

Executive summary

What we did

This publication examines the role that ex-post project evaluation can play in enhancing decision-making for future transport infrastructure investments. It presents the results of a Roundtable held in Paris in 2014, which brought together more than 20 experts from 12 countries to discuss the issues surrounding ex-post project assessment and review the experience with different approaches in a number of countries, with case studies from France, the United Kingdom, the United States and Spain at the core.

What we found

Ex-post analysis makes investment appraisal more accurate by validating the inputs to evaluation. Investigating past successes and failures not only improves the quality of appraisal for upcoming projects but enhances accountability. Ex-post assessment may also be critical to maintaining confidence in the value of project appraisal. It is now accepted that errors in traffic forecasts and cost estimates can be systematic rather than incidental. If left unaddressed, such errors can seriously undermine the value of ex-ante analysis.

Collecting detailed information on the impacts of interventions may also help us understand mechanisms beyond those captured in current appraisal methods and improve investment appraisal. Ex-post assessment can also contribute to understanding the impact of infrastructure investment on the economy, although it can be a methodological challenge to separate the net contribution of a transport project from a multitude of other relevant factors. At the same time advances in other areas of research such as the new economic geography, used increasingly to investigate potential economic impacts overlooked by standard transport sector cost-benefit assessment techniques, suggest an expansion of ex-ante evaluation methods may be necessary.

Many countries require ex-post evaluation of transport projects, however, few actually enforce this requirement. This failure is often related to a lack of dedicated funding for ex-post evaluation. Ex-post project evaluations can also be hamstrung by limited availability of relevant data.

For the ex-post analysis to have a good chance of success, the fleeting nature of data needs to be addressed. Data collection needs to be planned at the outset of a project, because post-hoc reconstruction of relevant data sets is often impossible. France has addressed this through the creation of transport observatories, established by law, which collect data, set benchmarks and publish audits of transport projects. Transport observatories have greatly improved data quality for major transport schemes. For the largest investments, a project-specific observatory is now set up at the same time as the project is approved.

In the United States, an online database with information on 100 projects allows decision makers to select a sample of similar projects to the one they are considering and access relevant information on the performance of those projects.

Ex-post evaluation can be applied even before a project is completed. If systematic data collection is put in place at the outset, an evaluation can be carried out at any point in time. In effect such evaluations can also help steer projects while they are still underway. In the United Kingdom, the National Audit

Office is tasked with reviewing the progress of major infrastructure projects and aims to counter project deficiencies as projects progress, reporting to relevant parliamentary committees.

What we recommend

Data collection for evaluation needs to be planned for from the outset

Much of the data needed for accurate assessment will not be available ex-post unless it is collected during planning, procurement, construction and early operating phases. Data collection can be facilitated by the technology used for pricing infrastructure and public transport use. The French permanent observatories have set a new standard for monitoring changes over the long periods for which major projects influence travel demand and territorial development.

Audit transport projects throughout the project stages

By monitoring planning, procurement and operational stages of projects, evaluation can provide those ultimately responsible for the project, such as a parliament, with up to date accounts of the management of the project by the responsible authority. Evaluation can highlight risks to successful project delivery and recommend changes when needed to reduce the risk of project delays or cost overruns.

Use independent organisations to carry out audits of transport projects

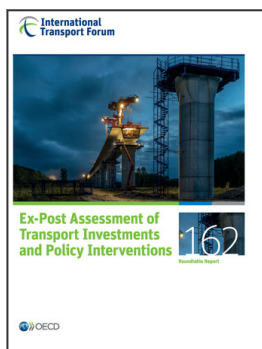
There is a strong case for ensuring that audits are carried out by an organisation independent of the project sponsor. An independent audit at an early stage in project planning and delivery reduces the risk of complications only becoming apparent when it is too late to take remedial action.

Recognise the variety of economic goals targeted by transport investments

Transport investment can be motivated by both short-term and long-term economic goals and by multiple combinations of land-use, employment and income growth goals. Evaluations should use methodologies that address the different goals and benefit streams sought. Case-study approaches to evaluation can help decision-makers understand which complementary policies (land-use planning, investment in skills and training, institutional changes, etc.) increase the likelihood of transport investments delivering their objectives.

Involve local partners in providing evidence on performance

Collecting the short-lived data needed to produce pertinent indicators of performance will often be facilitated by involving multiple local partners. This also strengthens public debate on the value of infrastructure investments and supports the primary goal of the ex-post evaluation that will always be to help prepare better ex-ante evaluations.



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