Department of Youth Policies and Universal Civil Service are limited, with the positive exception of research by the National Institute for the Analysis of Public Policies on the previous edition of the intervention (the National Civil Service). The Department has recently started pilot actions through consultations and end-of-placement questionnaires to volunteers, taking significant first steps towards starting the collection of information on UCS outcomes and impacts. When it comes to individual programmes/projects, only a few entities (mainly from the third sector) have carried out *ad hoc* evaluations or assessments of their interventions. Since these evaluations are scattered and mainly limited to third sector entities, it is not possible to extrapolate their conclusions at the UCS level. Overall, a strong body of evaluation evidence on the UCS is currently lacking, also given the absence of a strategic plan for evaluation exercises.

Despite major communication efforts on the UCS overall, reporting and dissemination of M&E findings of the UCS is currently limited. Despite a legal framework that encourages data sharing and transparency, the dissemination of evidence gained through the monitoring and evaluation of UCS is mainly limited to the annual report to the parliament. While the UCS conducts rich communication and dissemination actions on the UCS overall, such actions do not embed information on M&E results in a systematic manner.

Key recommendations

Defining a comprehensive results-based monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system for Italy's Universal Civil Service (UCS) can help the Department of Youth Policies and Universal Civil Service and the entities involved in the implementation of UCS programmes/projects to track progress and demonstrate its impact, formulate policy goals, identify promising practices, detect weaknesses, and design corrective actions. Monitoring and evaluation systems are also a crucial tool to promote transparency and accountability of policy making. Various actions would be required to improve the current M&E efforts of the UCS and generate a comprehensive, formal results-based M&E system to systematically track progress and performance. Key recommendations towards this goal include:

1. Ensure a clear and shared understanding of UCS' Theory of Change (ToC), to be used as a reference for implementing UCS programmes/projects and as a basis for M&E activities. In this process, UCS authorities are advised to:

- Ensure that the development process of the ToC for the UCS is inclusive and participatory.
- Clearly identify specific elements under each component of the ToC and the subsequent links between these elements.
- Enumerate the assumptions behind the model.
- Accompany the visual representation of the ToC with a narrative description of each of its items.

- Regularly review and update the ToC as the UCS evolves and more evidence becomes available.

2. Follow the UCS' Theory of Change to identify SMART indicators along the results chain. In this process, UCS authorities are advised to:

- Consider the principles of "SMART" indicators.
- Select an optimal number of indicators, with a right balance between information needs and costs for the collection and processing of information and data.
- Ensure that indicators are available for each level of the ToC, covering inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, and impacts.
- Ensure that indicators are disaggregated according to key factors of relevance for the UCS.
- Ensure a longitudinal perspective in monitoring and evaluation, with indicators to be fed at different points in time.
- Ensure a good coverage of the target population, encompassing local project operators, young volunteers as well as young applicants who were not selected into the UCS, wherever relevant.
- Consider the possibility to apply an approach with core and specific indicators to better capture the effects of the UCS on the sectors, territories, and communities.
- Identify complementary outcome and impact indicators that could be of interest for collection through evaluation exercises.

3. Systematically structure monitoring activities. In this process, UCS authorities are advised to:

- Ensure co-ordination of UCS monitoring and evaluation activities through a clear governance system.
- Prepare indicator fiches or a summary table of the set of indicators to facilitate effective data collection.
- Ensure that enhanced tools, such as unified data collection tools, are implemented throughout all entities/programmes/projects.
- Explore agile systems for the administration of questionnaires.
- Store data in a central system.
- Recognise the sensitivity of data treatment and consider data protection and privacy regulations while enhancing data collection.
- Implement a quality assurance system to ensure data reliability and consistency.

4. Define a forward-looking evaluation plan, allowing for evaluations throughout the whole programme cycle. In this process, UCS authorities are advised to specify the following elements:

- Subject and rationale.
- Methods and data requirements.
- Data availability.
- Roles and responsibilities.
- Timeline and milestones.
- Estimated budget.

5. Strengthen M&E communication efforts through existing and new channels. In this process, UCS authorities are advised to:

- Use existing communication channels for communication on M&E activities and results.

- Create a dashboard with key UCS indicators.
- Develop an open repository of M&E information and evidence, centralising all relevant evidence, research, and M&E reports on the UCS.

