

International Cooperation as a Learning Infrastructure for Educational Inspection: The Contribution of SICI

/

La cooperación internacional como una infraestructura de aprendizaje para la Inspección educativa: La contribución de SICI

Janie McManus

President, The Standing International Conference of Inspectorates¹

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.23824/ase.v0i45.1082>

Abstract

This paper examines how international cooperation supports educational inspection through the work of the Standing International Conference of Inspectorates (SICI). Drawing on a decade of organisational evidence including strategic plans, business reports, National Coordinator Forum records, workshop evaluations, collaborative project outputs, and member survey responses, the analysis traces SICI's evolution.

The findings show that SICI strengthens professional judgement, organisational learning and advice through reflective comparison rather than harmonisation. Learning is generated through connected mechanisms: continuous professional dialogue, thematic workshops, collaborative projects, job shadowing and systematic communication channels.

Impact is cumulative and indirect. It can develop as insights travel from individuals into organisational practice and, where conditions allow, into system-level debate.

¹ SICI: c/o Vlaamse Onderwijsinspectie, Hendrik Consciencegebouw. Koning Albert II Laan 15. 1210 Brussels. Belgium. Web: <https://www.sici-inspectorates.eu/>

Overall, the paper argues that SICI supports its members in navigating complexity with greater clarity and confidence while preserving national autonomy.

Key words: Educational inspection; international cooperation; comparative learning; professional judgement; professional learning; learning infrastructure; collaborative projects; system improvement.

Resumen

Este documento examina cómo la cooperación internacional respalda la inspección educativa a través de la labor de la Conferencia Internacional Permanente de Inspecciones educativas (SICI). Basándose en una década de datos organizativos — entre los que se incluyen planes estratégicos, informes de actividades, actas del Foro de Coordinadores Nacionales, evaluaciones de talleres, resultados de proyectos colaborativos y respuestas a encuestas de los miembros—, el análisis traza la evolución de SICI.

Los resultados muestran que SICI refuerza el criterio profesional, el aprendizaje organizativo y el asesoramiento mediante la comparación reflexiva, más que mediante la armonización. El aprendizaje se genera a través de mecanismos interconectados: diálogo profesional continuo, talleres temáticos, proyectos colaborativos, observación de prácticas y canales de comunicación sistemáticos.

El impacto es acumulativo e indirecto. Puede desarrollarse a medida que las ideas pasan de los individuos a la práctica organizativa y, cuando las condiciones lo permiten, al debate a nivel del sistema. En general, el documento sostiene que SICI ayuda a sus miembros a afrontar la complejidad con mayor claridad y confianza, al tiempo que preserva la autonomía nacional.

Palabras clave: Inspección educativa; cooperación internacional; aprendizaje comparativo; criterio profesional; formación profesional; infraestructura educativa; proyectos de colaboración; mejora del sistema

Summary

This article examines how international cooperation within the Standing International Conference of Inspectorates (SICI) supports the development of educational inspection. Drawing on organisational evidence from 2015–2026, it shows that SICI is a structured learning environment where inspectorates and external evaluation bodies use comparative insight to strengthen professional judgement and organisational practice. The analysis highlights how cooperation enhances evaluative clarity, supports methodological development and can contribute to the advice inspectorates and external evaluation bodies provide to governments. Overall, the evidence indicates that SICI enables its members to navigate complexity with greater confidence while ensuring national autonomy.

1. Introduction and contextualisation

1.1. Origin and mission of SICI

The Standing International Conference of Inspectorates (SICI) was established as a professional association of education inspectorates. Its original purpose was practical. It aimed to provide a forum where members could exchange experience, discuss developments in education systems, and improve inspection practice through cooperation.

From the mid-2010s, SICI's strategic planning introduced clearer organisational aims, priorities and more defined roles. The introduction of the National Coordinator role became a formal link between the network and member organisations.

Across the period considered in this paper, SICI's work can be understood as continuing to evolve. This article uses the journal's framing of SICI as a European technical cooperation network for educational inspection services. It also recognises that SICI's membership has expanded beyond Europe over the period reviewed. In this paper, that expansion is treated as strengthening the comparative lens.

SICI's membership includes both education inspectorates and external education evaluation bodies. Throughout this article, these organisations are referred to collectively as "members."

1.2. Purpose and approach of this article

This article provides a reflective, evidence-informed analysis of how international cooperation within SICI supports professional learning, organisational development, and the evolution of inspection practice. It focuses primarily on the period from 2015 to 2026.

