



## 1. Executive summary

**1.** This evaluation report covers the synthesis of the Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development (SOP HRD) 2007-2013 retrospective evaluations, comprising the 4 sectors targeted by these evaluations, namely - **Employment, Social Inclusion, Education and Technical Assistance**. The evaluation of the 4 sectors was carried out in 4 different technical assistance projects targeting the period 2007-2015, each evaluation exercise taking place over a period of 6-8 months, between May 2019 and January 2021.

**2.** This synthesis evaluation exercise is part of a broader evaluation plan, which also includes two evaluation exercises of the Human Capital Operational Program 2014-2020 interventions in the area of technical assistance, one of them being carried out in 2021, and the last evaluation exercise under the project being foreseen in the last year of implementation 2023. In addition, the contract also targets three synthesis reports of all evaluations and 7 ad-hoc evaluation exercises.

**3.** The retrospective evaluation of SOP HRD 2007-2013, through the 4 evaluations, aimed to support the identified stakeholders to understand the effects of the evaluated interventions, how the effects were produced, the influencing factors and lessons learned that can contribute to the improvement of future interventions in the 4 areas analysed. The users of the identified evaluation results include: MIPE, the competent ministries responsible for public policies supported by the European Social Fund (ESF), Government of Romania, Managing Authority (MA) POCU, intermediate bodies (IB) POCU and members of the Monitoring Committee (MC) POCU, including economic and social partners.

**4.** The purpose of all SOP HRD intervention evaluation exercises was to facilitate an informed management of the Human Capital Operational Program 2014-2020 and the adoption of evidence-based decisions.

**5.** The evaluation in the **Employment sector** took into account the major areas of intervention KAI (Key area of intervention) 3.1, KAI 3.2 under PA 3 priority axis, KAI 4.1, KAI 4.2 under PA 4 priority axis, KAI 5.1, KAI 5.2 under PA 5 priority axis and KAI 2.3 under PA 2 priority axis.

- KAI 2.3 Access to and participation in CVT (Continuing Vocational Training)
- KAI 3.1 Promoting entrepreneurial culture
- KAI 3.2 Training and support for companies and employees to promote adaptability
- KAI 4.1 Strengthening the capacity of the Public Employment Service to provide employment services
- KAI 4.2 Training of the Public Employment Service staff
- KAI 5.1 Development and implementation of active employment measures
- KAI 5.2 Promoting the long-term sustainability of rural areas in terms of human resource development and employment

**6.** The evaluation in the **Education sector** took into account the key areas of intervention KAI 1.1, KAI 1.2, KAI 1.3, KAI 1.4 and KAI 1.5 under PA 1 priority axis and KAI 2.1 under PA 2 priority axis.

- KAI 1.1 Access to quality initial vocational education and training
- KAI 1.2 Quality in higher education
- KAI 1.3 Human resources development in education and training
- KAI 1.4 Quality in continuing vocational training in SOP HRD
- KAI 1.5 - Doctoral and post-doctoral programs to support research
- KAI 2.1 Transition from school to active life

**7.** The evaluation in the **Social Inclusion sector** took into account the key areas of intervention KAI 6.1, KAI 6.2, KAI 6.3 under AP 6 priority axis and KAI 2.2 under PA 2 priority axis.



- KAI 2.2 Preventing and correcting early school leaving
- KAI 6.1 Development of social economy in SOP HRD
- KAI 6.2 Improving access and participation of vulnerable groups in the labour market
- KAI 6.3 Promoting equal opportunities in the labour market

**8.** The evaluation in the **Technical Assistance** sector took into account the key areas of intervention KAI 7.1, KAI 7.2 under PA 7 priority axis, KAI 3.3 under PA 3 priority axis, and KA 6.4 under PA 6 priority axis.