6. Strategically invest in institutional capacity and policy learning. In this process, UCS authorities are advised to:

- Allocate sufficient human, financial and technical resources for M&E activities by strengthening M&E capacities at the UCS and entity level and allocating specific funds for M&E activities.
- Strengthen awareness, institutional capacity, and use of monitoring and evaluation for policy improvement through specific tools, technical/expert assistance, and follow-up mechanisms.
- Facilitate policy learning and promote knowledge-sharing among UCS stakeholders, for instance through the creation of a community of practice.

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Notes

[1] See “A short history of results frameworks” in OECD (2023[18]) for an overview of different approaches.

[2] For instance, the 2023-25 three-year plan for the programming of Universal Civil Service (DGSCU, 2022[23]) and its preceding versions, the calls for programmes/projects, and UCS description in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan – NRRP (Italian Government, 2021[11]).

[3] Existing research attempted to reconstruct the logic of the UCS prior to LD 40/2017 and to identify the links between its building blocks. See the National Institute for the Analysis of Public Policies (INAPP)’s surveys and analyses of the National Civil Service conducted in relation to “Occasional Surveys – Civil Service” (INAPP[55]).

[4] Canada Service Corps systematically collects data on participant age ranges, starting and end dates, whether the participant completed their placement, type of placement, planned and actual number of hours spent on service placement, hours spent on training, province or territory where the placement took place, social identity identifiers and education level of participant, among others (Canada Service Corps, 2023[51]). It also implements an anonymous post-participation survey collecting data on identity factors, motivations for joining the programme, appreciation of different aspects of the programme, skills development and impact of the volunteering opportunity on the person’s civic and community engagement as well as on the community (Gagliardi, Perez-Raynaud and Robinson, forthcoming 2024[54]).

[5] The French Service Civique regularly monitors indicators such as: number of volunteers by gender, skills/education level, labour market status, age, province, region and sector; quarterly flows; new volunteers by type of organisation; duration of the volunteering (completed/interrupted, including reasons for interruption); weekly hours of volunteering. Information extracted from the programme’s website at https://injep.fr/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Donnees-regulieres-2021_service-civique.xlsx. The Activity report template for accredited organisations to the French programme also includes sections on “Impact of the Civic Service” and “Learnings and observations” (Gagliardi, Perez-Raynaud and Robinson, forthcoming 2024[54]).

[6] The “40% clause”, introduced at the time of the conversion of Decree-Law No. 77/2021, as amended, into Article 2, paragraph 6-bis of Law No. 108/2021 – Annex Part 1, provides that the central Administrations involved in the implementation of the NRRP must ensure that at least 40% of the resources that can be allocated territorially, regardless of their financial source, are allocated to Italy’s southern regions.

[7] See an example from Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII: https://serviziocivile.apg23.org/questionario-italia/.

[8] See an example from the Marche Region: Questionario SCR Marche di inizio servizio Survey https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/KCHR5YJ.

[9] See an example from the Campania Region: Servizio Civile Regione Campania, http://serviziocivilecampania.it/questionario-volontari/.

[10] It should be noted that the UCS also needs to provide data for ReGiS (the central management system of the NRRP) or for other information requests that the DGSCU may receive.

[11] See ongoing INAPP project "Monitoraggio e valutazione del Servizio Civile Universale fra cittadinanza attiva e Occupabilità (PTA INAPP 2022-24)" (INAPP, n.d.[52]) and the surveys and analyses of the National Civil Service conducted in relation to "Occasional Surveys – Civil Service" (INAPP, n.d.[55]).

[12] The survey data were linked to the database of the Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs on Compulsory Communications (Comunicazioni Obbligatorie), which contains data on dependent employment. See 2023 report by the Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (2023[56]).

[13] See for instance DGSCU (2022[53]).

[14] www.politichegiovanili.gov.it/servizio-civile/servizio-civile-in-cifre/.

[15] https://giovani2030.it/.

[16] www.politichegiovanili.gov.it/servizio-civile/servizio-civile-in-cifre/.

Guidance for a Monitoring and Evaluation System for Italy's Universal Civil Service

Italy's Universal Civil Service (UCS) engages young people in volunteering activities that enhance practical skill development for employability, active citizenship, and personal growth. Through a joint project between the OECD, the European Commission, and the Department for Youth Policies, Italy aims to improve the design and implementation of the UCS. As part of the project, this report analyses the current monitoring and evaluation framework of the UCS and provides guidance for the development of a robust results-based Monitoring and Evaluation system to improve the system's ability to track progress and demonstrate impact.

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