



Executive summary

The evaluation is part of the Evaluation Plan of the Operational Programme Human Capital (POCU) 2014-2020 and aims to analyse the efficiency, effectiveness and impact of the use of interventions in the field of social inclusion. The evaluation must also highlight the factors contributing to the success or failure of the implementation as well as to the sustainability of the funded actions.

The period evaluated was the duration of the implementation of 2014-2020 Operational Programme Human Capital (POCU) until April 30, 2023, deadline for most of the data collected, considered the reference date of the evaluation. Although it is a final evaluation, 8 months before the end of the programme implementation many projects were still under implementation and the monitoring data does not capture the actual achievements by the deadline due to a gap between the actual achievement, progress reporting and validation of achievements. Therefore, the analyses took this aspect into account when assessing the target achievement of the intervention objectives. Due to the large number of projects completed at the end of the implementation period, the potential for interventions to produce long-term effects on beneficiaries is greater than the effects currently observed.

The interventions evaluated belong to several specific objectives of the programme and are structured in seven themes (numbered according to the tender book from 2 to 8) as follows:

- **Theme 2** - Evaluation of POCU (Operational Programme Human Capital) contribution to reducing the number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion in marginalised communities (Coverage area - specific objectives 4.1, 4.2, 5.1, 5.2);
- **Theme 3** - Evaluation of POCU (Operational Programme Human Capital) contribution to improving digital literacy of people in disadvantaged communities (Coverage area - specific objective 4.3);
- **Theme 4** - Evaluation of POCU (Operational Programme Human Capital) contribution to overcoming situations of vulnerability (Coverage area: specific objective 4.4);
- **Theme 5** - Evaluation of POCU (Operational Programme Human Capital) contribution to increasing quality and access to social services (Coverage area: specific objectives 4.5, 4.6, 4.7 and 4.14);
- **Theme 6** - Evaluation of POCU (Operational Programme Human Capital) contribution to increasing quality and access to health services (Coverage area: specific objectives 4.8, 4.9, 4.10 and 4.11);
- **Theme 7** - Evaluation of POCU (Operational Programme Human Capital) contribution to ensuring the transition from institutionalised system to community-based services (Coverage area: specific objectives 4.12, 4.13 and 4.15);
- **Theme 8** - Evaluation of POCU (Operational Programme Human Capital) contribution to strengthening the capacity of social economy entities to operate in a self-sustainable way (Coverage area: specific objective 4.16).

The evaluation methodology was built on the nine evaluation questions of the tender book and targets: the progress in the sector and noticeable one due to interventions, the resulting economic benefits, indirect, unintended or spillover effects, sustainability, mechanisms that facilitate effects, best practices and ways to do things better.

The combination of evaluation methods and tools applied included: interviews, surveys, focus groups and workshops, expert panel, quantitative methods of analysis, including counterfactual methods.

Significant constraints on data availability, accessibility and quality emerged during the evaluation. The constraints emerged are placed either at the system level and concern the whole sector, or at the



programme level, targeting the data recorded and available through POCU (Operational Programme Human Capital) monitoring system, or at the project level consisting of the availability of grant recipients and final recipients to provide the necessary data for evaluation. This required adapting the data collection and analysis methodology, identifying new sources, adding data quality checks, and the interpretation of findings was adapted to methodological limitations, as explained in detail in the theme evaluations. Thanks to these measures implemented, **the conclusions drawn are sufficiently robust to be used with confidence by the interested parties.**

Findings and conclusions of the evaluation

POCU (Operational Programme Human Capital) interventions in the field of social inclusion are an important component of the programme with a total allocation of around €2 billion (38.37% of the programme budget) of which €1.75 billion ESF (European Social Fund). The importance of interventions is also amplified by the need to support vulnerable groups, with Romania ranking last among EU member countries for a large number of poverty and social inclusion indicators.

The programme had good internal coherence conceptually with complementary interventions, but when it came to implementation, complementarity was partially achieved and coherence was limited. Thus, interventions on digital literacy of the disadvantaged population, health interventions targeting ICT (Information and Communications Technology) solutions, telemedicine, community-based healthcare services were not launched, either because of an insufficiently adapted regulatory framework or because of delays in launching complementary interventions.

The evaluation reveals a significant scale of ESF (European Social Fund) support. At April 30, 2023, the deadline for this evaluation data, the reported outputs are certainly lower than those that will result from the completion of the large number of projects in the remaining period. This is due to the fact that the implementation process of the evaluated interventions is the late launch of calls, delays in the selection process and in the implementation of projects, leading to a concentration of achievements in the last two years of implementation.

The scale of support is reflected in the 758 projects with a cumulative contracted value of over €2.4 billion completed or still under implementation supporting over 550,000 vulnerable people. More than 600 social services have been supported and 411 marginalised communities have been supported through integrated measures. To all of this is added the health and social services staff trained, estimated to reach over 100,000 people upon completion of projects.

The evaluation provides evidence of the contribution of the support to improving the situation of the target groups supported. However, given the high needs at the level of the vulnerable population in Romania, ESF (European Social Fund) support and the results of the implemented projects fail to bring about a change at sector level.

