FROM ADOPTION TO PRACTICE: SUCCESS FACTORS AND CHALLENGES IN CAF IMPLEMENTATION ACROSS EUROPE

DOI: https://doi.org/10.53486/dri2026.56
UDC: [005.6:338.465+352/354]:061.1EU

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Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to present the evolution of the CAF model in Europe, to analyse best practices and challenges faced by public institutions, and to identify the quality performance indicators within the results criteria of the CAF 2020. The research methodology is based on literature review and content analysis of the best practices nominated by EIPA. The resources used included scientific articles in the field and official EUPAN and EIPA reports. The study's results show that the competence, agility, and quality of the staff represent key elements in achieving service quality from the perspective of the analyzed case studies. The main challenges identified are resistance to change and lack of training, limited institutional capacity for coordination and trouble in establishing communication channels. The quality performance indicators associated with the CAF result criteria includes measure related to: citizen satisfaction, such as waiting time, number of complains, access to information; people results, such as training participation, employee satisfaction; social responsibility, such as energy consumption and community engagement; key performance results, such as budget execution or use of ICT, etc. All of these indicators illustrate the multidimensional nature of performance assessment in public institutions. The qualitative nature of the analysis, the subjectivity involved in interpreting best practices, and the restricted number of case studies analysed represent the limitations of the present paper. Despite these limitations, the research provides public institutions with a structured overview of qualitative performance indicators and an overview of challenges they could face during the implementation of the CAF model.*

Key words: *self-assessment, quality, public services, indicators*

JEL: H83, O38, M12, M14

Introduction

Public sector organizations operate in a dynamic environment that requires a constant adaptation to changing conditions and existence of a quality service measurement system represents an asset to a public institution. Performance measurement is not just a management function but also a field of research, making significant contributions to the qualitative improvement of organizational processes. Performance measurement has become a cornerstone in public service delivery, with the aim of enhancing organizational effectiveness, accountability, and stakeholder satisfaction (Tanny & Zafarullah, 2023). The impact of performance measurement systems is far-reaching, affecting not only objective service delivery outcomes but also subjective perceptions of citizens and other stakeholders (Yang & Northcott, 2019). Understanding this impact is critical for governments seeking to improve service quality, trust, and satisfaction among diverse user groups (Lee & Kim, 2024). The benefits of performance measurement in public institutions are numerous, such as identifying and focusing on the core decisions of public sector organizations, driving the development of internal processes, increasing employee motivation for improvement, and defining the entity's improvement path. All these advantages contribute to a growing interest in enhancing the quality of public services. Starting from the question: "How can we best meet the needs of citizens?", public institutions are increasingly concerned with the continuous improvement and diversification of the services offered to their citizens. Effective management relies on effective measurement of performance and its outcomes. It is considered that the first condition for development and success is to develop a system for measuring and implementing performance (Fobé, Mulligan, & Gerson, 2021).

Performance indicators are essential tools for evaluating and improving the quality, efficiency, and effectiveness of public services across different sectors and regions (Zhang et al., 2024). The literature highlights a diversity of indicators dedicated to measure input- resource used, output- service delivered, outcome-impacts achieved, efficiency, and effectiveness measures, each serving unique roles in public administration and service delivery (Aljuwaied et al., 2024; Bartolacci et al., 2025). Their application represents a support for benchmarking processes, inform public policy-makers, and ensuring accountability in public institutions (Davidescu et al., 2025). The development of performance indicators in public services attract attention due to their potential in improving accountability, efficiency, and service quality (Bartolacci et al., 2025). But there are still challenges and limitations that hinder the effective creation, implementation, and evaluation of these indicators, considering the complexity of public sector environments and the diversity of stakeholder expectations (Aljuwaied et al., 2024). Difficulties related to integration in coherent framework of different types of indicators, limitation in data quality and availability, selecting relevant indicators that reflects accurately the outcome, and the increasing impact of digitalization on performance management systems are just some of the challenges that public administrators face (Bartolacci et al., 2025).