The analysis draws on organisational evidence, including strategic plans, annual business reports, National Coordinator Forum records, workshop reports and evaluations, newsletters, collaborative project materials, documentation of study visits and job shadowing, and responses from a member survey on perceived value and impact.

The paper does not constitute a formal evaluation of SICI. It does not measure performance against predefined indicators. It does not attribute specific results to particular activities. It is also not an exhaustive institutional history.

The purpose is practical. It is to identify the mechanisms through which cooperation appears to support inspectorate learning. It is to clarify the conditions under which that learning is most useful. It is to recognise the constraints that shape what can realistically be achieved through a voluntary international network.

Because SICI is practitioner-led, much of the evidence is qualitative and experience-based. This reflects the nature of the subject matter. Professional judgement, comparative reflection, and organisational learning are not easily captured through quantitative indicators alone.

Insight therefore comes from patterns across multiple sources. These include themes that are repeated in workshop evaluations, issues raised in forum discussions, and member perspectives over time.

Participation across SICI activities is not uniform. Some members are involved extensively. Others are more selective due to interest, capacity, priorities, or resource constraints.

This paper therefore reports patterns of engagement rather than claiming to represent every member experience. Where examples are used, they are illustrative of broader trends.

The analysis also recognises that learning from cooperation does not automatically translate into domestic change. Inspectorates operate within specific legal mandates,

governance arrangements, and political environments. Ideas generated through cooperation must be interpreted, adapted, and negotiated locally. As a result, the paper places more focus on mechanisms and conditions over claims of direct causation.

Finally, this article aligns with the journal's interest in the participation of educational inspection in European cooperation programmes and shared projects. It therefore focuses on how SICI enables technical cooperation through comparison, collaborative inquiry, and the development of shared tools and reference points.

The remainder of the paper examines these mechanisms in detail, before returning to a reflective analysis of what this implies for the future development of educational inspection.

SICI operates as a structured mechanism through which members exchange not only information but practical approaches to supervision, evaluation frameworks, evidence use, stakeholder engagement and organisational design. Through workshops, collaborative projects, mobility activities and sustained professional dialogue, the network enables members to examine how comparable challenges are addressed in different contexts. This comparative exposure supports reflection on national practices, highlights alternative methods and tools, and creates opportunities for cautious adaptation rather than direct policy transfer. In doing so, SICI contributes to methodological development, innovation in supervision processes and more informed policy advice within member systems. The thematic analysis that follows examines how these mechanisms function in practice and how they support professional learning across members.

2. Thematic development

2.1. Comparing Inspection Models

SICI members share a common purpose '*Better Inspection, Better Learning*' but operate within different mandates, governance arrangements, and professional traditions. These differences shape how inspection is defined, organised, and enacted. Some members work within centralised systems with prescriptive frameworks, while others operate in more devolved structures that allow for greater flexibility. These variations provide a diverse range of approaches and give members credible external reference points.

This diversity becomes visible through SICI's organisational evidence. Records show members examining how different models respond to shared pressures such as equity, inclusion, digitalisation, safeguarding, and post-pandemic system recovery. Members use these discussions to explore how other systems balance statutory obligations, evaluative scope, and proportionality, and how they interpret improvement, accountability, and evidence.

The comparative process operates through professional dialogue. Members analyse why another system prioritises certain evaluative principles, why it emphasises particular forms of evidence, or how it sequences inspection activity. These contrasts can help members clarify what is core to their own approach and what reflects national tradition or institutional design. Differences in data use, framework detail or the weight given to professional judgement often prompt deeper scrutiny of domestic assumptions.

The evidence shows that comparison is relational. Members interpret the practices of others through the lens of their own mandates. A highly structured model may appear reassuringly consistent to one system but overly rigid to another; a broad evaluative framework may appear proportionate to one system but insufficiently specific to another. These relational contrasts strengthen evaluative reasoning by widening the range of approaches against which internal practice can be considered.

Across the decade of evidence reviewed, members repeatedly note that comparative discussion clarifies their understanding of national practices. For example, exchanges on proportionality during COVID-19 helped systems with detailed frameworks consider flexibility, and systems with flexible approaches consider assurance. Similarly, discussions on wellbeing, and the use of research supported members to refine the scope of what they evaluate and the types of evidence they prioritise.

