

Executive Summary

Purpose and scope

This is the final ex-ante evaluation report of the Operational Programme Technical Assistance 2014-2020. The general objective of the ex-ante evaluation of the Technical Assistance Operational Programme 2014-2020 is to ensure added value and to improve the quality of the programming document which will be negotiated with the European Commission, according to the new regulations regarding the funds of the Common Strategic Framework 2014-2020 and to deliver valuable judgments and recommendations on programming issues.

The main evaluation themes addressed are External Consistency, Intervention Logic of the Programme, Programme Performance and Strategic Contribution. These themes are further detailed into eleven evaluation questions provided by the Terms of Reference issued by the Ministry of European Funds of Romania.

Methodology and ex-ante evaluation process

The methodology of the ex-ante evaluation was described in the Inception Report and is summarized at the beginning of each evaluation question. As recommended by the Commission guidelines, the evaluation process was iterative and interactive and included constant communication between the Evaluation Team and the Ministry of European Funds, the Programmer, as key stakeholder in charge of the coordination of the elaboration of the plan as well as interviews, expert panels, workshops and focus groups with representatives of MA OPTA, but also with beneficiaries.

Between April 2014 and July 2014, the evaluation team provided two feedback reports on the draft versions of the Operational Programme Technical Assistance prepared by the Ministry of European Funds, and two Draft Ex-ante Evaluation Reports.

More precisely, in April 2014, the Evaluation Team delivered the first Feedback Report which provided recommendations regarding the quality of needs assessment and the structure of the existing OP. Based on this report, the Ministry elaborated a new version of the Operational Programme Technical Assistance in April 2014, marking the start of the second iteration. This second cycle was ended in May 2014, when a second Feedback Report was provided by the evaluation team.

The first version of the Draft Ex-ante Evaluation Report was delivered on 27 June 2014, and it was based on the third version of the Operational Programme from 13 June 2014. On 10 July 2014 a revised version of Operational Programme Technical Assistance v3 was received, and it was the base for the second version of the draft ex-ante evaluation report. The second version of the Draft Ex-ante Evaluation Report was provided on 21 July 2014 and it took into consideration the first official version of the Operational Programme, sent to the European Commission on 6 August 2014.

Moreover, punctual and ongoing feedback was provided from March 2014 up to date. These interactions were complemented with feedback meetings aimed at clarifying the conclusions and recommendations of the ex-ante evaluator and agreeing on future modifications of the Operational Programme.

On 24 October the second official version of Operational Programme Technical Assistance was received, and it is the subject for this evaluation report.

Findings and recommendations

The findings and recommendation of the evaluation, together with a description of the iterative process and table of conclusions and recommendations are presented in 11 chapters, correlated with the 11 evaluation question included in the Terms of Reference.

The ex-ante evaluation evidenced that the Operational Programme Technical Assistance is the result of an active partnership process, during which all stakeholders were consulted and informed at each stage of elaboration. The first version of Operational Programme Technical Assistance was available for consultation in March 2014, and representatives from other ministries, public institutions, but also private stakeholders, had the opportunity to influence the content of the Operational Programme Technical Assistance.

The Operational Programme Technical Assistance 2014-2020 is structured into three priority axes, which focus respectively on beneficiaries' capacity and information and publicity (Priority Axis 1), on the European Structural and Investments Funds legal and procedural framework (Priority Axis 2), and on human resources management (Priority Axis 3).

The Programme addresses both horizontal issues for all Operational Programmes (in terms of support for projects beneficiaries, communication activities, system support, information management system support, and human resources management) and programme-specific ones for Large Infrastructure Operational Programme, Competitiveness Operational Programme and Operational Programme Technical Assistance (covering these programmes' needs to support beneficiaries', communication, the management structures, and the human resources).

Overall, there are no outstanding aspects in terms of recommendations related to the Operational Programme Technical Assistance. The programme has progressively incorporated recommendations that were made throughout the evaluation process, therefore at the moment recommendations do not concern inconsistencies of the programme, but suggestions for adding up value to it.

External Consistency

The strategic consistency of the Operational Programme Technical Assistance was assessed against the Europe 2020 Strategy, the Common Strategic Framework, the country specific Council recommendations on the National Reform Programme and the Partnership Agreement. Given the specificity of Operational Programme Technical Assistance, to provide transversal support for the implementation of operational programmes, in most of the cases consistency with these strategies is indirect.

Operational Programme Technical Assistance has been found to be complementary with Europe 2020 Strategy, the Common Strategic Framework, the country specific Council recommendations and the Partnership Agreement along aspects such as management structures capacity, information and communication, human resources management, and beneficiaries' capacity.

