



MINISTRY OF INVESTMENT AND EUROPEAN PROJECTS
PROGRAMME EVALUATION OFFICE OF THE GENERAL DIRECTORATE
FOR PROGRAMMING AND SYSTEM COORDINATION

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE EVALUATION PLAN OF THE TECHNICAL
ASSISTANCE OPERATIONAL PROGRAMME 2014-2020

EVALUATION REPORT FOR 2021, INCLUDING RELATED DATASET AND METADATA

FINAL VERSION

JUNE 24TH, 2022

Executive summary (short version)

The project *Implementation of the Evaluation Plan of the Technical Assistance Operational Programme (TAOP) 2014-2020* aims to: (i) facilitating informed management and strengthening evidence-based decision making at programme level, (ii) strengthening reporting to the European Commission on the effectiveness and impact of funding, (iii) strengthening the evaluation culture of the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) and increasing the level of information on funded interventions and their impacts.

The Executive Summary summarizes the main conclusions on the results and impact of the Technical Assistance Operational Programme for the period 2014-2020 (until 31st December 2021), in terms of:

- Strengthening the capacity of beneficiaries of the European Structural and Investment Funds in general and of the Technical Assistance (TA), Large-Scale Infrastructure and Competitiveness Operational Programmes in particular, to prepare and implement mature projects (Specific Objective 1.1)(S.O);
- Dissemination of information on the Structural and Investment Funds in general and the Technical Assistance, Large-Scale Infrastructure and Competitiveness Operational Programmes.
- Contribution to GDP formation and employment.

The third Evaluation Report has analysed these issues for the project¹ from the following perspective:

- Effectiveness of the interventions financed (i.e. the extent to which the objectives of the programme have been achieved in terms of financial execution and achievement of the indicators set);
- The extent to which the capacity of beneficiaries to prepare and implement projects and the level of awareness of the general public about EU funds has increased during the period under review;
- The extent to which the funding provided through the Technical Assistance Operational Programme has contributed to increasing the capacity of beneficiaries and the dissemination of information on non-reimbursable funds;
- The occurrence of unintended positive or negative effects of interventions, the sustainability of their impact and the internal and external factors that affected the implementation of the programme and its effects.

The methodological approach used combined qualitative and quantitative evaluation methods. The information obtained was verified by applying additional data collection methods involving consultation of managers of projects funded under the programme and participants in training activities, as well as beneficiaries of European Structural and Investment Funds. The findings and conclusions were validated through consultation with programme stakeholders in focus groups.

The conclusions reached took into account the programme relocations and the contracting of 16 projects under Specific Objective 1.1 between February and November 2021. In general, the intended effects of such complex interventions can be observed and lend themselves to robust evaluation when a representative sample of projects have been completed. During the period 2014-2020, approximately 38.5% of all projects funded under the programme were completed (i.e. 57 of 148). Therefore, the likelihood of the expected impact being achieved was estimated based on the results obtained up to the baseline date. All the stakeholders have been consulted in this respect. Where availability to participate in consultations was limited, the analysis was complemented by other data collection and evaluation methods applied. Last but not least, the restrictions adopted as a result of Pandemic Covid-19 have affected the progress of certain activities in the funded projects and thus their impact estimates.

Effectiveness of interventions

In terms of the effectiveness of interventions funded by the Technical Assistance Operational Programme 2014-2020, financial and physical progress is limited. The limited level of financial execution is a consequence of the stage of implementation of projects. At the same time, although for three of the indicators set at programme level, the level of achievement against the target set in the programming document as of 31.12.2021 exceeds 100%, there is a risk that the project level targets will not be achieved by the end of programme implementation in 2023. This risk cannot be quantified exactly as no interim indicator targets have been set.

Evolution of beneficiaries' capacity to prepare and implement projects and of the level of dissemination of information on the European Structural and Investment Funds in the period 2014-2020

During the period under review, an increase in the capacity of beneficiaries to prepare and implement projects financed by the European Structural and Investment Funds was observed. The capacity both to prepare quality proposals with strategic impact and to effectively implement contracted projects has increased, although in the latter case the analysis shows that progress has not been optimal. The analysis also reflects the increased level of information and awareness of citizens about the opportunities offered and the impact of the Structural and Investment Funds increased at the end of 2021 compared to 2014. However, the development of a partnership culture on grant funding could not be comprehensively assessed due to limited monitoring and various contextual factors affecting this progress.

