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Mid-Term Independent Evaluation of the Project Expanding Social Security to Support the Formalization of the Angolan Economy (ESSAFE)

QUICK FACTS

Countries: Angola

Evaluation date: 04 May 2026

Evaluation type: Project

Evaluation timing: Mid-term

Administrative Office: ILO-CO for the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, and Gabon

Technical Office: ILO-DWT for Cameroon, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Equatorial Guinea; ILO-SOCPRO

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DC Symbol: AGO/23/01/EUR

Donor(s) & budget: European Union (EU), \$5,348,654.30

Key Words: Social Security Schemes, formalisation, capacity building

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Summary of the project purpose, logic and structure	ESSAFE (Expanding Social Security to Support the Formalization of the Angolan Economy), a project implemented by ILO Angola (2023-2027) with European Union (EU) funding of €4.9 million, supports the transition from informal to formal employment through the expansion of contributory social security coverage and benefits in Angola. The project operates in a context marked by high informality rates and limited access to social protection, in which most workers remain outside the national social security system and public awareness of existing benefits is limited. Based on ILO Recommendations No. 202 and No. 204, ESSAFE supports policy development on employment and social security, strengthens INSS communication systems and digital services, reinforces technical capacities within public institutions, and supports consultation processes among government institutions and social partners. ESSAFE is part of a wider EU programme on economic formalization and social protection in Angola. Implementation is led by the ILO office in Angola in cooperation with MAPTSS, INSS, INE, INAPEM and MINPLAN (amongst others), together with employers' and workers' organisations.
Present situation of the project	ESSAFE started in July 2023 and runs until June 2027. At the time of the evaluation, two annual progress reports covering July 2023 to June 2025 had been produced, documenting project governance and coordination arrangements and the implementation of activities across the five outputs.
Purpose, scope and clients of the evaluation	The evaluation is intended to support decision-making during the remaining implementation period, strengthen accountability towards national stakeholders and the EU, and contribute to learning within the ILO and partner institutions. Its main users include government institutions, national tripartite constituents, the ILO, the EU, United Nations (UN) agencies, and organisations involved in social protection and economic formalization in Angola. The evaluation covers the period from July 2023 to December 2025 and assesses progress across the five project outputs at national and sub-national levels, including contributions to social dialogue, international labour standards, gender equality, non-discrimination, and disability inclusion.

Methodology of evaluation

The evaluation adopted a participatory and results-based approach aligned with ILO evaluation guidelines and integrated gender equality, human rights, disability inclusion, and social dialogue considerations throughout the process. It applied a mixed-methods design combining qualitative and quantitative data from primary and secondary sources, with triangulation across methods and stakeholder groups. Data collection included:

- Desk review of programme documents and external sources,
- 27 key informant interviews with representatives from the ILO, government institutions, employers' and workers' organisations, the EU, UN agencies, and partner institutions (10 women and 17 men), and
- 3 focus group discussions involving 21 participants in Luanda (10 women and 11 men).

Data collection took place through remote and in-person consultations between January and April 2026. Ethical standards, confidentiality, informed consent, and data protection requirements were applied throughout the evaluation. Two limitations affected the process. First, the project remains under implementation, which limited the assessment of longer-term results. Second, revisions to the project results framework reduced comparability with earlier reporting. These constraints were addressed through triangulation, adjustments to data collection tools, and the use of the revised theory of change and indicators.

MAIN FINDINGS & CONCLUSIONS

Relevance

→ **Finding 1:** ESSAFE demonstrates strong alignment with Angola's national development priorities, including national institutions priorities. National frameworks are explicitly referenced in the Description of Action (DoA) and informed the project's design and Theory of Change (ToC). At mid-term, the project remains relevant to ongoing national reforms on social security expansion, formalisation, digitalization, and financial sustainability. Implementation shows adaptation to institutional contexts, maintaining relevance. Alignment is strong with core government stakeholders, while for workers' and employers' organisations it is more limited and mainly reflected through participation in project-supported processes. Likewise,

alignment is strongest at central institutions level compared to provincial level.

- **Finding 2:** ESSAFE demonstrates strong strategic complementarity with national and international frameworks, namely the UNSDCF, SDGs, and successive ILO P&B cycles. The project addresses a gap within the UN system by focusing on the contributory dimension of social protection. Complementarity is strongest in relation to social protection outcomes, while contributions to formalisation and economic transformation remain, at mid-term, primarily indirect and policy-oriented, largely delivered through analytical work products. Emerging operational initiatives, such as the pilot with Grupo Carrinho (aligned with the EU's Global Gateway strategy), have the potential to strengthen ESSAFE's contribution to economic transformation through formalisation.
- **Finding 3:** ESSAFE's design is appropriate to address the structural challenges of extending social protection coverage in Angola. It adopts a comprehensive, system-level approach that targets key constraints in policy, institutions, and data systems. Its emphasis on upstream, policy-oriented and analytical interventions results in an indirect pathway to impact at mid-term, which results in limited visibility of tangible results for the transition of workers into the formal economy. While the design enables coordination, flexibility, and alignment with institutional priorities, its system-level approach creates trade-offs in terms of focus, stakeholder understanding, and perceived added value.