- KAI 7.1 Support for SOP HRD implementation, overall management and evaluation
- KAI 7.2 Support for SOP HRD promotion and communication
- KAI 3.3 Development of partnerships and boosting initiatives for social partners and the civil society
- KAI 6.4 Transnational initiatives on inclusive labour market

**9.** The **evaluation questions** to which the evaluation reports answered, pursuant to the tender book, are common to all 4 sectors, namely:

- Quantification of progress achieved in targeted areas, sectors and groups in relation to specific objectives (gross effects or effectiveness of the intervention)
- Determining the extent to which the observed progress is attributed to the program (net effect or impact of the intervention)
- Identifying unintended, positive or negative effects
- Determining the propagation effect
- Formulation of findings on the sustainability of effects
- Identifying the mechanisms that facilitated / prevented their effects and key contextual characteristics
- Identifying the extent to which things could have been done better

The **Social Inclusion** sector had an additional question about costs:

- To what extent are the costs involved justified, taking into account the changes / effects / results recorded

The **Employment** Sector had an additional question about the contribution of SOP HRD to GDP formation: What is the contribution of SOP HRD 2007-2013 to gross domestic product formation and employment

## EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

**10.** The evaluation process was based on a **combination of methods, designed horizontally for all KAIs related to each of the 4 SOP HRD sectors and subsequently adapted to the specifics of each KAI**. This allowed for an efficient and consistent approach to the implementation of the methods, given that the key areas of intervention have common elements of intervention but especially beneficiaries and other common stakeholders.

**11.** The evaluation methods and instruments planned and actually applied in the evaluation process included: analysis of the specialized literature, documentary research, interviews, workshops, panel of experts, focus group, case studies, opinion polls, statistical analysis of the series data - based on collected contextual data, counterfactual impact analysis, regression analysis, analysis of the influencing factors in the mechanism that produces results and other effects, regression analysis (based on Heckman selection model) and Instrumental Variables Method, graphical analysis for viewing data.

**12.** The **evaluated period** was the duration of SOP HRD 2007-2013 implementation (extended until 31.12.2015, the deadline for the implementation of projects), and in terms of effects, they were analysed based on available data until 2020.



## METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

**13.** The **main methodological limitations** were generated by the **low degree of availability of stakeholders**, especially reflected at the level of the polls, but also at the level of the application of other evaluation instruments such as interviews, workshops or focus groups. The conditions imposed by the COVID 19 pandemic also imposed restrictions on direct interaction with respondents in the case of interviews and group meetings. **A second important limitation was related to the quality and accuracy of the administrative data** necessary for the evaluations generated by inconsistencies at the level of centralized monitoring data based on Action Web, at the level of reported values of program indicators, data provided in formats unsuitable for processing, data contradicting data from alternative sources, etc.

**14.** At the same time, another important methodological aspect resulted from the difficulty of investigating the effects (especially the unexpected and the propagated ones) and their sustainability at such a **long distance after the end of the intervention**. The information needed to evaluate the effects, respectively the way in which the participation in the projects influenced the changes that occurred.

## GENERAL ASPECTS REGARDING THE CONTEXT IN WHICH THE INTERVENTIONS TOOK PLACE

**15.** The Sectoral Operational Program Human Resources Development with a total allocation (from the European Social Fund and the Romanian state budget) of over 3.7 billion Euros. The program was of considerable magnitude and complexity, a real challenge for the authorities involved in the implementation system, but also for funding beneficiaries and was implemented in the context created by the financial crisis of 2008-2010 and subsequently in the recovery period of the national economy. A widely held view is that the implementation of this program has been an important learning and capacity building exercise.

**16.** For all 4 sectors targeted through the 21 KAIs, SOP HRD funding did not have a uniform territorial distribution and does not appear well correlated with the existing needs in all development regions, even if the large share of funding in Bucharest-Ilfov region is explained by the large number of beneficiaries public institutions and universities, predominantly located in Bucharest.

**17.** The conclusions and recommendations are specific to a retrospective evaluation, focused on impact, on long-term effects relevant to the needs of the 4 sectors, on the mechanisms by which interventions produce these effects, but also on indirect or propagated effects. The conclusions summarize the answers to the seven evaluation questions, the recommendations being consistent with them.

