

Impact evaluation of the projects implemented under the ALMA initiative

Impact evaluation report summary (updated)

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Summary

Evaluation aim, object, contracting authority and contractor

To aim of the Evaluation is to determine ALMA (Aim, Learn, Master, Achieve) initiative's actions on project participants and project beneficiaries; to assess the initiative's effect on participants' understanding of European identity and values; to evaluate how the principles of sustainable development were applied during project implementation; to determine the relevance, sustainability, and expected continuity of the investments; to carry out an economic efficiency analysis to assess whether the chosen initiative is economically advantageous compared with other possible alternatives; and to provide recommendations and conclusions.

Evaluation's scope consists of 28 projects under the ALMA initiative.

The evaluation was carried out by Smart Continent Management Institute at the request of ESFA.

Theory of change

The ALMA initiative projects under Evaluation are pilot in nature. Therefore, two contribution pathways are distinguished when formulating the Theory of Change. One pathway covers changes occurring at the level of individual projects; the other covers changes at the system level. The initiative aims to reduce the social exclusion of NEET youth by implementing a consistent cycle of activities – from partnerships and participant selection to mobility, further monitoring, and communication. At the individual level, ALMA contributes to increasing participants' skills, self-confidence, and opportunities for employment or return to education or training. At the system level, it strengthens the capacity of institutions to work with NEET youth, develops partnerships, improves methodologies, and increases the visibility of the initiative.

Evaluation methodology

The Evaluation was based on various data sources, including interviews with project beneficiaries (PB, 28), managing authorities (MA, 4), EC representatives (3) and ALMA coordinators (4), a participant survey (466 survey responses, 74,8% representativeness), project reports, monitoring data, communication material, secondary sources, and official statistics. The Evaluation used a complex set of methods, including reconstruction of the theory of change; semi-structured interviews; analysis of primary documents and secondary sources; creation of causal relationship diagrams; participant surveys and statistical analysis of their data; cost-benefit analysis; and case studies.

Evaluation of the visibility of the ALMA initiative

ALMA initiative communication effectively reached young people, social partners, and employers by combining social networks, live events, and local partner networks.

ALMA initiative communication effectively reached key target groups – young people (especially NEETs), social partners, and employers – through a multi-faceted and coordinated communication system. The dissemination of information was particularly successful when communication went beyond directly reaching young people and involved parents and local communities, which became an important factor in building trust and decision-making. This strengthened the legitimacy of the initiative and encouraged broader participation, especially in the regions.

Social media (e.g., Facebook and Instagram) was the most effective channel for reaching and engaging young people. Visual, authentic, and emotional content—participants' stories, videos, interactive formats—not only increased reach but also created a sense of community and trust in the initiative. Live events and partner networks complemented this communication, ensuring direct contact, dialogue, and access to information for socially vulnerable or less accessible groups. Traditional media, although less interactive, played an important role in strengthening ALMA's public image and institutional credibility at the national level.

Dissemination activities contributed to a significant increase in the visibility and recognition of the ALMA initiative. Compared to the initial stage, more target groups are able to identify the objectives of the initiative and understand its practical benefits. Young people's attitudes have changed from scepticism to viewing the program as a real opportunity for professional and personal growth, social partners have begun to integrate ALMA more actively into their activities, and employers increasingly view it as a tool for talent development and social responsibility.

Evaluation of the benefits, sustainability, and application of sustainable development principles in the actions under ALMA projects

Participants selected for ALMA projects were those who needed this intervention, and ALMA led to changes in their (re)integration into the labour or education system.

Appropriate selection of participants is a prerequisite for the benefits and effectiveness of the ALMA initiative. This intervention, which requires considerable investment, is effective when targeted at young people who need sufficiently individualised and comprehensive support. The ALMA pilot projects have provided valuable experience in selecting participants, which will be important when expanding the application of the ALMA model in the Member States.

According to the analysed profile of project participants, they often had a low level of education, limited or no professional qualifications, and weak links to the labour market. Most of them had little or no formal work experience. A significant proportion of participants were from marginalised and vulnerable groups, often experiencing social isolation and a lack of institutional support.

