

# Executive Summary

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This report captures the evaluation of the effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability of the use of ESF resources through the Operational Program Administrative Capacity (POCA) 2014-2020 under OS 1.4, 2.1 and 2.2. The evaluation also aims to highlight the endogenous and exogenous factors that contribute to the success or failure of the implementation, as well as to the sustainability of the funded actions.

In order to evaluate the physical and financial performance and progress registered in the program implementation, the evaluation team used the following set of methodological tools: desk research (literature review, documentary analysis, analysis of result/achievement indicators), interviews with strategic actors and program beneficiaries, a questionnaire-based survey among POCA beneficiaries, focus groups, an expert panel organized for each evaluation topic, and a customer satisfaction survey (only for topics related to S.O. 1.4).

## **Main findings for S.O. 1.4, 2.1 and 2.2**

The main findings from the evaluation of the Programme are summarized below.

In terms of **effectiveness**, POCA interventions funded by OS 1.4, 2.1 and 2.2 are consistent with national strategies adopted in several sectors, and in particular with SNAP (for OS 1.4), SCAP (OS 2.1) and SNA (OS 2.2). Compared to the previous programming period, POCA benefits from the existence of this strategic and comprehensive framework, providing a high degree of correlation of interventions with existing national strategies.

POCA interventions also respond to the stakeholders' needs and are still fully relevant when considering the evolving context.

The level of progress of the three OS is different: in the case of OS 1.4 the progress is low because the three contracted projects are still in the implementation phase (two of them started in 2019); OS 2.1 (253 projects, of which 69 are under implementation) has a relatively good performance, taking into account the fact that some indicators are expected to reach values set for the year 2023; SO 2.2 (48 contracted projects, of which 6 are in the implementation phase) presents a very high degree of attainment, with a high probability to reach the targets set for 2023.

Regarding **efficiency**, almost all beneficiaries considered that the same results of POCA projects could not have been achieved at lower costs. Some factors influenced the activities under the perspective of their cost-effectiveness, either positively or negatively, depending on specific theme-related factors. In terms of implementation efficiency, the comparison with similar parts of other Operational Programs of EU

member States shows that POCA level of progress at the end of 2019 was higher than comparable sections included in O.P. of Slovakia and Italia, and lower than the comparable sections of the Bulgarian O.P.

As for the **impact** of the funded interventions, almost all beneficiaries agreed with the assertion that without the support of POCA the activities included in the projects could not have been carried out at all or - if realised through other means - would have reached a lower level of quality. However, it has to be taken into consideration that the three S.O. have different scopes: S.O. 1.4 envisaged a wide reform process that is still ongoing and whose impact will continue and will extend also well beyond this programming period; S.O. 2.1 and S.O. 2.2 have a higher level of progress, but the impact of the current interventions puts in place the issue of the continuity of these interventions.

The ways to ensure **sustainability** are intrinsically connected to the implemented activities. However, several risks in the long-term may be highlighted, as indicated here under in the short description of the evaluation results provided for each evaluation theme.

### **Main findings for each S.O.**

For each theme, the main findings from the evaluation of the programme are presented as follows.

#### *Evaluation theme 7:*

The actions so far carried out are all consistent in achieving the objectives of the national strategies. The connection with SCAP is very high and the three projects financed under S.O. 1.4 show also a very high complementarity with SNAP. The use of non-competitive mechanisms is finalised to address the fundamental issues related to administrative capacity in the field of public procurement.

The three projects are all under implementation. Only the first project with ANAP as beneficiary is approximating the final stage. The level of progress of the indicators is still low, since only one indicator has so far reached the level of 50% (number of public authorities and institutions supported for the development and simplification of public procurement rules and procedures) and the estimation about the degree of achievement for 2023 is far from the targets (68%). However, since the projects are only three, and two of them have deadlines set in 2022, it is possible that there is still time to generate the expected results.