ESSAFE remains highly relevant within Angola's evolving social protection reform agenda, demonstrating alignment with national priorities, international frameworks and strategic orientations of key stakeholders. The project responds coherently to the main constraints affecting the expansion of social security through a technically appropriate, system-level approach. Its emphasis on upstream, policy-oriented interventions has produced relevant and technically robust outputs, but has limited the visibility of tangible results for workers, particularly beyond central institutions and outside Luanda. Maintaining relevance over the remaining of the implementation will require stronger articulation between upstream analytical work and more operational and visible interventions, as

well as clearer communication of results to a broader range of stakeholders.

Coherence

- **Finding 4:** ESSAFE demonstrates strong internal coherence with other ILO interventions and structures. It built on the foundations established by ACTION/Portugal, with a complementary division of labour and shared outputs supported by regular coordination, information-sharing, and cumulative learning. ESSAFE also benefits from technical backstopping from SOCPRO, ITC-ILO, the Decent Work Technical Support Team, and CO-Kinshasa, which strengthens technical quality and continuity. The closure of ACTION/Portugal may increase pressure on ESSAFE, particularly in maintaining linkages between contributory and non-contributory social protection and areas such as South-South cooperation that are less developed within ESSAFE. This highlights the need to clarify how ESSAFE will sustain these functions, particularly given the ILO's recognition of linkages between contributory and non-contributory social protection.
- **Finding 5:** ESSAFE demonstrates coherence with the EU-funded programme PREI, UNDP, and UNICEF at the design and strategic level, particularly due to ESSAFE's distinct focus on contributory social protection. At mid-term operational synergies remain underexploited with PREI. To strengthen coherence and reduce risks of duplication, ESSAFE could reinforce structured coordination with PREI actors.

ESSAFE demonstrates a coherent institutional positioning within the ILO portfolio in Angola, building on previous initiatives through continuity of technical support, cumulative learning and complementary areas of intervention. Coordination with ILO technical structures had reinforced consistency and technical quality across implementation. Coherence with EU-funded programmes and development partners is also well established, supported by a recognised niche in contributory social protection. At implementation level, however, operational synergies remain underexploited and largely dependent on informal collaboration mechanisms, which may limit continuity over time. Strengthening

structured coordination with key partners and reinforcing operational linkages with PREI would support greater complementarity across interventions and consolidate ESSAFE's contribution to the expansion of contributory social protection in Angola.

Effectiveness

- **Finding 6:** ESSAFE has made progress in delivering its planned outputs and strengthening the capacities of key national institutions. The project contributed to advances in the legal framework, social protection statistics and institutional collaboration, while also producing relevant tools and capacity building initiatives in communication, governance and digitalisation. However, the translation of these achievements into concrete results, particularly in terms of expanding contributory social security coverage, remains limited. Several interventions are still at the design or early implementation stage, and the uptake and use of technical outputs in policymaking and practice are not yet fully evident. While the project has strengthened the foundations for social protection expansion, tangible impacts on coverage are still emerging and will depend on the effective implementation and institutionalisation of its outputs.
- **Finding 7:** ESSAFE made a significant contribution to strengthening the institutional capacities of key beneficiary institutions, with the strongest results observed in INSS and INE.

ESSAFE has achieved solid progress at mid-term in delivering planned outputs and strengthening the capacities of key national institutions. The strongest results are visible in legal and policy reform, social protection statistics, institutional capacity development, and interinstitutional coordination. Important achievements include support to the ratification of Convention No. 102, the production of Angola's first Social Protection Statistical Bulletins, the consolidation of GITEPS, and capacity building initiatives involving INSS, INE, MAPTSS and ONE. Progress was also observed in communication, governance and digitalisation through technical assistance, training and the development of operational tools. Nonetheless, progress has been uneven across outputs, with some activities still at design stage

or early implementation. This is particularly the case for interventions with greater potential to contribute directly to formalisation and expanded contributory coverage. In addition, the use of some technical outputs in policy and operational processes is not yet fully evident.