In conclusion, the process of comparison within SICI enables members to analyse the ways in which different models address common challenges and to gain a better understanding of the evaluative principles that underpin those models. This supports clearer interpretation of national frameworks and contributes to more deliberate professional decision-making.

2.2. SICI as a Structured Learning Infrastructure

SICI operates as a structured learning infrastructure that enables members to use international cooperation in practical, repeatable, and cumulative ways. Its value lies in providing predictable mechanisms through which comparative insight becomes usable rather than incidental.

At the centre of this infrastructure is SICI's thematic programming. Workshops are organised around shared themes, enabling members to explore complex issues from multiple angles. This coherence enables learning to accumulate across events rather than being restricted to single occasions. Thematic organisation also provides a consistent framework for inquiry, supporting members to examine topics such as inclusion, civic education, or digitalisation in a sustained way.

In recent years, SICI has adopted a thematic approach to its annual programme, with members collectively identifying priority issues and themes for focused consideration over a full year. Workshops and the General Assembly are organised around the selected theme, allowing members to examine topics from a variety of perspectives and across different national contexts. This approach is further strengthened by the participation of external academic experts, who have been invited to contribute research-based insights at the start of each thematic cycle. By connecting practical inspection experience with research-informed perspectives and sustaining inquiry across events, the network enables deeper exploration of the theme.

SICI's National Coordinator function provides further structure. National Coordinators act as consistent links between the network and members, ensuring that comparative learning is connected to real operational issues. Discussions in the monthly forums show that National Coordinators encourage collective sensemaking, raise emerging challenges, and help shape thematic priorities based on current system demands. Their role ensures continuity across activities and helps learning circulate beyond individuals.

Communication systems reinforce this structure by enabling knowledge to travel throughout the network. Newsletters, workshop reports, collaborative project outputs, and a secure members' area support organisational memory. These channels allow members to access materials even when they have not attended events. They also provide a

reliable record of discussions over time, strengthening the continuity of comparative learning.

Together, these mechanisms function as an infrastructure rather than a series of disconnected activities. They support recurring interaction, maintain thematic emphasis, and provide numerous opportunities to revisit topics and issues that are changing or evolving. This enables members to deepen their understanding about how other systems deal with similar challenges and how to relate these insights in their own contexts.

Crucially, the infrastructure operates within a voluntary model. Engagement is driven by professional interest and organisational capacity. This openness supports honest professional discussion but requires prioritisation to avoid overstretch. Within these constraints, the cumulative effect of the learning infrastructure is clear: many members describe gaining clearer evaluative reasoning, greater methodological confidence and more informed organisational decision-making through their engagement with SICI.

2.3. Collaborative Projects and Shared Technical Work

Collaborative projects form a central part of SICI's learning infrastructure. They allow members to undertake joint inquiry into complex areas of practice where evidence is incomplete, contested or rapidly developing. Across the period reviewed, these projects included cumulative programmes of work.

The evidence shows that projects supported members to move beyond exchange of information and into co-production of knowledge. They created opportunities to examine questions that individual systems could not explore as effectively on their own. They also generated outputs such as frameworks, reports, tools, and recommendations, which extended the reach of participation.

2.3.1. From BIBESOIN to TESSIE and STESSIE

The evolution of SICI's collaborative work is visible most clearly in the sequence of projects focused on social inclusion and student wellbeing. These projects illustrate how sustained international cooperation can lead to progressively deeper inquiry into complex areas of practice.

The BIBESOIN project (*Better Inspection for Better Social Inclusion*) started a shared endeavour to look at school wellbeing and social inclusion, bringing together

participants working within different mandates and policy contexts. The focus was practical and comparative: how systems evaluate learners' needs, and how inspection and external evaluation can respond to social disadvantage without over-simplifying locally specific challenges.

This work developed further through the TESSIE framework, (*Toolkit for Evaluating and Stimulating Social Inclusion in Education*) which provided members with more structured ways of analysing social inclusion across contexts. Rather than prescribing how systems should inspect or intervene, the framework identified key dimensions of inclusion and offered a shared language through which professional dialogue could take place. Project documentation shows that participating members adapted these ideas to their own mandates and contexts, using the framework as a reference point rather than a model to replicate.