Kalfa and Yetim (2018) state that common problems in inefficient public administration include high taxes, inefficient use of resources, budget deficits, inflation, and high unemployment. These problems cannot be effectively addressed using traditional bureaucratic methods. Therefore, the adoption of Total Quality Management (TQM) was considered appropriate to obtain successful, quality-orientated outcomes and to establish a performance measurement system that would identify the organisational boundaries and clarify the resources available to it (Asensio, Evaristo, & Martins, 2021). Public sector organizations are process-orientated rather than results-orientated, which is why they encounter a number of difficulties in adapting performance measurement models (EIPA, 2020). The central challenge of public administration is considered to be the provision of high-quality programmes and services in a manner that optimises the use of available resources. This requires meeting both the demands of citizens for high-performing public services and the objectives of society and policymakers. Achieving these goals involves ensuring employee sustainability and motivation, guaranteeing and improving the quality of public services for users, and strengthening transparency within organizations. Consequently, specific models that facilitate strategic planning, operational effectiveness, efficient governance, rigorous evaluation, robust public trust, and continuous quality improvement have become essential elements in fulfilling the organisation's mission over the years (Asensio, Evaristo, & Martins, 2021).

Išoraitė (2008) and Moxham (2008) examine performance measurement in public sector organizations, finding that private sector models cause difficulties because for the public organizations processes quality are more important than outcomes. This specific characteristic led to the development in the 20th century of one of the fundamental models of quality management dedicated to public institution, the Common Assessment Framework (CAF). The fundamental principle of the CAF model is to initiate an evaluation process at various levels of public administration: central, regional, or local. The model analyses how the organization and public management are structured, with the aim of evaluating performance, identifying strengths and opportunities for improvement, followed by using the information obtained to generate positive changes, thereby ensuring continuous improvement. The CAF model provides a simple, user-friendly, accessible, free of charge, and suitable framework for the self-assessment of organizations across the entire public sector, regardless of their area of activity (EIPA, 2020). This framework is based on the premise that excellence in organizational performance, citizen satisfaction, staff satisfaction, and societal satisfaction is driven by leadership that directs strategy, human, material, and financial resource planning, partnerships, and processes toward achieving objectives. The holistic approach to performance analysis allows for a multidimensional perspective on the organization, which consists of collaboration between managers and employees—who are within the system—and citizens—who are the beneficiaries of the service and are outside the system's configuration. Managers use this tool as a "compass" that guides them toward achieving excellence. In addition to enabling the organization to conduct an independent assessment by graphically analysing the cause-and-effect relationship between organizational factors and the results obtained, this model supports public organizations in improving their own performance and facilitates the dissemination of specific management ideas among member states (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017).

The purpose of this study is to present the path of the CAF model evolution and identify the performance indicators used in CAF model implementation. Based on review and analysis of existing literature and reports published by EIPA and EUPAN, it also aims to describe the main challenges and key success factors associated with practical use of the model.

The CAF model in EU

Common Assessment Framework - history, structure, excellence principles

Since the first formulation of the CAF model in 1998 until the inauguration in 2000, the model support changes and finally evolved into a self-assessment instrument, developed by contribution of the European Public Administration Network (EUPAN), the German University of Administrative Sciences in Speyer, and the European Institute of Public Administration (EIPA). The initiative originated from the collaboration of ministries responsible for public administration in EU member states, with the primary objective of improving the quality of services provided to citizens by aligning with a unified European vision (Kalfa & Yetim, 2018). The expansion and adaptation of the CAF model in public organizations across EU member states were based on the EU's 2000 Lisbon Strategy, which aimed for a competitive, knowledge-based economic model, broad political and economic reforms, an efficient public administration, and effective results-based management mechanisms.