**18.** The recommendations aim at future interventions funded post-2020, through the European Social Fund, to ensure a better impact for solving the priority problems and needs in the 4 sectors, for creating a favourable framework for producing long-term effects, for improving the implementation system of the future operational program 2021-2027, but also improvements that can be implemented for the Human Capital Operational Program 2014-2020 in progress at the date of this evaluation.

## CONCLUSIONS OF THE EVALUATION

### Conclusions common to all sectors

**19.** The Operational Program Human Resources Development 2007-2013 was a learning exercise for the operational program management authorities, beneficiaries and participants alike.

**20.** The administrative burden for beneficiaries was very high, significantly influencing the implementation of projects. Although it is difficult to demonstrate, it can be concluded that the administrative burden had a negative effect on the effects obtained, by diverting significant resources from the core activities of the project.

**21.** The evaluation of the contribution of the interventions to the development of the four sectors was extremely difficult in the absence of a results-oriented monitoring, able to collect data on the results, the changes produced by the implementation of the projects, respectively of the intervention.



22. The analysis of the degree of achievement of the program indicators established at SOP HRD level reveals that out of the 69 program indicators, 56 indicators registered values achieved close to or above the target values, and 13 indicators did not reach their target values. Overall, it can be considered that the target values of SOP HRD program indicators have been largely met. In this context, it is important to specify that SOP HRD MA (Managing Authority) adopted corrective measures during the implementation of the program in order to increase the achievement of the program indicators targets, in particular by creating a clearer system of assumption of program indicators by beneficiaries and of adequate target values at the level of the funded projects, through clearer provisions in this respect in the Applicant's Guides and in the technical-financial evaluation grids.

23. SOP HRD absorption rate is about 70%. Through the efforts of the MA and IB (Intermediate Body) in the period 2013-2016, it was possible to partially recover the delays in the implementation of SOP HRD accumulated until then and which caused a low absorption rate, but they were too large to be fully recovered and to ensure a 100% absorption of EU funds allocated to SOP HRD.

### **Conclusions on the EMPLOYMENT sector**

24. The dynamics of indicators in the employment sector show a negative evolution until 2011 in the context of the economic crisis followed by an increase in the recovery of the national economy, which led to an increase in the number of trained people, employees and unemployed, during the implementation of the Sectoral Operational Program Human Resources Development, a Program that had an important contribution from this perspective.

25. The development and implementation of active employment measures, both in urban and rural areas, have proved to be successful interventions, supporting the improvement of employment and the reduction of unemployment. It should be emphasized that the Program has had important effects for hardly employable persons but also among women. Thus, the evaluation showed that the most important short-term effects of the Program were on the long-term unemployed, and in the medium and long term, the effects are most significant for the inactive persons and jobseekers.

26. The program has led to a 25% increase in the chances of employment for the inactive persons, a 24% increase in the chances of jobseekers, respectively a 10% increase in the chances of unemployed persons over the age of 45 compared to other persons registered in the database of the National Employment Agency during the same year, and who did not participate in the Program. In rural areas, the Program targeted mainly hardly employable persons, including among the participants a high proportion of persons with a low level of education (under 8 grades), inactive persons and the long-term unemployed. Under these conditions, the Program contributed to the employment of over 18% of the participants and to the start of an independent activity in the case of 2.25% -3% of the participants.

27. Through the 5 Key Areas of Intervention (KAI 3.1, KAI 3.2, KAI 4.1, KAI 4.2, KAI 5.1, KAI 5.2 and KAI 2.3) under 4 PAs (PA3, PA4, PA5 and PA2), the program has generated positive effects on employees who participated in the training, especially in terms of their professional mobility: the beneficiaries were promoted / advanced or changed their job for a better one. It also generated lasting positive effects at the level of companies that have invested in the professional training of their employees, their economic performance being superior in the medium and long term. Thanks to the participation in the program, both employees and employers have become more aware of the importance of continuing vocational training, and of qualified human resources in line with labour market requirements and technological developments. This increased level of awareness has contributed to the sustainability of the effects of the Program by organizing and participating in other training courses. The program has significantly contributed to the creation of the necessary premises to achieve the effects in the targeted areas, a good example in this regard being the development of the market of vocational training providers. At the same time, through the supported interventions, the Program has had beneficial effects from the perspective of social inclusion, in that its positive effects have also



manifested themselves at the level of sub-groups which are generally characterized by reduced access to training and professional opportunities. On the other hand, local economies have only partially benefited in certain situations from the positive effects of qualification or continuing education / specialization actions, due to the increase in labour migration to Western European states in certain geographical areas.