Based on the target group profile and monitoring data on successful participants (48,5% of all participants or 62,6% of those who completed all three project activities found employment or returned to the education system or training), it can be concluded that the participants selected for ALMA projects were those who needed this intervention and that ALMA has led to changes in their (re)integration into the labour or education system. This conclusion is supported by interview data from project implementers, which indicates that about 73% of participants would not have started working for a very long time without the ALMA project, and about 20% would have started working, but in jobs requiring lower qualifications than after the project. About 7% would have started working in the same job as after the project, only later.

Most projects achieved at least a 30% success rate among all participants in the project. Several projects managed to achieve a success rate of 90% or more.

PBs have gained more experience and expertise in working with vulnerable young people, which will improve the quality of their services in the future.

PBs have strengthened their experience and expertise in working with vulnerable young people, so it is likely that the quality of their services will be higher in the future. During the Evaluation, numerous examples were collected showing that the solutions, methodologies, and tools developed during the project are or will be applied in other contexts. The directions for the application of the methodologies and tools mainly include (a) new ALMA calls at national or regional level and the integration of the initiative into ESF+ programs, (b) making the ALMA model a permanent service in the public, private, or non-governmental sector, (c) implementing other projects with a similar target group.

The experience gained during the implementation of the projects not only strengthened competencies relevant to working with vulnerable young people but also contributed to the development of cooperation and management competencies. In addition, some project implementers note the reputational benefits and the addition of new specialists to their teams.

There are sufficient grounds to believe that the results achieved during the projects will be maintained and used in the future.

The results achieved during the implementation of the projects provide sufficient grounds for their preservation and future use. However, the continuity of results will vary from country to country, as some countries are integrating the ALMA model into regional programs and planning new calls for proposals, while in others, the sustainability of results will be limited to the level of participants and project implementers (and partners). At the level of project participants, their motivation, attitudes, and acquired skills and abilities create the conditions for the continuity of the progress achieved. It is also important that project implementers recognise the importance of continued support. Based on the survey, project participants have a positive view of the experience gained during the projects, and these assessments give reason to consider that the progress achieved will be sustainable. At the project implementer level, the sustainability of results depends on the organisation's commitment to continuing these activities, the partnerships formed, the methodological basis created during the projects, staff retention and the experience of success during the pilot projects. The implementation of these factors in the ALMA pilot call is sufficient to ensure the sustainability of the results achieved. In the external environment, the availability of financial resources, inter-institutional cooperation, political and systemic support, and synergies with other programs are important for continuity.

The partnerships established contribute to the sustainability of results in several ways. They ensure continued support for young people after mobility, expand the networks of employers and organisations that offer long-term employment and internship opportunities, and lay the groundwork for future joint activities. They also pave the way for planning ALMA calls at the national or regional levels, integrating ALMA into some ESF+ programs, incorporating ALMA principles into regional employment strategies, and ensuring the dissemination of knowledge and the continuity of good practices.

In most cases, project results are integrated into the long-term strategies of PBs or communities (regional). In a few cases, there is no direct integration of results into long-term strategies. In these cases, the results remained more at the level of internal learning and competence building, or a more detailed assessment is needed of how the ALMA model can be integrated with existing employment promotion programs.

Evaluation of the ALMA initiative's impact on participants' personal achievements and development

Through ALMA projects, participants have strengthened their professional skills and knowledge, which increases their employability.

81,4% of participants who completed all three stages of ALMA projects confirm that the experience gained has benefited their professional career and prepared them for the future. ALMA projects have contributed significantly to the growth of participants' professional competencies. Participants have acquired practical knowledge and skills that are directly related to their chances of finding employment. This confirms that the projects are an effective tool for strengthening young people's readiness for the labour market.

The implementation of ALMA projects has contributed to strengthening participants' personal skills, such as communication, problem-solving, and teamwork abilities, which creates more favourable conditions for their successful integration into society.

The results of the project participant survey indicate a significant impact of ALMA projects on participants' social skills. 87,3% of participants in all three stages of ALMA projects agree or strongly agree that this experience has strengthened their social skills. Participants confirm that ALMA projects have strengthened their teamwork and communication skills with different people. In addition, participants learned to feel more confident when asking for advice. Such an impact of the projects reduces social exclusion and strengthens young people's readiness to successfully integrate into the labour market or return to the education system.

ALMA project participants gained greater self-confidence, which motivates them to continue their education or find employment.