The support provided in the development of project ideas and the assistance provided by the MA in the implementation of projects was the most important internal factor that influenced the recorded achievements. Some critical external factors influencing the implementation process also emerged: late fulfilment of ex ante conditionalities, excessive amount of tertiary legislation, frequent modifications regarding ex ante controls, asymmetry between ex ante and ex-post controls. The state of emergency caused by the SARS-Covid 19 pandemic had effects in terms of postponement of the training activities and of the awareness events. ONAC was also pushed to run centralized public procurements for different entities and for different products (ventilators, medical equipment).



Regarding impact, the interventions are redesigning the public procurement system according to the initial objectives. Since the whole system still requires an improvement in skills and professionalisation of procurement operators, new competence frameworks and training curricula of the public procurement professional profiles were issued in 2020. ANAP public procurement Guide is online but requires further simplification and more knowledge among the contracting authorities.

The customer satisfaction carried out with 39 contracting authorities indicated that the general aspects of reform process are appreciated. However, on the degree of satisfaction for the functioning of the public procurement system in Romania opinions were divided, while the lowest scores were registered with respect to the evaluation of the legislative framework.

The balance between procurement performance and legal compliance is the most relevant issue arising from the reform process. Public procurement process needs to be further streamlined, simplified and de-bureaucratized in line with the initial needs and objectives set out in the POCA and SNA. Legislation still needs to be made more flexible. The need of a more pronounced attention to the qualitative aspects of procurement also emerged. POCA may contribute to this process by creating the conditions, based on the results of the current interventions, of a continuous, organised and structured dialogue between contracting authorities and ANAP.

The long-term sustainability of the projects interventions may be enhanced by the awareness of the hierarchies of the main organisations involved about the pillaring and transversal role played by public procurement in view of the overall improvement of the country's administrative capacity. Some risks are also to be highlighted: the lack of stability of the legislative framework and the need to better balance control/sanctions approaches aiming mainly to legal compliance and proactive/collaborative approaches aiming to improve public procurement economic performances.

#### *Evaluation theme 8:*

POCA interventions under S.O. 2.1 are highly consistent with numerous national strategies, and especially with SCAP. The calls issued were all relevant with respect to the needs of potential beneficiaries and stakeholders.

The changes occurring in the period since the approval of POCA strengthen the connection between the needs initially identified and the interventions enacted by the programme: the objectives aiming to modernising local public administration through the implementation of multiple line of actions are at the current stage as necessary and essential as they were at the moment of the launch of the programme.

253 projects have been contracted, and 69 of them have been completed. The level of progress is relatively good, with an average reach of 38%; not considering the four indicators newly that are still at zero (since the related interventions have not yet been put in place), the level of progress of the initially planned indicators amounts to 56%. For this last set of indicators the possibility to reach the estimated final targets is high. Compared to the end of 2019, the projects under this S.O. registered a significant progress.



Several factors determined delays in the implementation: late fulfilment of the ex-ante conditionality on quality management systems; late implementation of measures promoted by central public administration to ensure a unitary framework for substantiating the decision-making process at local level; postponement or slowing down of public procurement procedures; changes at institutional and legislative level. A differentiated degree of reception of the calls at local level was also observed: some calls were re-launched for the lack of interest shown by the local public authorities. Coronavirus pandemic made difficult or even stopped the implementation of some activities, but at the same time it 'forcibly' accelerated the adoption of ICT tools by local public administrations.

The communication activities were adequate and adapted to the needs of the local authorities. Beneficiaries were very satisfied regarding the communication activities and the support received from the MA, though training by MA POCA on MySMIS and a shared knowledge of the results and the good practices of the projects are needed.

Regarding efficiency, beneficiaries did not consider less expensive ongoing or recently implemented projects providing similar activities to the ones included in the POCA; most of them also asserted that the results of POCA projects could not have been achieved at lower costs. In terms of comparison with other Operational Programs aiming to optimise management systems at local level, at the end of 2019 the Bulgarian O.P. had a higher level of progress than POCA interventions under this S.O., while the Slovak O.P. a lower one.