**28.** An important aspect to emphasize is the territorial concentration of the effects obtained by the Program from the perspective of employment. Thus, the territorial distribution of the training participants who found a job within 6 months from the end of the intervention indicates Bucharest-Ilfov and South-East regions as the ones that coagulate the largest number of persons, at the opposite end being South-West Oltenia region. Strong effects from the employment perspective are also recorded in the Central and Western regions. Such a concentration is contrary to the principles of harmonious territorial development and the goal of reducing development gaps between regions.

**29.** The sustainability of the effects obtained, 3-5 years after the end of the interventions is demonstrated in many cases. The position of employed person in the labour market and at the level of employers has been strengthened, the productivity of enterprises whose staff have participated in continuing vocational training programs has increased in the long run.

### **Conclusions on the EDUCATION sector**

**30.** In the period 2007-2013, the dynamics of the indicators showed that Romania's education stagnated in many aspects, had little and insufficient progress or amplified its problems. Interventions in education have been implemented in an ambitious national strategic framework, with legislative changes that have created instability. Thus, the higher education sector went through, during the implementation period of SOP HRD 2007-2013 and after it, a significant reduction of the financial resources allocated from the state budget and the number of persons enrolled in study programs. Thus, although the interventions funded by SOP HRD should have played a complementary role to public funding, in the case of higher education many private actions were funded exclusively from these projects.

**31.** Progress on human resources development in education has been limited, amid a combination of complex contextual factors, from demographic change, budget constraints, delays in implementing reforms in the area of vocational education and training, and participation in continuing vocational training in Romania remained consistently well below the European average throughout the implementation period of SOP HRD, reaching a minimum participation rate in 2018 of 0.9% compared to 11.1% European average. Similarly, public funding in the area of Research Development Innovation in Romania continued to be insufficient and declining during and after the implementation of the program, leading to stagnant overall scientific performance and a low level of national and international scientific cooperation.

**32.** Professional insertion was also influenced by a number of factors, including demographic and socio-economic factors (youth unemployment rate), poor development of services such as guidance and counselling (insufficient human and material resources), formal nature of internships, lack of mechanisms to monitor the insertion at national level, lack of mechanisms to correlate the educational offer with the labour market in the context of reforms both at the educational level and at measures to increase employment.

**33.** The 6 KAIs under PA1 and KAI 2.1 under PA 2 priority axis have had positive effects for the education sector but are largely limited to target groups and with limited sustainability, some of them such as those in KAI 1.1. Thus, support interventions to improve school participation and performance at the level of supported units had a net positive impact, while the creation of the school counsellor body had a positive but limited impact due to the insufficient number of counsellors in the system and the low effectiveness of vocational training, from the perspective of transferring learning to practice.

**34.** A large number of methodologies and instruments have been developed through SOP HRD for a reform of the quality assurance system and the improvement of institutional management, as well as the educational



offer, the transition from school to active life, but the sustainability and extension of the use of methods and instruments created was not supported, coordinated and monitored.

**35.** There have been positive effects on the development of the quality of human resources employed at the level of structures subordinated to the Ministry of National Education (e.g. Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding) or independent (National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance), increased cooperation between different organizations or structures with roles of administration and monitoring of the higher education system, development of institutional administrative structures specialized in implementing externally funded projects but no impact of SOP HRD interventions was observed from the perspective of improving the quality assurance system in continuing vocational training.

**36.** The results of the projects were not translated into the continuing vocational training system, the number of authorized training programs and the number of providers increased during the implementation of the program due to training funding, but decreased after 2015, representing a reaction to the funding opportunity rather than a sustainable consolidation of the continuing vocational training system. Also, the results of SOP HRD interventions targeting the national quality assurance and management system in continuing vocational training (such as institutional arrangements, national provider authorization system, instruments and mechanisms at all levels of the system, etc.) were not adopted and implemented. Thus, quality interventions in continuing vocational training have failed to contribute to the restructuring of the quality assurance system.