In terms of consistency with EU 2020 Strategy, Operational Programme Technical Assistance is consistent with the flagship initiative "Digital agenda for 2020" and "An agenda for new skills and jobs". Also, regarding thematic objectives included in the Partnership Agreement, Operational Programme Technical Assistance is related to thematic objective 11 that concerns an enhanced institutional capacity. Consistency with the country specific Council recommendations refers to support for the use of financial instruments, for conduction of studies and evaluations and support for ESIF structures staff.

At national level, the evaluation focused on consistency with other technical assistance interventions provided under the Regional Operational Programme, Human Capital Operational Programme, Administrative Capacity Operational Programme, National Rural Development Programme. Minor overlaps have been eliminated during the evaluation process and currently only complementarities exist.

With respect to the Strategy for Consolidation of Public Administration Capacity complementarities were identified in areas such as information and publicity activities, realisation of guides and methodologies aimed at facilitating internal processes at the level of management structures, development of information management systems, and training and counselling for staff.

With respect to consistency with European Union Strategy for the Danube Region, Strategy Regarding the Marine Basin of the Black Sea; Horizon 2020; Horizon 2020, COSME, Creative Europe, Social Change and Innovation, Connecting Europe consistency has been identified on a series of aspects related to communication activities or information systems.

Intervention logic

The logic of intervention of the Operational Programme Technical Assistance is coherent and follows a logical structure, starting from identification of needs definition of specific objectives and setting of expected results. Result indicators are relevant for the set specific objectives, and the defined actions contribute to their achievement.

The output indicators are clear and relevant. In terms of contribution of estimated outputs to results, there is a causal link between all the estimated outputs and their correspondent result indicator, and the assumptions underlying the results chain are plausible.

With respect to external factors which can influence the indicators, some of the most important include economic situation in the country, institutional changes and political instability, beneficiaries' capacities, changes in the public procurement rules and procedures, potential infringements during the implementation process, the level of complexity of the structural instruments implementation system.

Programme Performance

In terms of human resources and administrative capacity to manage the Programme, room for further improvement was identified in the area of clear assignation of staff, work load, number of staff from implementation structures.

Moreover, the new institutional arrangement and the role of Ministry of European Funds as a coordinator of European Structural and Investment Funds, of MA and also of a beneficiary represent a challenge from the point of view of human resources and administrative capacity. Consequently, it is desirable to provide a clear definition of the structures and staff in charge of management and implementation of the Operational Programme Technical Assistance, to increase headcount in understaffed units, and to simplify project implementation procedures.

Also, additional restructuring action is recommended, to avoid the conflict of interest at the level of the Managing Authority of Operational Programme Technical Assistance. The evaluators acknowledge that the implementation of part of these recommendations cannot be approached by the Operational Programme, but at higher institutional levels in the Ministry of European Funds.

With respect to monitoring and data collection, the programming document does not contain yet a detailed description of the planned arrangements for the timely collection and aggregation of statistical data and their publication. In order to fulfil the conditionality on Statistical data and indicators, the Programmer is elaborating "Indicator Fiches" for each of the indicators. Complete and accurate introduction of data in SMIS is essential for the performance and monitoring of the Operational Programme, especially in the context of a relatively low performance of the system in 2007-2013 characterised by flaws of data stored in SMIS and their reporting reliability.

Strategic contribution

In relation to contribution to EU 2020 strategy, considering that Operational Programme Technical Assistance will provide specific technical assistance support to Competitiveness and Large Infrastructure Operational Programmes, it will have a stronger indirect contribution to the achievement of Headline Targets on R&D, CO2 emission reduction, renewable energies and energy efficiency.

Given its nature, Operational Programme Technical Assistance will have a horizontal influence over all Operational Programmes financed from European Structural and Investment Funds, and will also provide support for European Territorial Cooperation programmes beneficiaries, while it will also have

a specific contribution to Large Infrastructure Operational Programme, Competitiveness Operational Programme, and Operational Programme Technical Assistance itself.

In terms of horizontal principles, the minimum legal requirements regarding equal opportunities in terms of gender equality and non-discrimination are respected by the OPTA. Moreover, Operational Programme Technical Assistance will provide support to the functioning and capacity strengthening of the Working Group related to horizontal principle related to equal opportunities in terms of gender equality and non-discrimination that is mentioned in the Partnership Agreement.

Furthermore, information and publicity activities supported by the Operational Programme will include initiatives aimed at promoting equal opportunities and non-discrimination. Throughout the evaluation process, the recommendations to explicitly refer to the equal opportunities principle in the process of Operational Programme Technical Assistance programming and implementation were incorporated by the programmer and included in the OPTA.

With respect to sustainable development aspects, the Operational Programme mentions a set of horizontal interventions that will be financed during 2014-2020, such as training, communication activities or studies and evaluation, and no recommendation has been made in this respect.