As for impact, POCA may be considered as a "strong catalyst", without which the same results would not be reached. Most of the contracted projects include multiple and integrated objectives, but the reception of the related changes at the level of staff and employees represents an open issue. With specific regard to standard systems not well understood by the personnel, the need of coordination on the projects results emerged.

Regarding the long-term sustainability of the interventions, it is highly recommendable to promote the conditions for publishing and sharing the results of the activities. Risks in the long-term are mainly related to the lack of future funding, to possible legislative changes and to the fact that the general population is still considered largely unaware/unprepared with regard to many of the new digitised procedures/services introduced thanks to this line of interventions. Moreover, a clear picture of what will follow POCA interventions is still missing: in light of future interventions to be included in the programming period 2021-27, a more locally-focused, bottom-up, approach is needed. As for the digitisation needs of local administrations, a focus on the possibility to consider as eligible applicant also the smaller administrative units (communes and villages) is also to be taken into consideration.

#### *Evaluation theme 9:*

POCA interventions under OS 2.2 are consistent with SNA and have also strong connections with other national strategies (SCAP, SNAP and SNADR) . The calls issued were fully relevant with regard to the needs of the target groups and of the stakeholders. Moreover, the objectives set by the programme continue to

be relevant with respect to the ongoing evolution of needs and problems.

48 projects were contracted under OS 2.2, and only 6 are still under implementation: the completion rate of contracted projects is 87.5%, and all projects will be completed by January 2021 (except for one project with a completion deadline of March 2022). Four of the indicators show a very high degree of attainment and targets proposed for 2023 have been achieved so far in proportion of 69%. It is however expected that the number of authorities and institutions supported in developing and adopting operational procedures on anti-corruption prevention measures cannot be fully achieved by the end of 2023.

The majority of the surveyed beneficiaries declared not to have faced any particular challenge during the project implementation: compared to the results of the survey with beneficiaries of interventions under S.O. 1.4 and 2.1, this is a much better result. Most of the beneficiaries highly appreciated level of detail and accessibility of the information provided by POCA structures. However, many of them continued to request training sessions for better managing transversal issues arising from the implementation process. Moreover, a stronger orientation to developing an interinstitutional dialogue on the results achieved is needed.

External actors/factors influencing the implementation process were also identified, as delays due to the complexity of the public procurement procedures. The state of emergency also determined delays, but to a lesser extent than in other S.O., due mainly to the high level of progress reached by the activities at the moment of the diffusion of the pandemic. Compared to other S.O., interventions in this field were less influenced by institutional/legislative changes.

Regarding efficiency, almost all the respondents to the survey mentioned that the same results as those achieved through the POCA projects could not have been obtained at lower costs. In terms of comparison with similar interventions included in other Operational Programs of EU Member States, POCA indicators related to S.O. 2.2 at the end of 2019 were at higher levels than comparable indicators of Italian O.P. on transparency and ethics.

As for impact, according to beneficiaries the results obtained through the funded interventions would not have been possible without POCA support. Under this regard, the most important aspect to be taken into consideration is that institutions (both central and local) are in the phase of formally developing procedures to prevent corruption and promote ethics and therefore there is still a serious problem with the formalist approach to measures to promote integrity. However, in some cases the diffusion of new procedures and new skills among not only the personnel directly involved in these activities but at a more general level within their respective institutions was observed.

With regard to long-term sustainability the main long-term results are the implementation of internal procedures and the improvement of individual skills and competences. However, the consolidation of the results is strictly related to the support provided by all the institutional levels involved in the implementation of these measures. The major challenge is therefore related to the necessity to constantly maintain the full involvement of the higher institutional layers of the authorities in charge with the



implementation of the anti-corruption interventions; lack of funds, unpredictable evolution of the pandemic and differentiated administrative capacities at local level may also have an influence on long-term sustainability of the funded interventions. Finally, a debate on the future of the interventions in this field is needed.