The first version of the CAF model was presented at the first EU conference on quality in public organizations, held in Lisbon in 2000, where participants were invited to share their best practices for ensuring high-quality service delivery to citizens. Subsequently, the voluntary implementation of the CAF model was proposed, with the first official version launched in 2002 at the second EU conference on quality in public administration. A second version of the CAF model was introduced in 2006 at the fourth EU conference on sustainability through quality in the public sector. Based on feedback received from EIPA, a third version of the CAF model was developed and published in 2012. The latest version released, the fifth, was the CAF2020 model, which is currently being implemented. The periodic development of new versions of the CAF model is essential to maintain the tool's relevance in the dynamic context of public administration. Factors such as increased diversity, the emphasis on sustainability, accelerated digitalization, and the need for agility have necessitated the ongoing updating of the CAF model (EIPA, 2020). The CAF model is structured around nine criteria, which define the two components of the model: the enablers and the results. These 9 criteria identify the main aspects that must be taken into account in any organizational analysis. Criteria 1–5 refer to managerial practices, that is, what the organization does and how it approaches tasks related to leadership, personnel, strategy, planning, partnerships, resource management, and procedures. Criteria 6–9 focus on outcomes related to citizen/customer satisfaction, staff satisfaction, social responsibility, and key performance indicators. Each criterion is further divided into a list of sub-criteria. The 28 sub-criteria identify the main aspects to be considered when evaluating an organization. They are illustrated with examples that explain the content of the sub-criteria in detail and suggest possible approaches to explore how the administration meets the requirements expressed in the sub-criteria. The circularity of the model for integrating evaluation findings into determinants and outcome criteria in managerial practices contributes to a continuous cycle of innovation and learning that accompanies organizations on their path to excellence (EIPA, 2020).

Thijs (2013) identifies the top five reasons why organizations choose to use the CAF model. The public sector organizations opt to implement the CAF model to identify their strengths and areas for improvement, to enhance organizational performance, to involve staff in organizational management as a means of motivating them, due to staff's heightened sensitivity to quality, and when it appears as a directive from top management. The author notes that financial issues, rewards in the form of national awards or distinctions, competition, or participation in innovation programs at the local, regional, or national level are factors that do not generate interest in applying the model.

In addition to providing a qualitative assessment of an organization's strengths and weaknesses, the CAF model offers the possibility of obtaining a quantitative assessment of the organization's performance through a scoring system that measures the degree to which the objectives set out in strategic plans have been achieved. Balaboniene and Vecerskiene (2015) state that the Balanced Scorecard (BSC) is the tool that monitors strategy implementation at all levels of the organization by collecting the information necessary to describe the current situation and to anticipate changes if certain tasks have not been implemented. As noted in several CAF self-assessment reports, enablers and results are not two separate entities within the organization, as they are in a cause-and-effect relationship: enablers represent the causes, and results represent the effects, and the feedback from the latter to the former is also part of the process. These stages are characteristic of the PDCA (Plan, Do, Check, Act) cycle, which plays an essential role in applying the scoring criteria. According to the PDCA approach, regular reviews are conducted during the assessment process to develop a plan to address weaknesses and enhance strengths. The quality of this information and systematic analysis completes the CAF model cycle, integrating it into the continuous improvement process, which enables the organization to operate at a higher level of self-reflection. The two assessment methods provided by the CAF model are the "classic" score and the "adjusted" score, both based on the PDCA cycle. The "classic" CAF score provides an overall assessment of each subcriterion, indicating the PDCA phase in which the subcriterion is located. The second model, known as the "adjusted" CAF score, reflects a more detailed analysis of the subcriteria, as it is based on the evaluation of each subcriterion across all phases of the PDCA cycle simultaneously and independently (EIPA, 2020). The process facilitates a holistic review of the organization's priorities and provides a way to examine whether critical actions and support, including financial resource allocation and human resource planning, are aligned with the organization's mission, vision, objectives, and plans (Asensio et al, 2021).