The subsequent STESSIE project (*Spreading and Strengthening the Toolkit for Evaluating and Stimulating Social Inclusion in Education*) extended this line of inquiry to system-level conditions that enable or constrain inclusive practice. Through collaboration with ministries, universities and schools across Europe, the project supported the development of an online self-evaluation tool designed to be used across different settings. Input from a partner school, acting as a critical friend, helped ensure that inquiry remained grounded in school-level realities. This work illustrates how comparative inquiry can move beyond discussion toward the creation of practical resources, while still allowing for local interpretation and use.

Across these projects, the pattern is consistent: joint inquiry produces shared conceptual tools that can be adapted to local contexts. The projects do not seek to create a single European methodology. They aim to strengthen professional understanding of complex issues through comparative reflection.

2.3.2. Civic Values, Skills, and Emerging Policy Areas

SICI's project on civic values and skills illustrates how the network leads collective inquiry in areas where members are seeking greater conceptual clarity. This SICI-led work enabled members to compare how different systems define civic education, where responsibility for civic development sits within curriculum and inspection frameworks, and how inspectors can approach civic learning in ways that respect national contexts. By examining these questions together, members clarified the boundaries of their own roles

and identified principles that could inform their domestic frameworks without promoting a standard model.

A further example of this comparative technical inquiry is the Network of Practice on the teaching of English as a foreign language. Members explored how different European inspectorates and evaluation centres evaluate language learning, how inspection frameworks and processes are adapted to specific subject areas, and how internal quality-assurance mechanisms support the reliability of professional judgements. As with other SICI collaborations, the value lay not in identifying a single model but in strengthening shared understanding of how inspection approaches can be applied and adapted across systems.

The network is supporting a collaborative project in which a group of members is examining the emerging policy area of artificial intelligence. Participating members are considering how to evaluate the use of digital tools, interpret data responsibly, and understand digital inclusion. This collaborative inquiry allows members to examine these challenges collectively, with potential to reduce duplication of effort and help members understand the associated risks and opportunities. The project is expected to conclude in April 2026, with a workshop planned to share learning, exchange insights, and support reflective discussion among members.

2.3.3. How Collaborative Work Supports Policy Engagement

Although SICI does not engage directly in policy advocacy, evidence suggests that collaborative outputs can contribute to how some members shape advice to governments.

Members who participate in collaborative inquiry, return to their systems with expanded insights regarding on how policy challenges are interpreted in other contexts. This can strengthen their ability to contextualise national debates and provide informed advice. Comparative insights can allow members to demonstrate that their recommendations are grounded in wider professional experience.

This influence is indirect. Collaborative projects do not produce policy positions. They produce professional understanding. This understanding then shapes the conversations members have with policymakers, sometimes clarifying risks, sometimes identifying opportunities, and sometimes challenging assumptions embedded in national policy debates.

2.3.4. Summary

Collaborative projects show how SICI's learning infrastructure operates in practice by turning diversity of systems into a resource for inquiry. They produce shared outputs without prescribing uniformity, helping members think carefully about complex issues and, in turn, strengthening the evidence base they draw on when providing advice. Members describe the value of developing a more coherent evaluative vocabulary, shared concepts and terms that support clearer professional dialogue across very different systems. In this sense, collaborative projects are not simply activities but mechanisms through which members build collective professional capability. More broadly, members also highlight that joint exploration of emerging themes can help reduce duplication of effort and support more efficient, evidence-informed innovation across systems.

2.4. Mobility, Study Visits and Job Shadowing

Mobility, study visits, and job shadowing have always been important elements of SICI's cooperation model. They provide opportunities for inspectors to observe practice in real contexts and to engage directly with colleagues in other systems. This experiential dimension complements the structured dialogue that takes place through forums, workshops, and collaborative projects.

Job shadowing is particularly valued. It allows inspectors to follow the full process of inspection work in another system, from preparation to on-site evaluative activity, to reporting. Records show participants describing these experiences as enabling deeper understanding of how professional judgement is exercised in different organisational cultures. They observe how evidence is gathered, how teams interact, how conversations with schools are framed, and how evaluative conclusions are reached. These insights are often implicit. They are difficult to capture in written protocols, but they shape professional reasoning in powerful ways.

Mobility activities also support trust and professional relationships. Inspectors frequently report that time spent together in schools and offices creates a relational depth that virtual and formal exchanges cannot replicate. This trust strengthens the quality of discussion that follows in workshops and forums. It also facilitates informal consultation: after a mobility activity, inspectors often contact colleagues in other systems for advice or clarification on issues as they arise. These informal channels create an additional layer of professional infrastructure within the network.