**37.** SOP HRD funds allocated to interventions regarding doctoral and post-doctoral programs in support of research doubled the public investment in doctoral studies during 2008-2014, the size of the intervention being significant considering that it supported 11,245 PhD students. However, the contribution of SOP HRD interventions to the development of human resources in research and to the increase of research quality in Romania has not been confirmed, largely due to lack of data on the career path of supported PhD students or the effective involvement in research of PhD students from educational institutions. The development and strengthening of partnerships between universities, the development of networks with transnational partners and the improvement of the content of post-doctoral programs are the main positive effects of interventions for doctoral and post-doctoral programs, other than those reflected by outcome indicators.

**38.** Regarding the transition from school to active life, the size of SOP HRD intervention is significant compared to the number of graduates from upper secondary pre-university and university education and contributed to covering the funding gap especially for the development of the counselling system and internships. Interventions aimed at the transition from school to active life have contributed to the development of the structures, systems and instruments needed to facilitate the transition from school to active life by setting up counselling and / or practice centres, facilities, processes, procedures, working methodologies (practicum notebook per qualifications, methodologies for organizing internships, counselling students or pupils, selection to participate in counselling, internships); instruments (test sets, counselling worksheets); guides, manuals; optional curriculum development on entrepreneurship. All this has contributed to increasing the quality of counselling and career guidance services and their specialization.

### **Conclusions on the SOCIAL INCLUSION sector**

**39.** From the perspective of the social inclusion sector, the situation of vulnerable groups has fluctuated with temporary improvements in certain aspects, such as participation in training, employment rate, being correlated with the trends of the economic environment, the effects of crisis or economic growth, developments or involutions of social economy structures. In the absence of facilities such as tax facilities, the sheltered employment offer is insufficient to support the employment of vulnerable persons. Although the risk of social exclusion decreased in Romania between 2007 and 2019 by 16 percentage points, Romania remains at the highest level in Europe. The working poverty rate was also the highest in Europe and is related to the quality of jobs and the level of wages.



**40.** At the national level, the gender gap by occupational categories, areas of the national economy and types of employment has decreased. Equal access to employment and career building has increased, but not for persons with below-average education whose access to employment has declined. In terms of domestic violence and human trafficking, they have decreased in quantity but the danger is perceived more acutely. Positive evolutions have also been noted at the national level in terms of awareness of the principle of equal opportunities and gender in society and the issue of workplace sexual harassment.

**41.** In the area of social economy, progress has been made in the development of this sector mainly reflected in legislative evolutions through the adoption of the Social Economy Law 2019/2015 and subsequent secondary legislation that provides a legal framework for recognition but not effective support of the sector. The dynamics of social economy entities in Romania show that the new framework does not sufficiently stimulate the attestation of enterprises as social enterprises or the certification as insertion social enterprises.

**42.** The effects of interventions on access to and participation in education include improving teachers' skills to work with vulnerable groups, increasing students' / participants' confidence in AdȘ (Second Chance), and community awareness level of the importance of education and non-discrimination. SOP HRD was an opportunity to pilot instruments and methodologies, but their subsequent implementation and replication at the level of other communities was no longer supported and monitored. Thus, we can say that the projects funded by SOP HRD have produced positive effects on access to and participation in education, noticeable at the level of beneficiary schools or supported students, but at the level of the program there is no impact on reducing dropout or risk of dropping out.

**43.** SOP HRD interventions also contributed to the development of the social economy sector, through numerous funded projects, which allowed the popularization of this concept, research and debate of key concepts, exchanges of experience between stakeholders, development of materials and instruments specific to the area. The effects found at the level of projects include the skills acquired by specialists and trainers, the increased interest of the academic environment for the development or improvement of study programs in the area of social economy, the evolution of the legislative framework and the establishment of social economy structures and jobs at the level of these structures. However, the sustainability of the SESs established by KAI 6.1 and the jobs created is low, the survival rate of the SESs set up being around 50% after the end of the funding agreement.