Efficiency

- **Finding 8:** ESSAFE has used financial, human, and technical resources efficiently at mid-term. Execution rates are on track, and resources have been directed towards legal reform support, analytical work, and institutional dialogue and strengthening. The staffing model combines a core project team, with specialised technical backstopping from regional and headquarters experts, which has been proportionate and adequate to achieve the intended results. Efficiency has been systematically constrained by administrative inefficiencies and procurement delays linked to the arrangements between the project and the CO-Kinshasa. The opening of CO-Luanda opens the opportunity for faster administrative efficiency and operational decision-making, when administrative arrangements transit completely to the CO-Luanda.
- **Finding 9:** ESSAFE's management, coordination, and monitoring mechanisms have functioned effectively at operational level, by supporting adaptive management, institutional alignment, and transparent reporting. Strengthening efficiency may require resolving the gap between Technical Committee-level technical agreement and Steering Committee-level formal endorsement, operationalising the newly introduced monitoring survey, introducing intermediate outcome indicators, and strengthening outcome-level reporting to demonstrate the project's contribution to sustained institutional and social security system change.
- **Finding 10:** Activities and outputs have been delivered with generally good technical quality, but implementation timeliness is uneven. Progress is strongest in policy reform, training, institutional strengthening, and analytical outputs, while activities requiring inter-institutional coordination, formal

approvals, or counterpart-led implementation have experienced delays.

ESSAFE has used project resources efficiently: execution rates are consistent with the implementation period elapsed, resources have been directed toward priority outputs, and the staffing model has been proportionate to results achieved. Financial execution was stronger in technical assistance activities such as comparative studies, legal reform support, actuarial analysis, and institutional capacity building, and weaker where implementation depended on counterpart decisions, interministerial coordination, or external payments, such as the mediators' programme expansion and the National Journalism Prize. Administrative dependence on CO-Kinshasa has systematically affected recruitment, financial transfers, and output completion. At management level, the gap between Technical Committee technical agreements and Steering Committee formal endorsement, combined with limited participation of social partners, has reduced implementation speed, ownership, and visibility of results.

Sustainability and Impact (early signs)

- **Finding 11:** Across ESSAFE's strategic areas, early signs of impact are strongest in institutional strengthening, policy reform and national interagency coordination. Sustainability prospects are generally positive, especially for results that are integrated into existing systems and aligned with institutional priorities, although in some areas they are still emerging.
- **Finding 12:** There are limited but relevant early indications that ESSAFE is contributing to stronger foundations for formalisation and expanded social protection coverage in Angola. Despite this, measurable changes at population level cannot yet be attributed to the project.
- **Finding 13:** ESSAFE has demonstrated an ability to adapt to emerging risks through flexible management and adjustments to workplans. The project shows very limited unintended effects, with one notable positive effect being stronger interinstitutional coordination for social protection issues.

ESSAFE shows early signs of impact mainly through stronger institutions, improved policy processes and better coordination

between actors in the social protection sector. Effects on formalisation and expanded contributory coverage remain limited at mid-term. Sustainability prospects are stronger for results that are already embedded in national systems and institutional routines, particularly in legal reform processes, technical capacities and the production of social protection statistics. By contrast, initiatives that depend on continued external support, unresolved coordination arrangements or pending operational decisions face greater sustainability risks. ESSAFE has also shown flexibility in responding to implementation risks, although challenges linked to parallel initiatives remain unresolved. At mid-term, the project's main contribution has been to strengthen the conditions for future progress on formalisation and coverage.

Cross-cutting themes

- **Finding 14:** ESSAFE has effectively promoted international labour standards and embedded social dialogue as a core implementation approach, with the strongest and most visible results linked to Convention No. 102. Project interventions are also broadly aligned with the principles of Convention No. 144 and Recommendations Nos. 202 and 204.
- **Finding 15:** ESSAFE has effectively integrated social dialogue and tripartism as core implementation approaches. Gender equality has been incorporated with moderate results, while disability inclusion is more visible at design level than in demonstrated implementation results.

ESSAFE has integrated cross-cutting themes especially through the promotion of international labour standards and the systematic use of social dialogue mechanisms. Support to the ratification of Convention No. 102, together with broader alignment with other relevant ILO instruments, demonstrates a clear standards-based approach to reform and coverage expansion. Social dialogue has been consistently embedded in project implementation, and the participation of workers' and employers' organisations has remained stronger in consultation and validation stages. Gender equality has been incorporated with moderate results, while disability inclusion is more visible at design level than in demonstrated implementation

results. Further efforts to mainstream gender and disability dimensions would strengthen the project.

RECOMMENDATIONS, LESSONS LEARNED AND GOOD PRACTICES

Recommendations

R1 | Relevance & Efficiency: Prioritise actions that directly demonstrate results in supporting the transition of workers into the formal economy by leveraging existing policy and analytical work in the remaining implementation period. Scale targeted initiatives such as the Grupo Carrinho pilot to generate visible results on formalisation, and strengthen the visibility of private sector partnerships and alignment with the EU's Global Gateway strategy.