Viewed cumulatively, mobility activities and job shadowing illustrate what makes SICl's cooperation distinctive. They create opportunities for immersive, practice-based learning that complements structured dialogue and collaborative inquiry. In doing so, they make comparison tangible, deepen insight into how inspection is enacted in different systems, and strengthen professional judgement by exposing inspectors to multiple ways of reasoning about evidence. They also reinforce the trust and relationships that sustain the wider learning infrastructure.

In this sense, mobility is not an add-on to SICl's work. It is a core mechanism through which members develop a more nuanced understanding of their own practice by observing the real-world enactment of others' approaches. Its value lies not in transferring models but in strengthening inspectors' capacity to interpret their own systems with greater clarity and confidence.

2.5. Events as Structured Knowledge Platforms

Regular events form a central component of SICl's learning infrastructure, providing structured opportunities for exchange, reflection, and agenda-setting across the network. These include the annual General Assembly, and thematic workshops hosted by members.

The thematic approach adopted in recent years represents an important evolution in how SICl supports learning. Unlike one-off conferences, these events operate as part of a coordinated programme of professional dialogue, aligned with an annual thematic focus identified collectively by members. Workshops held throughout the year look at the theme from several points of view. This ongoing inquiry enables deeper understanding.

Member ownership is a defining feature of this model. Workshops are hosted by members on a voluntary basis, but they are designed to contribute to the network's agreed annual theme, bringing system-specific priorities into a shared programme of inquiry. SICl provides organisational support and partial funding, but the agenda is shaped collaboratively. This approach allows the network to remain responsive to emerging challenges while drawing on the contextual expertise of host organisations. It also reinforces the principle that learning within the network is reciprocal rather than directional: all members contribute perspectives shaped by their own governance arrangements, policy contexts, and professional traditions. Event feedback reinforces this

model, highlighting a practical condition for impact: protected time for discussion and structured reflection is consistently valued and helps learning travel beyond the event.

The fact that SICI's events continued during the COVID-19 pandemic further illustrates its role as a resilient learning mechanism. Workshops were held online, allowing members to share responses to rapidly changing conditions. Engagement with SICI provides organisational resilience by offering comparative reference points during periods of uncertainty such as COVID.

SICI has long shared presentations from its events. More recently, it has begun to produce workshop reports and to use common evaluation questions, strengthening the knowledge function of events and enabling insights to accumulate over time. This practice makes events available to members who may not have been able to attend.

Overall, SICI events are more than just places for information exchange they are structured knowledge platforms that support comparative learning, agenda-setting and professional community building. These forums bring members together so that they can test assumptions, explore alternative approaches, and identify areas where innovation may be warranted. Their contribution lies less in producing immediate policy change than in expanding the range of informed options available to those responsible for evaluation and inspection.

2.6. Communication as Network Infrastructure

Communication within SICI operates as a core part of the network's learning infrastructure. It is not an administrative add-on. It is a mechanism that sustains cooperation across a geographically dispersed and institutionally diverse membership. Without it, the other elements of the network, forums, workshops, collaborative projects and mobility activities, would not connect into a coherent whole.

The newsletter plays a supporting role in this communication infrastructure. Until this year it was typically issued twice annually, providing a periodic record of activity across the network. It contributes to transparency by documenting what is happening across SICI, and it supports engagement by keeping members aware of opportunities to participate. It also helps knowledge flow by sharing selected insights from events and projects with colleagues who cannot attend in person. By showcasing work from different

jurisdictions, the newsletter can contribute to community formation and reinforce the sense that members are part of a shared professional endeavour.

Communication also operates through circulation of workshop reports, collaborative project findings, and General Assembly materials. These documents extend the reach of events beyond their immediate participants. They allow members to brief colleagues, support internal discussion, and integrate international insights into their own organisational processes. The evidence indicates that this form of dissemination is particularly useful for member organisations, where only a small number of staff may be able to attend events. The presence of a written record ensures learning is not lost. It also helps new members understand the evolution of discussions over time.

In addition, SICI's communication channels enable a practical form of member-to-member support through coordinated information requests. Members can ask the network to respond to targeted questions, requests for examples, or short surveys. This brokering function helps members access timely comparative intelligence on specific issues, supports responsive problem-solving, and can reduce duplication of effort when multiple systems are working on similar challenges.