**44.** SOP HRD interventions aimed at improving the access and participation of vulnerable groups in the labour market have contributed to increasing the employment of support beneficiaries but are not evidence of contributing to increasing employability, remaining vulnerable in the labour market, with discontinuation of employment and wages at minimum wage level. Support had a better impact for inactive persons in urban areas and less for inactive persons in rural areas.

**45.** The program had a net positive impact on the access of vulnerable persons to vocational training, qualification and skills development, on the development of partnerships for social inclusion. However, interventions failed to focus on vulnerable groups with the greatest needs, with the implementation mechanism encouraging the quantity rather than the quality of support. Other effects of the program include: increased employment motivation, self-confidence, self-esteem, reduced social isolation, even if in some cases only temporarily, self-responsibility, openness of employers to vulnerable persons.

**46.** SOP HRD interventions have contributed to maintaining a pole of civic and social pressure to keep the issues of equal opportunities on the public agenda, thus supporting the effort to change legislation and increase the political representation of women in Romania. The funded projects supported a favourable cultural and informational context, thus indirectly contributing to increasing the integration of women into the labour market. Also, for the most part, the social impact indicators have improved significantly both during and after the implementation of SOP HRD, and in the context of maintaining and increasing concern about the issue of equal opportunities in public and decision-making space.



[47.](#) The main positive effects of interventions to promote equal opportunities in the labour market manifested in the area of developing expertise in the area of gender equality and social activism to support equal opportunities in the labour market.

#### **Conclusions on the TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE sector**

[48.](#) The evolution of the capacity of SOP HRD MA and IB during 2007-2013, analysed both in terms of the results obtained regarding the efficient and effective implementation of the program, and in terms of capacity elements Structures, Human Resources, Systems and instruments, has improved but not sufficiently to ensure the efficient and effective implementation of the program (although the program indicators were largely met, a high ESF absorption rate was not achieved in Romania).

[49.](#) KAI 7.1 made an important contribution to increasing the capacity of MA and IB, but managed to partially meet the needs of SOP HRD implementation system, but MA and IB capacity increase was largely due to factors other than KAI 7.1. Only half of the financial allocation of this KAI was used, and the funded interventions largely supported the functioning of MA and IB for the performance of their current tasks and less the development of their capacity in the strict sense, such as the development of staff skills, innovation of management etc. As unplanned effects at the level of KAI 7.1, there is an increase in the stability and motivation of MA and IB staff due to salary increases, unplanned beneficial effects at the level of the relationship with the beneficiaries by improving the management of the relationship with the beneficiaries of funded projects and the greater accountability of these beneficiaries.

[50.](#) From the perspective of the evolution of SOP HRD visibility, awareness of the role of the EU and the opportunities offered by the program, the implementation of projects funded by KAI 7.2 was the main mechanism for creating the notoriety of the program, the beneficiaries being the main vectors of information dissemination.

[51.](#) The positive effects were mainly facilitated by the previous experience of the beneficiaries and the level of information during the PHARE period and were diluted mainly by the institutional deficit of human resources and organization. Communication with SOP HRD beneficiaries has contributed to increasing their administrative capacity in order to implement POCU-funded projects.

[52.](#) From the perspective of partnerships, the two KAIs, 3.3 and 6.4, respectively, aimed primarily at increasing the capacity of civic organizations and partnership structures to act on the labour market primarily through dialogue and not to develop policies and strategies in the area.

[53.](#) The interventions funded by KAI 3.3 had definite effects on the capacity of the social partners and NGO representatives to participate in the decision-making process in the area of labour market, social inclusion, decision-making transparency and those funded by KAI 6.4 brought added value through the presence of external partners. The activities carried out in transnational partnership inspired the Romanian partners in the development of initiatives in the labour market and social inclusion, takeover and implementation of innovative practices in Romania, which contributed to the change of visions in various areas and adaptation to new social and economic realities, to European standards.