Excellence in the public sector depends on the ability of leaders to deliver public services competently, effectively, and efficiently, using high-quality practices and staff committed to working collectively for the public good, to meet a specific set of societal needs and expectations. The CAF 2020 model provides support in achieving excellence by articulating the 8 principles of excellence. Thijs (2013) argues that these fundamental principles of excellence, initially defined by EFQM (The European Foundation for Quality Management) and adapted for use in the public sector, are essential for integrating TQM principles into the public sector's philosophy, facilitating the transformation process from a bureaucratic public organization to one oriented toward total quality. The 8 principles reflect organizations' commitment to results, citizens and customers, leadership, process management, staff development and engagement, learning and continuous improvement, innovation, partnership development, corporate responsibility and sustainability, agility, diversity, and digitalization. Results orientation emphasizes the importance of focusing on objectives and achieving them, while citizen and customer engagement highlights the need to understand and respond to their needs and expectations. Leadership and consistency in achieving the goal underscore the need for a clear vision and strong values, which serve as a guide for employees in achieving organizational objectives, while management through procedures and actions indicates the importance of making decisions based on relevant data and information to ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of operations. Furthermore, the principles emphasize the importance of continuous staff development and the promotion of an organizational culture that encourages continuous learning and innovation. These aspects contribute to increased employee engagement and motivation, and, consequently, to improved organizational performance. Developing mutually beneficial partnerships is essential for achieving organizational goals and embracing corporate and social responsibility is crucial for supporting sustainability and meeting sustainable development goals. Agility enables organizations to adapt quickly to change and innovate continuously, while diversity and innovation help reflect and meet the diverse needs of the communities they serve. Digitalization is a key aspect in the modern era, facilitating the efficiency and accessibility of public services, but it requires a responsible approach to data protection and ensuring equal access. Taken together, these principles represent the foundation for continuous improvement and innovation in public sector organizations.

Performance quality indicators in public services and CAF criteria

In spite of comprehensive structure of the CAF model, that integrates enablers with results using a cause-effect logic, assuring a continuous improvement cycle, there is still a gap in the literature about integration of the model trough performance indicators. Academic literature presents the diversity of performance indicators used in public services, including input, output, outcome, efficiency, and effectiveness measures which target the resource used, services delivered, impacts achieved, input-output ratios, and achievement of objectives (Zhang et al., 2024). Yet, these indicators are applied in a fragmented manner, for example input and output indicators are more used in areas like urban infrastructure and administrative performance measurements (Zhang et al., 2024). Also, there is an imbalance between efficiency and effectiveness indicators, because the first indicators are unduly emphasized at the expense of service quality. Several studies argue that, in public administration, the efficient use of time, financial resources, and personnel is prioritized over citizen satisfaction and service quality (Bartolacci et al., 2025; Shi et al., 2023).

The lack of integrated reports that systematically combine input, output and outcome indicators for a holistic evaluation of public sector institutions across sectors and governance levels is another limitation of current performance reporting (Shi et al., 2023). The research that analyses the intersection between user satisfaction, quality of service outcome, and traditional resource-based indicators is limited (Solaz-Moreno et al., 2025), despite the evidence that service quality and performance measurement influences citizen satisfaction and trust in public organisations (Psomas et al., 2024). The increasing role of digitalisation complicates the relevance of performance indicators because there is still insufficient understanding of how digital transformation affects the relevance, selection, and effectiveness of traditional indicators (Erben et al., 2026).There are also data-related challenges, including issues of data quality, methodology, and technical skill gaps, which obstruct accurate performance measurement and effective decision-making processes (Bartolacci et al., 2025). It is a tendency for public organisations to prioritise easily measurable indicators over more complex but meaningful measures, like processing time or number of services delivered instead of citizen satisfaction or long-term societal impact. The literature concludes that public services organizations face multiple operational and contextual challenges. These include limited digital infrastructure, difficulties in inter-agency coordination, resistance to change, and the challenge of aligning indicators with stakeholders’ expectations and perceptions of service quality (de Menezes et al., 2022; Salemans & Budding, 2022). The CAF model, as presented in the present study, provides a structured framework for assessing organisational performance. However, in the presented context, research is still needed in order to link performance quality indicators to the CAF model result criteria. This would ensure the integration of the input, output, outcome, efficiency, effectiveness, and user centred measures within an excellence quality management model.