The development of SICI's digital infrastructure marks a further step in this evolution. The redesigned website and the introduction of a members-only area provide a more systematic approach to knowledge management. The creation of a centralised repository allows members to access resources more easily.

Communication also enables other aspects of SICI's learning infrastructure to function. National Coordinator Forums depend on regular circulation of materials before and after meetings. Collaborative projects and mobility opportunities are often brokered through informal exchanges supported by the network's communication systems. In this sense, communication is the connective tissue that links SICI's mechanisms into an integrated whole.

Overall, SICI's communication practices form an infrastructure that supports learning, continuity, and coherence. By linking individual activities into a sustained programme of professional development, these practices deepen the network's collective capacity. Knowledge is distributed across diverse systems, supporting inclusion by enabling engagement from members with varying capacities. Communication also helps maintain a shared understanding of purpose within a growing and evolving organisation,

ensuring that insights generated through cooperation are not confined to specific events but become part of a wider professional knowledge base.

In this way, communication is more than just sharing information. It is a strategic method for maintaining a learning community across boundaries. It reinforces the conditions under which members can work together constructively while retaining national autonomy. It ensures that the value of cooperation accumulates over time rather than dissipating. And it supports SICI's identity as an organisation that enables reflection, comparison, and adaptation in complex and dynamic education systems.

2.7 Impact on Practice and Policy

Assessing the impact of an international professional network presents methodological challenges. SICI does not exercise authority over member organisations, mandate implementation or deliver programmes with predefined outcomes. Its influence operates through learning, reflection, and voluntary adoption of ideas. For this reason, impact is best understood not as direct causation but as contribution. The question is how far engagement with the network alters thinking, informs decisions, or strengthens capability within members over time.

Across the decade of evidence reviewed, three broad levels of impact emerge:

1. individual professional judgement,
2. organisational learning within members, and
3. indirect system influence through the advice members provide.

These levels are connected, but the pathways between them are neither linear nor uniform.

The findings suggest that structured international cooperation can strengthen inspection systems without prescribing uniform models. Participation in networks such as SICI does not lead to convergence on a single approach; rather, it provides a comparative reference frame that helps members clarify their own purposes, assumptions, and methods. Exposure to alternative practices supports members to distinguish between elements that are context-dependent and those that are more widely transferable, supporting more informed decision-making.

In periods of policy change or system stress, external perspectives can function as a stabilising influence, offering tested approaches and reducing the risk of insular decision-making.

The evidence also highlights the importance of investing in the professional capacity of inspectors. Collaborative projects, peer exchanges, and joint inquiry activities contribute to the development of shared evaluative language, methodological confidence, and ethical standards. These forms of capacity building operate differently from formal training: they draw on professional judgement, experience, and contextual interpretation.

A further implication concerns innovation. Cross-national dialogue offers the opportunity for members to test emerging approaches, for example, in evaluating complex areas such as inclusion, civic competence or system-level performance before adopting them domestically. This can support cautious, evidence-informed innovation while reducing the risks associated with untested reforms. However, the ability to transfer practices depends on local governance arrangements, legal frameworks, and resource conditions. This emphasises the necessity of adaptation rather than direct adoption.

Lastly, engagement with peers from other systems demonstrates a willingness to engage in scrutiny and learning, which may strengthen the confidence of stakeholders in the fact that evaluation practices are informed by a broad evidence base rather than solely national traditions. At the same time, participation requires prioritisation, as members operate within finite resource constraints.

Taken together, these implications indicate that international networks such as SICI function less as policy actors and more as enabling infrastructures for professional learning, reflection, and cautious innovation. Their value lies not in directing national policy, but in supporting the development of informed options. Within SICI, these dynamics are visible in the way collaborative projects, thematic programmes and mobility activities can contribute to the professional reasoning which in some contexts can feed into members' advice.

2.7.1. Impact on Professional Judgement and Capability

Members report that international cooperation strengthens their professional judgement. Exposure to alternative approaches can help inspectors clarify their assumptions about evidence, evaluation criteria, and the purposes of inspection. This does not involve

replicating the practice of others. It involves reflective recalibration, seeing one's own system from a different vantage point.

This effect is significant because inspection relies heavily on professional judgement. Frameworks guide the work, but evaluative decisions depend on interpreting complex evidence in context. Interactions with peers from other systems encourage inspectors to question routines that may have become normalised. They also encourage confidence by confirming that other professionals interpret similar signals in similar ways.