94,8% of respondents indicate that the ALMA project contributed to their personal growth. Going abroad was an important achievement in their lives. The experience gained during the project gives participants greater self-confidence. In addition, participants confirm that they have learned to adapt better to new environments and situations. These changes are important both for the personal success of the participants and for their professional lives. Also, project participants confirm the importance of mentoring. 83,9% of respondents agree that the assistance provided by mentors both in their home country and abroad helped them gain experience.

Participation in the ALMA project is an important experience for project participants.

Most participants describe their experience of participating in the ALMA project as one of the most important in their lives. Its importance is emphasised through three main prisms: personal growth and independence, professional development, and broadening cultural horizons and language learning. Almost all participants would recommend ALMA to others. They emphasise stepping out of their comfort zone, unique opportunities, self-discovery, and social connections. Only a small number of participants indicated that the experience was not useful or would only partially recommend it or not recommend it at all. This was most often associated with poor organisation, an unsuitable labour related experience location, living conditions, or a lack of support from mentors.

Evaluation of lessons learned from the ALMA initiative's implementation and the benefits for project implementers

The challenges of implementing ALMA revealed structural and methodological limitations in working with vulnerable NEET youth.

One of the most significant challenges in implementing ALMA was maintaining participant motivation and ensuring stable engagement. Many young people had negative experiences with institutions, low self-confidence, and limited

ability to participate in structured activities. Project implementers addressed these challenges through individualised plans, flexible activity organisation, informal activities, and mentoring, often based on building close, trust-based relationships. This approach gradually strengthened participants' engagement and reduced the risk of dropout.

However, heavy bureaucratic burdens and fixed budgets did not always allow for a rapid response to the individual needs of participants, especially when it came to financing unforeseen but critically important services. Different institutional work cultures, priorities, and data protection requirements hampered coordination, while intensive work with vulnerable young people increased the risk of staff burnout. Projects that invested in case management, regular communication, and team well-being achieved more stable and sustainable results.

ALMA projects reached a highly heterogeneous and often “invisible” target group.

ALMA projects reached a highly heterogeneous and often “invisible” target group – from motivated, but lacking opportunities, to completely isolated individuals facing psychosocial difficulties, addictions, or lacking contact with public institutions and valid documents. Such diversity among participants required considerable methodological flexibility and long-term, trust-based work.

Low levels of education and fragmented or non-existent work experience were significant structural barriers to integration, limiting participants' employment opportunities and self-confidence. In some initiatives, up to half of the participants were highly vulnerable young people, and their inclusion strengthened ALMA's transformative potential—organisations were encouraged to rethink their working methods, strengthen partnerships, and invest in additional services, thus creating the conditions for long-term social and professional reintegration.

Individualised and informal approaches were key to success in working with the target group.

Personal action plans and flexibility made it possible to respond to participants' individual needs and keep them engaged. Mentoring was especially helpful in building confidence and addressing self-esteem issues. Practical and experiential activities were the most effective in strengthening participants' readiness for the job market. Job interview simulations, CV workshops, language learning, and digital skills training reduced anxiety, increased self-confidence, and improved real employment opportunities.

Community and emotional security were essential conditions for any progress. Informal activities, group sessions, and encouraging interpersonal connections helped participants feel safe and accepted. Without these elements, the technical methods were not effective.

ALMA changed the attitude of project implementers towards success and working with vulnerable young people.

Project implementers began to evaluate success not only in terms of employment, but also in terms of small but significant changes – participation, self-expression, confidence. This led to more flexible evaluation criteria and greater attention to qualitative results. In addition, belief in the potential of participants and the importance of community has grown stronger. ALMA's experience has shown that even the most marginalised young people can change if they are provided with a safe environment and consistent support. Organisations have begun to build not only services but also communities.

Successful intervention requires time, rapport, and flexibility.

Maintaining motivation is a process in which patient trust-building is important. Traditional methods often proved ineffective, so it was necessary to apply experience-based models that involved participants in decision-making.

Early response to crises and emotional support reduced the risk of dropouts. Critical “tipping points” most often occurred during the first weeks of mobility. Projects with clear response mechanisms avoided losing participants.

Fixed rates limited the flexibility of social interventions.