To identify what are the used performance quality indicators reported by public institution that implement the CAF model, the study analyses the EUPAN report (2025), which describes the nominated 18 golden cases by EIPA at the Warsaw’s Conference. Trought a content analysis methodology, the paper determine what measurements for quality improvement were used by

European public institutions to report their achievement regarding the citizens, people, social responsibility and key performance results, after implementation of the CAF model (see Table 1).

Table 1. Quality indicators attributed to CAF criteria

CAF element	Indicator	Type of indicator	Aspect addressed
Citizen Result	Waiting time	Efficiency	Service accessibility
	Number of complaints	Quality	User dissatisfaction
	Access to information	Transparency	Openness
	Participation in survey	Engagement	Citizen involvement
	Transparency of decision	Governance	Accountability
People results	Training days per employee	Capacity	Skill development
	Participation in training	Engagement	Employee involvement
	Employee review	Stability	HR sustainability
	Absenteeism	Efficiency	Workforce discipline
	Employee satisfaction	Satisfaction	Internal climate
Social Responsibility	Energy consumption	Sustainability	Environmental impact
	Recycling rate	Sustainability	Resource efficiency
	Environmental projects	Responsibility	Green initiatives
	Community partnerships	Engagement	Social integration
	Volunteer activities	Social value	Civic contribution
Key Performance Results	Graduation rates	Effectiveness	Output quality
	Drop-out rates	Effectiveness	System efficiency
	Exam results	Quality	Performance outcome
	Employment rates	Impact	Labour market relevance
	Cost per student	Efficiency	Resource use
	Budget execution	Financial	Fiscal discipline
	Audit results	Compliance	Governance quality
	Use of ICT	Digitalisation	Technological capacity

Source: Authors' adaptation based on EUPAN (2025).

Success factors and challenges in the CAF model implementation

From the inauguration year of the CAF model in European Union until present, the practitioners and specialized institution like EIPA and EUPAN, discussed and presented many cases of public institutions that can serve as an example of implementation of the CAF model. As one of the model objectives is the benchmarking, which refers to learn from each other, public institutions are encouraged to embrace examples presented in other countries and use as inspiration for improving quality of the public services they provide. The following cases are presented in order to underline the success factors and challenges that institution faced during the implementation.

PARCO, the office coordinating public administration reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina, has implemented the CAF model to improve efficiency and transparency in public administration. The decision to pilot the CAF model was influenced by the strategic objective of developing a modern and efficient public administration compatible with EU standards. An inter-institutional working group on quality management was formed, which, following certification obtained in accordance with the requirements of European bodies, contributed to the introduction of quality management tools in public administration. After identifying key issues through self-assessment, an action plan was designed, establishing the priority actions necessary to be undertaken for improvement. Specifically, emphasis was placed on internal and external communication with third parties, thereby establishing two-way communication through the implementation of user and employee satisfaction surveys.

Digitalization was another area improved through the redesign of the website and the development of digital strategies. By applying the CAF model and the PDCA cycle, PARCO was able to identify and address existing issues in a systematic manner. The experience gained was shared with other public administration organizations, contributing to the overall improvement of administrative processes and communication throughout the country. Currently, over 20 organizations at various administrative levels in Bosnia and Herzegovina use the CAF model, and these processes are included in strategic documents for the modernization of public administration (Avdagić, Begić & Delić, 2023).

In line with the government's strategy for public administration, the Ministry of Education, Science, and Sport (MESS) in Slovenia launched its first self-assessment using the CAF model in 2017. This set them on a fast track to improvement, which generated a snowball effect through the implementation of new approaches resulting from the application of the process in the first phase. During the first self-assessment, a lack of information regarding employee satisfaction, organizational climate and culture, values, and knowledge of the MESS mission and strategy was identified. By using a hybrid approach in selecting project team members, adequate coverage of social responsibility areas and a variety of experiences brought to the self-assessment process were ensured. Setting up a dedicated website for the CAF model implementation project on the SharePoint 2016 platform facilitated communication and collaboration among team members, contributing to the efficient management of documentation and relevant information. Training workshops proved to be an effective way to overcome the team members' initial lack of experience and knowledge, improving their skills and understanding of the CAF model. The exchange of best practices with other ministries and the conduct of a satisfaction survey at the end of the project contributed to enriching the self-assessment process and identifying innovative solutions for improving organizational performance. The inclusion of strategic topics in the self-assessment process led to a more in-depth analysis and the identification of clear priorities for improving MESS performance. Overall, MESS's experience demonstrates that applying the CAF model can be beneficial and replicable in other similar organizations, facilitating better resource management and continuous improvement of operations. Additionally, an opportunity was identified to develop a standardized methodology in collaboration with other relevant public institutions to enable comparisons with them. The process involved appointing representatives from various organizations and organizing training sessions on quality management and the CAF model to prepare project members, ensuring they were ready for each phase of the self-assessment process (Hauptman, 2023).