Members also report improvements in specific competencies. These include methodological skills, analytical approaches, understanding of inclusion and wellbeing, and awareness of emerging issues such as digitalisation or civic education. According to survey responses, SICl has strengthened some members' sense of belonging to an international community of practice, indicating a broader professional identity.

2.7.2. Impact on Organisational Learning and Development

At organisational level, impact occurs when insights from international engagement inform internal discussion, strategic planning, or methodological review. Members often use comparative learning to test proposals, anticipate risks and evaluate the viability of reforms, according to data from survey responses and project documentation. Comparative evidence adds depth to internal discussion, even when change is incremental.

Collaborative project outputs support this process by providing tangible artefacts that organisations can adapt. The TESSIE framework, for example, offered a structured way of analysing social inclusion, while allowing members to integrate the concepts into their own mandates. Similarly, joint inquiry into evaluating English as an additional language or civic education supplied shared reference points for members exploring these themes domestically. The pattern across cases is selective adaptation rather than replication.

Members also benefit from strengthened professional relationships. Mobility and project work create informal channels through which members can consult peers, seek examples, or request advice. These relationships function as an additional layer of professional infrastructure.

Impact is not uniform. It depends on leadership decisions about whether and how insights are applied. It also depends on organisational capacity, political context, and timing. Members in smaller jurisdictions, or those engaged in reform, may find immediate uses for comparative insights. Others may use them to shape longer-term thinking.

2.7.3. Influence on Policy and System-Level Debate

Inspectorates occupy a specific position within education systems. They generate evidence, provide analysis, and advise governments. For this reason, comparative learning gained through SICI can influence system-level debate indirectly. It can broaden the evidence base members use when advising policymakers. It also enables members to contextualise national challenges within wider international patterns.

Survey responses suggest that, for some members and in some contexts, comparative knowledge can strengthen perceived credibility in policy discussions. It can also help members present a wider range of options by showing that similar issues have been addressed differently elsewhere. Comparative insights may highlight risks associated with particular reforms, illustrate alternative trajectories, or provide reassurance that specific approaches have been used effectively in other jurisdictions. In this sense, SICI can contribute to evidence-informed discussion rather than to policy direction.

Respondents also describe a legitimacy dividend: international engagement signals openness to learning and strengthens confidence that evaluative practice is informed by wider professional reference points.

Participation in international discussions may contribute to shaping system narratives. Members who engage regularly in SICI bring back insights that can help inform public debate, shape perceptions of quality and add to broader conversations about accountability and improvement. The effect is diffuse. It develops over time. But it supports a more informed and less insular dialogue about the purposes and practices of educational inspection.

2.7.4. Summary

Overall, the evidence suggests that SICI's impact is real but diffuse. It operates through strengthened professional judgement, deeper organisational learning, and more informed advice. It grows over time, through frequent interactions rather than individual

interventions. It can respect national autonomy while expanding the comparative horizons within which members work.

This form of impact corresponds with the realities of complex public systems. Inspection does not operate in isolation. It requires judgement, contextual interpretation and informed communication with policymakers and the public. Survey responses suggest that SICI can contribute to an agenda-setting function, with respondents converging on inspection for improvement, evidence standards and teaching and learning quality as key areas for shared inquiry. International cooperation supports these functions by adding to the evidence base and reinforcing the professional confidence needed to navigate change.

3. Reflective Analysis and Conclusions

3.1. International cooperation as professional learning, not policy alignment

The evidence reviewed in this paper suggests that SICI functions most effectively as a structured environment for professional learning across jurisdictions. Its contribution lies in enabling members to examine their own assumptions, practices, and strategic choices through sustained exposure to credible alternatives.

This distinction matters because inspection is inherently context-dependent.

SICI's evidence base instead points to the value of reflective comparison. It also helps professionals test assumptions that can become normalised within domestic settings. This is a form of adaptive expertise rather than technical transfer.

3.2. How SICI enables learning in practice

Across the organisational record, SICI's learning value is not produced by single events. It is produced by the interaction of several connected mechanisms. These mechanisms make comparison practical rather than abstract.

National Coordinator Forums provide continuity. They support routine dialogue and collective sense-making on emerging issues. They also connect international discussion to domestic operational realities through participants who are embedded in their own organisations.