The application of fixed rates in ALMA projects contributed significantly to reducing the administrative burden and clarifying financial planning. The PBs emphasised that this funding model allowed for more effective cost forecasting and reduced the complexity of reporting and administrative costs, especially when compared to detailed cost-based funding mechanisms. This was particularly important for smaller organisations with limited administrative capacity.

However, the fixed rates did not adequately reflect the actual costs and needs of working with vulnerable young people. Social inclusion interventions are characterised by high variability and a need for individualisation, so a standardised rate did not always allow for a quick response to unforeseen situations, such as the need for psychological assistance or additional mentoring time. In addition, fixed rates did not consider regional differences in the cost of living, service prices, and availability between different Member States or regions.

Due to these limitations, some PBs had to reallocate internal resources or limit the scope of interventions, which in some cases could have a negative impact on the intensity and quality of services. This is particularly relevant when working with the most vulnerable participants, who often require long-term, complex, and intensive support.

The Evaluation highlighted the suitability of a mixed financing model for social inclusion initiatives such as ALMA. The PBs recommended maintaining fixed rates as the main administrative mechanism but supplementing them with the possibility of compensating for clearly defined additional or unforeseen costs. Such a model would allow for a balance between administrative efficiency and the flexibility required for individualised interventions and would ensure greater social justice and more equal opportunities for participants, regardless of their level of vulnerability or region.

Evaluation of the ALMA initiative's relevance in EU Member States and of the elements required to ensure continuity

The ALMA initiative is an effective measure for the inclusion of vulnerable NEETs.

ALMA's holistic model, combining international mobility, mentoring, and individualised support, reaches young people for whom traditional employment measures are often ineffective. The initiative is clearly aligned with EU policies – the Youth Guarantee, ESF+ and the European Pillar of Social Rights – and complements existing youth employment measures.

The long-term impact of ALMA depends on institutional and political commitment.

Sustainable results can only be achieved when ALMA principles are integrated into national or regional policies, stable funding is secured, and clear institutional responsibilities are established. Where the initiative remains at the level of individual projects, its continuity remains limited.

ALMA has the potential to become a systemic tool, but its implementation across the EU remains uneven.

Following the pilot projects, seven Member States – Greece, Slovakia, Portugal, Spain (Andalusia and Valencia regions), Romania, Malta, and Italy (Emilia Romagna region) – have launched or are planning national or regional ALMA calls, demonstrating recognition of the initiative. However, the overall pace of development depends on political will and the ability to translate successful practices into long-term policy strategies.

Evaluation of the European and transnational dimension of the ALMA initiative

The ALMA initiative strengthens young people's European identity and civic awareness and promotes long-term systemic change.

Before participating in the project, a significant number of participants did not see the benefits of international experience or even thought that living abroad would be impossible for them. Before the project, 41,3% of respondents did not understand the added value of international experience, and 54,2% said they did not think that living abroad was a realistic option for them.

After ALMA, 76% of participants said that living abroad and interacting with people from other countries helped them feel more European. In addition, 77,2% of respondents clearly understood after the project the impact of the EU on their lives and social inclusion. This shows that the participants' European identity was formed not through declarations, but through everyday experiences – work, cultural contact, and independent living. Young people began to see the EU not as a distant political structure, but as a source of real opportunities that contribute to their personal growth, self-confidence, and social integration.

Evaluation of the economic costs associated with young people's non-participation in the labour market in EU Member States

If the target group were not included in the ALMA initiative, the state and society would incur costs and long-term economic and social losses.

If the target group were not included in the ALMA initiative, the state and society would incur costs and long-term economic and social losses. The estimated costs and long-term losses exceed the expenditure of the ALMA call by €6,1 million (in 2023 value). The losses mainly result from the uncreated added value of NEET youth, uncreated partnerships and methodological tools and competences. The losses of the state (regional and municipal) budgets due to social benefits would additionally amount to about €1,054 million.

The economic benefits of the ALMA initiative exceed its implementation costs.

The results of the cost-benefit analysis show that the benefits of the ALMA initiative outweigh its costs. The economic benefit-cost ratio is 1,57. In other words, the benefits exceed the costs by 57%. With the addition of final information from five projects, this indicator has the potential to increase. The factors that most determine the effectiveness of the ALMA intervention are the acquired competencies that lead to higher-skilled work than in the scenario without the intervention (wage gap), the number of successful participants, the number of participants in the three activities, and the long-term nature of the impact.