Contribution of the Technical Assistance Operational Programme 2014-2020 to increasing beneficiaries' capacity and awareness of non-reimbursable funds

The Technical Assistance Operational Programme 2014-2020 has contributed largely to increasing the efficiency of project implementation and the capacity to identify and prepare quality proposals with strategic impact. However, we cannot quantify exactly to what extent the increased quality and strategic impact of the projects is due to the programme, but there are certain indications.

At the same time, it was not possible to observe the contribution of the programme to raising public awareness of European funded projects, given the persistence of institutional bottlenecks in the implementation of information and dissemination actions. However, the evidence shows a moderate contribution to strengthening the partnership framework of the European Structural and Investment Funds.

Unintended effects and sustainability of programme impacts

Assessing both the unintended effects and the sustainability of the impact of funded interventions is premature given the limited stage of implementation of the programme. What could be observed, however, is that both the unintended effects and the sustainability of the impact are significantly influenced by the type of interventions funded. For example, training activities tend to strengthen intra- and inter-institutional communication and collaboration and their impact is sustainable as long as the specific activities of the trainees do not change. The main novelty is the Covid-19 pandemic, which has generated both positive (e.g. increased use of digital means of communication and information, and use of e-signatures) and negative (e.g. increased dissatisfaction due to low digital skills or insufficiently adapted online activities) spillovers.

The sustainability of the effects achieved depends on the specifics of the activities carried out. For example, under S.O1.1, the training and education activities have the potential to maintain their effects in the long term, although the degree of sustainability depends on the stability of the areas in which the training was carried out (e.g. legislative framework, public procurement procedures) and the nature of the activities carried out by the beneficiaries after completion of the activities.

Factors that positively or negatively influenced the interventions

The Covid-19 pandemic is also the main factor that has affected the implementation of planned activities and the expected impact in the last period. It was no longer possible to organise study visits, information events or training sessions, at least not in the form originally envisaged. On the other hand, institutional instability or status quo, in some cases, has negatively affected project implementation. There was also a lack of clarity on the development of a new strategic vision on increasing the dissemination of information on the European Structural and Investment Funds, as well as low stakeholder involvement.

Good practices

However, some examples of good practice in implementing funded interventions have been identified: (i) creation of single teams of experts with strategic vision on interventions in specific areas, (ii) verification of the quality of deliverables made by the relevant institutions in the areas concerned, (iii) regular analysis of the needs of target groups of interventions, (iv) implementation of horizontal interventions for beneficiaries of the European Structural and Investment Funds complementary to specific interventions for certain operational programmes.

Recommendations

Therefore, the Technical Assistance Operational Programme has contributed to strengthening the capacity of beneficiaries to prepare and implement projects financed by the European Structural and Investment Funds. Concrete results have been observed, such as improved project management issues as a result of training sessions, or increased quality and complexity of projects.

The main recommendations to optimise this contribution both in 2014-2020 and in the next programming period concern:

- Continuation and intensification of the TAOP support offered to beneficiaries from the private sector and carry out a study to analyse the needs of potential beneficiaries of these Operational Programmes from the private/non-governmental sector in order to identify the types of eligible support from the TAOP;
- Continuing to carry out regular analyses and projections of staff workload, how resources could be used more efficiently (including experts contracted with TAOP support), anticipating busy periods and preventing risks;
- Carrying out a study to verify to what extent digitisation or the use of emerging technologies (i.e. AI, RPA) helps to increase efficiency in administrative processes and reduce the burden on civil servants and beneficiaries;
- Implementing mechanisms to ensure knowledge transfer (e.g. *job shadowing* and pair work) so as to make the most of the experience of the experts on agreement and ensuring the sustainability of interventions;
- Continuing the implementation of revised information and dissemination projects, with increased attention to factors that may affect the achievement of project targets, even if their cumulative value exceeds the revised programme indicator targets and the practical risks at programme level are minimal. On the other hand, it is recommended to start as soon as possible the vocational training component in a project concept that can be taken over for the next programming period, including a hybrid physical-online approach and blended methods adapted to current learning preferences.
- Creating more flexible approaches including: adopting agreements that allow flexibility in the process, with milestones and deliverables, moving away from process indicators to output indicators that leave flexibility on how to implement and focus on outputs and outcomes.
- Re-conceptualization of support activities for social partners, including at least the following features: use of a remote communication tool, continuity of communication by including asynchronous interactions, coherent combination of information, consultation, training
- creation and implementation of a web-based remote communication tool dedicated to the development of partnership culture and the involvement of partners in the management of the ESIF. The tool needs to be integrated into the ESIF communication strategy and related tools so that it is not perceived as a new tool outside of ESIF communication;
- Ensure through Technical Assistance the necessary human resources for continuity in communication, including specialised expertise such as in online facilitation, specialist expertise on specific areas;