Workshops provide depth. They enable members to look closely at of themes where professional judgement is complex and contested. Evaluations suggest that members value these events most when they support honest discussion of challenges, and provide exposure to different approaches and encourage systematic reflection over time.

Collaborative projects provide co-production. They allow members to explore issues jointly and to generate tangible outputs such as frameworks, tools, and shared reference points. The sequence of inclusion and wellbeing work illustrates how projects can build cumulatively, strengthening shared conceptual clarity without prescribing a single methodology.

Mobility, study visits, and job shadowing provide experiential learning. They allow members to observe practice in context and to understand tacit aspects of professional judgement that are difficult to capture through documents. They also strengthen trust and relationships, which then improve the quality of dialogue in other SICI settings.

Communication provides organisational memory. Newsletters, reports, and online platforms helps members learn even if they didn't attend events. Creating a members-only digital space improves accessibility and information retention, supporting continuity even in the event of staffing changes or shifts in national priorities.

Together, these mechanisms form a learning architecture. They support repeated interaction, accumulation of shared understanding and the ability to revisit issues as contexts evolve. This is the practical meaning of describing SICI as a learning infrastructure.

3.3. What impact looks like in a voluntary professional network

SICI's influence can be characterised as expanding the comparative horizons within which members think and act. Engagement can deepen evaluative reasoning by exposing professionals to how similar challenges are interpreted in other systems.

Organisational impact is more variable, but still evident. Comparative insight often informs internal discussion, influences methodological review, and supports more strategic choices, even when it does not directly result in visible reform.

At system level, the evidence suggests that, for some members and in some contexts, SICI contributes indirectly by strengthening the comparative basis on which

advice is developed. Rather than exerting a direct influence on policy direction, comparative insights may help members contextualise national discourse.

3.4. Conclusions: why this matters for the future of inspection

This paper has argued that SICI matters because it strengthens educational inspection through reflective comparison and sustained professional learning. Its contribution is cumulative rather than dramatic. It operates through connected mechanisms that enable members to learn without prescribing, compare without ranking and cooperate without eroding national autonomy.

In increasingly complex education systems, inspectorates must sustain public confidence while navigating uncertainty. International cooperation does not remove these challenges; however, it can support more informed and reflective decision-making.

SICI's experience suggests that networks of practice can play a distinctive role in educational governance by creating spaces for professional inquiry that can be difficult to replicate within national accountability frameworks. Such networks can strengthen judgement by widening reference points and exposing professionals to credible alternatives. They help members adapt by sharing experience, co-producing tools and sustaining relationships over time.

The implication is not that inspectorates should converge. It is that members benefit from structured cooperation that respects difference while making learning usable. In this sense, SICI supports education systems by strengthening the professional capability of those tasked with independent evaluation.

Overall, the evidence supports a clear conclusion. SICI's value lies in supporting members to reflect more critically on their own practice and to navigate complexity with greater professional confidence. It does so through voluntary, trust-based cooperation supported by stable mechanisms for dialogue, inquiry, mobility, and knowledge sharing. This is a modest claim. It is also a significant one for the future credibility and effectiveness of educational inspection in Europe and beyond. In this sense, international cooperation functions as a professional resource rather than a policy instrument, a means of widening the range of informed options available to those responsible for evaluation and inspection. This suggests that, in complex and evolving education systems, structured international cooperation is not an optional addition but a practical component of maintaining effective

inspection.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank members of the Standing International Conference of Inspectorates (SICI) for their participation in activities that informed the evidence base discussed in this article, including those members who also contributed by completing a survey.

Funding

No specific funding

Conflict of Interest

None

References

Standing International Conference of Inspectorates. (n.d.). *BIBESOIN – Better Inspection for Better Social Inclusion*. <https://sici-inspectorates.org/what-we-do/collaboration/bibesoin/>

Standing International Conference of Inspectorates. (n.d.). *TESSIE – Toolkit for Evaluating and Stimulating Social Inclusion and Equity*. <https://www.sici-inspectorates.eu/what-we-do/collaboration/projects/>

Standing International Conference of Inspectorates. (n.d.). *STESSIE – System-Level Conditions for Stimulating Social Inclusion and Equity*. <https://www.sici-inspectorates.eu/what-we-do/collaboration/projects/>

Standing International Conference of Inspectorates. (n.d.). *Civic values and skills: Comparative project*. <https://www.sici-inspectorates.eu/what-we-do/collaboration/projects/>