R2 | Coherence: Formalise strategic coordination with PREI around shared priorities on formalisation and social protection. Clarify roles and responsibilities between ESSAFE, PREI, and OEI; establish regular coordination with MINPLAN, ONE, and PREI technical structures.

R3 | Effectiveness: Prioritise and fast-track mature, implementation-ready interventions. Conduct a rapid internal prioritisation exercise, focus resources on high-impact initiatives (mediators' programme, social protection statistics, service delivery, digital transformation), set clear milestones, and reassess or deprioritise activities unlikely to be operationalised within the project period.

R4 | Effectiveness: Clarify ESSAFE's role in the digitalisation of INSS services. Agree with INSS and the technological partner on a clear division of roles, position ESSAFE as strategic/technical advisor, and ensure that existing ESSAFE technical outputs (service workflows, process redesign proposals) are formally reviewed and integrated into the ongoing digitalisation process.

R5 | Efficiency: Resolve administrative bottlenecks and improve decision-making between operational and strategic coordination levels. Fully transition administrative and financial processes to CO-Luanda (payment execution, procurement workflows), and prioritise resolution of long-pending outputs such as the Grupo Carrinho pilot, the strategy for the implementation of a social protection culture in Angola, and the National Journalism Prize.

	R6 Efficiency: Strengthen the participation of social partners in project implementation, monitoring, and results communication. Develop accessible reporting tools for social partners; expand reflection spaces; design targeted capacity building for workers' and employers' organisations; and support dissemination of project outputs within their constituencies. R7 Sustainability & Impact: Strengthen the institutionalisation and sustainability planning of key project processes and results. Develop a detailed exit strategy that promotes national resource allocation to sustain core functions (data production, interinstitutional coordination), defines transition arrangements with clear responsibilities and timelines, integrates key processes into existing institutional structures, and identifies sustainability risks with mitigation measures, particularly for GITEPS and the Social Protection Statistical Bulletin. R8 Cross-cutting theme: Adopt a more systematic approach to integrating gender equality and disability inclusion across project interventions. Embed gender and disability analysis into analytical work; ensure coverage expansion interventions address barriers faced by women and persons with disabilities (particularly in informal and rural contexts); develop or adapt pilot initiatives to explicitly target these groups; and build the capacity of implementing partners on gender- and disability-sensitive approaches.
Main lessons learned and good practices	Lessons Learned (LL): LL1: Flexible project design and adaptative management improves relevance when institutional priorities and capacities evolve during implementation, but incorporating unplanned activities also increased administrative and staff burden, a trade-off requiring budget and staff reserves from the start. LL2: A strong upstream focus in the first phase of implementation needs to be complemented by visible downstream interventions to strengthen stakeholder ownership and demonstrate pathways to impact. Policy-oriented interventions should be progressively linked to more operational and visible actions. LL3: The production of high-quality technical outputs does not guarantee their uptake without structured follow-up and alignment

with institutional processes. Uptake should be planned from the beginning, aligning outputs with decision-making timelines, engaging responsible actors, and ensuring continued technical support to translate recommendations into action.

LL4: Project ambition needs to be matched with realistic delivery capacity, sequencing and prioritisation. An overly expansive scope in a complex institutional environment can reduce implementation depth and visibility of results. Future projects benefit from clearer prioritisation, phased sequencing of activities, and staffing proportionate delivery expectations.

Good Practices (GP):

GP1: Sequencing interventions and maintaining a clear division of labour across programmes strengthens coherence and accelerates institutional uptake, while avoiding duplication.

GP2: Using the Technical Committee as an operational co-management platform, with INSS, MAPTSS, ILO, and the EU jointly reviewing progress and make prioritisation decisions, improves implementation speed, inter-agency alignment, and institutional ownership.

GP3: Transparent and evidence-based reporting that consistently explains delays, causes, and corrective actions strengthens trust with strategic partners and supports adaptive project management.

GP4: Using international labour standards (ILS) as operational tools, and not only normative references, to guide policy dialogue and reform processes strengthens the technical quality and legitimacy of policy reforms (demonstrated through ESSAFE's support to C102 ratification).

GP5: Leveraging data production processes (e.g. the Social Protection Statistical Bulletin with GITEPS) to strengthen interinstitutional coordination and ownership, bringing together multiple institutions in the process of data collection, validation and analysis, breaks institutional silos and fosters collaboration and shared responsibility.

GP6: Combining technical assistance with capacity building and peer learning (e.g. Diploma in Social Protection Management and South-



South exchanges) supports knowledge acquisition and its application to real institutional challenges.