In Italy, could be observe how a public organization with a specialized field of activity, focused on mobility management and the development of the automotive sector in the country, chose to use the CAF model with the aim of improving the efficiency and effectiveness of its group management system. This was done to promote learning and the exchange of experience among the various ACI offices, in order to foster collaboration. Since 2012, by applying the CAF model with a focus on optimizing the cost-benefit ratio in small and medium-sized organizations, ACI has succeeded in developing direct relationships with citizens, improving internal and external communication channels. The implementation of the CAF model within the ACI Federation has brought about a series of remarkable achievements. These include the strengthening of positive relationships with local organizations and stakeholders, which has contributed to more effective communication and improved collaboration. Furthermore, the effective dissemination of a service culture and public value has strengthened ACI's reputation in the community and increased its positive impact. Moreover, the implementation of the CAF model has fostered an environment conducive to evaluation and learning from comparisons, thereby encouraging continuous improvement and the exchange of knowledge among the organization's members. These results highlight the success of the CAF model's implementation and its significant contribution to the development and consolidation of ACI (Pennacchio & Italo, 2023).

Romanian path to the CAF model

As Romania is a member state of the European Union, it has the opportunity to benefit from support from European organizations established with the aim of improving the quality of public services. Through these organizations, it has access to the set of best practices adopted at the European level by several countries that it can use as examples.

The process of improving service quality in public administration began in 2004 with the introduction of quality standards for monitoring and evaluating public services and the performance of civil servants. These standards established a fixed number of civil servants based on the quality requirements for each public service. In addition, a strategic planning system was developed for each public authority, tailored to the public services provided, including incentive schemes, to improve the quality of public services and stimulate innovation in the development and implementation of the Citizens' Charter. Through Government Decision No. 909/2014, the Strategy for Strengthening Public Administration 2014–2020 was approved, and the National Committee for Coordinating the Implementation of this Strategy was established. The main objective was for Romania to manage a public administration responsive to the needs of society by 2020. An important step in this direction was the Action Plan for the Phased Implementation of Quality Management within Public Authorities and Institutions 2016–2020, which generated funding requests through the Operational Program for Administrative Capacity (POCA) for the introduction of ISO standards, the CAF model, and Balance Scorecard instrument in public institutions. As a result, the number of public institutions implementing these tools has increased.

Conclusions

The analysis of the CAF model implementation in European public institutions highlights that the transition from formal adaptation to effective use of the model requires more than compliance with methodological requirements. Successful implementation depends on the coherence between organizational practices and improvement actions, which is reflected in the cause effect logic embedded in the CAF model and the PDCA cycle. For example, the quality of human resources, expressed through adaptability, competencies, and engagement, emerges as a key determinant of service quality. The study notice that the benefits of the CAF model become evident when the institution has strategic support, effective communication and collaboration mechanism, and sustained investment in staff development. The exchange of experience among institution and the benchmarking practices are meant to develop a culture of learning and continuous improvement.

The challenges identified in the literature and in the case studies about the CAF model implementation are shaped by the contextual factors, as employee's resistance to change, varying levels of digitalisation, and institutional capacity for coordination. There are also difficulties with integrating quality performance indicators, limitations in data availability and quality, and the tendency to use easily measurable indicators over those which reflect long term outcomes and citizen satisfaction.

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