The structure of monetised benefits of the ALMA initiative shows that the impact is spread across different segments of the target group and is diversified. Such results provide analytical grounds to believe that the ALMA intervention would be cost-effective for society even if some parameters were partially worse than those used in the analysis.

Benefits related to work and studies/training were assessed and monetised. However, there are also other benefits related to the personal growth of the participants that are not assessed in monetary terms. For example, there are no monetised benefits that the participants gain because they have learned to adapt better in new situations, to be more confident, etc. These experiences undoubtedly create value for the participants' relationship with themselves, others and the world, and thus improve their quality of life.

Recommendations

Recommendations are provided that identify key issues for the ALMA initiative and individual projects to be sufficiently impactful, effective, and sustainable. Most of these issues have already been addressed in the projects evaluated. They are systematized so that they can be used in planning future projects:

- Maintain the ambition to apply the ALMA intervention to the most vulnerable NEETs who need sufficiently individualised and comprehensive support.
- Encourage EU Member States to consider applying the ALMA model when developing post-2027 programming policies.
- EU Member States with a high proportion of NEET youth should apply this model to support the reintegration of this group.
- When planning ALMA projects, focus on the long-term perspective of the participant and the competencies needed to get a job in a higher-skilled job and receive a higher salary compared to the scenario without intervention. Aim for a double impact on each participant – not only professional growth, but also personal.
- Promote cooperation between ALMA project implementers and local employment services, social service centres, non-governmental organisations and other organisations working with young people. This will ensure that the selection is evidence-based and that those most in need of ALMA intervention are selected. It is also recommended to ensure flexibility in the selection process in order to respond quickly to changes in young people's needs and to include those who are often left out of traditional programmes.
- Promote cooperation between NGOs, municipalities, education, health, and business sectors in projects.
- Maintain existing and implement new mentoring and psychosocial support models for project participants.
- The principles of non-formal education should be used during the projects. In addition, it is recommended to create opportunities for young people to be not only recipients of services, but also creators.
- It is recommended to consider a mixed financing model – combining fixed rates with contextual adjustment mechanisms and the possibility of substantiating actual costs in certain cases.
- In order to ensure that young people receive the right support and educational environment, it is necessary not only to formally establish partnerships, but also to actively participate in the process – to communicate regularly, visit the hosting institutions, assess their readiness, infrastructure, mentoring opportunities and working conditions. Such practice is important ensuring that the hosting organisations are ready to host vulnerable NEETs, have clear plans for their integration and can provide quality learning and work experience.
- Pay more attention to the identification and pre-assessment of accommodation conditions and the alignment of participants' expectations regarding accommodation.
- Plan activities for rest, reflection, and psychological hygiene, not just work and learning tasks for participants.
- Support and strengthen the staff of organisations implementing projects so that they are emotionally resilient when working with vulnerable young people.
- Prepare plans and preliminary scenarios for responding to extreme, critical situations.

- Organise information meetings for parents and consultations about the benefits of the project (especially mobility) and psychological preparation for the family. In this way, family members would be informed in advance about the activities carried out during the project, possible challenges and expectations, and the family itself would be better prepared to support the participant throughout the project implementation period.
- Projects should promote a mechanism that includes post-project meetings with participants, follow-up events (e.g. experience-sharing seminars, career workshops, mentoring programs), and individual support for those who encounter difficulties. It is recommended to involve local communities and employers so that young people have practical opportunities to apply the skills they have acquired. In addition, ongoing support should collect feedback to assess the long-term impact and respond according to real needs. Also, a longer follow-up phase could be considered.
- To further strengthen the results achieved, it is recommended to continue developing social media campaigns, as they have proven to be the most effective. The continuity of regional events would ensure long-term links with local communities, while the systematic involvement of partner networks would increase the accessibility and credibility of the initiative.
- Ensure the continuity of existing and proven schemes or institutions coordinating ALMA issues at EU level. Such a structure should continue to collect, systematise, and share the experience gained by EU Member States in implementing ALMA projects to maintain and strengthen the transnational expert and institutional cooperation links that have been established over more than a decade, especially in the last four years.