Examples of good practice and lessons learned are highlighted in the evaluation, emblematic of which is Prima Cameră programme, one of the most successful interventions in the field of social inclusion of institutionalised children, being innovative and highlighting mechanisms that can be capitalized in the design of interventions in the next funding period. Alongside these, examples of good practice, with results appreciated by supported groups and community members, are identified and explained in the evaluation, among interventions in marginalised communities, support for the elderly and victims of domestic violence, health services (prevention, early diagnosis and treatment) and social economy interventions.



The systemic project “Creating and Implementing Integrated Community Services to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion” ensured the introduction of integrated teams in 126 marginalised communities and the creation of a partnership and practical collaboration in the field of integrated community services at the level of the Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education. Tools and methodologies for integrated services were developed and implemented including online, such as the digital platform for foster carers through the “Team up” project and “Integrated Community Services” (ICS) application for digital case management. “Bunicii comunității” intervention stands out due to its extension with 77 funded projects out of 84 aimed at overcoming the situation of vulnerability.

The implementation process proves that ensuring complementarity of interventions in social infrastructure with the development and provision of services for vulnerable groups is a challenge both for the implementation system of the European Structural and Investment Funds, which fails to ensure a smoothly coordinated process between the two POCU (Operational Programme Human Capital) and ROP (Regional Operational Programme) programmes, and for local actors, local public authorities and dedicated structures such as the Local Action Groups set up for this purpose, for which capacity development still remains a need for support. The expected impact is conditioned by the complementarity of the results with other projects such as projects funded by NRRP (National Recovery and Resilience Plan) or other national programmes and investments. For example, complementary to the implementation of screening programmes, increased diagnostic and treatment capacity for people tested must be ensured, integrated into a strategy that ensures predictable resource allocation and smooth implementation.

The sustainability of the interventions is a critical aspect because it depends on the funding of activities after the completion of the projects, but also on the availability of human resources in areas already affected by a severe shortage, the functioning of mechanisms necessary for the integrated operation of services intended for vulnerable people. Social enterprises have a high sustainability risk due to their fragility in the competitive environment and the lack of support measures justified by the need to support the employment of people from vulnerable groups.

The interventions also generated effects other than the intended ones declared by the programme, namely indirect and spillover effects among which we highlight: increased solidarity of family and community members, improved cooperation of actors, increased trust in public services (diminished in some cases by the cessation of service provision upon project completion), better understanding of social inclusion and vulnerable people in communities, creation of collaborative networks of training participants, provision of services/products by social enterprises for the benefit of the community, development of social entrepreneurship skills.

Although progress has been made in recent years, administrative registers on the various categories of vulnerable groups fail to provide up-to-date data on the situation and dynamics of registered persons and the support received, making it difficult both to conceptualise interventions and to analyse impact. Limitations in terms of availability of data related to supported persons in electronic format were noted during this evaluation.

POCU (Operational Programme Human Capital) has succeeded in introducing new methods and approaches, such as the “community-led local development (CLLD)” mechanism, urban local action groups, screening methodologies for various pathologies. The sustainability and expansion of the use of these new approaches and methodologies depends crucially on their integration into the social and health services system in Romania, the provision of adequate funding and continued support through the Inclusion and Social Dignity Programme. In the absence of this stimulating framework, POCU (Operational



Programme Human Capital) and ESF (European Social Fund) interventions generally risk to remain singular, isolated interventions with limited sustainability and no aggregation capacity leading to a national change in the situation of vulnerable groups.

Although a process of progressive improvement of the implementation mechanisms is noted, it is still imperative to simplify procedures, reduce bureaucracy, increase flexibility by reducing control at activity level, improve MySMIS functionalities. Other improvements concern calls for projects.

The evaluation highlights the need to **ensure adequate funding commensurate with the size of the sector and a continuity of long-term funding** that provides a broad framework for action **based on medium and long-term planning**, developing coherent, sustained multi-annual interventions that produce results and a more visible and significant impact at system level. The role of civil society organisations is estimated to make a substantial contribution in terms of skills, experience, quantitative and qualitative human resources and capacity to reach vulnerable groups, but the lack of financial resources and the unpredictability of funding opportunities limit their involvement and sustainability. The analyses also highlight the role of professional associations even if they are not part of the projects, but complementarily ensure coherence and promotion of piloted interventions, as is the case for health services.

The COVID-19 pandemic has certainly affected implementation processes, with health services more exposed due to the health crisis that accompanied the interaction restrictions. The evaluation finds examples of effective project management in contrast to projects that have experienced long delays and are at risk of not meeting indicator targets. On the other hand, the competitive project selection system encourages setting high targets, sometimes unrealistic in relation to the vulnerable groups likely to be addressed. These characteristics are present in all evaluation themes.

Competitive calls limit access to funding for communities with low capacity to attract funding, so calls for projects need to encourage civil society to get involved in supporting these communities or even prioritise the targeting of funding.

One of the biggest problems related to access to social services for people from different vulnerable groups is linked to the limited **geographical spread of these services**. Many **local public administrations do not have developed social services** either because of a lack of specialised staff to provide them or a lack of financial resources needed to create and implement them. The involvement of local public administrations in projects and in the sustainability of results appears to be a key factor not only for the implementation but also for the impact of projects. There is a widely shared view of the limited capacity of a large number of local authorities, particularly in rural areas, representing small but high-need communities. Excessive fragmentation of local public administration is a major constraint on ensuring adequate local capacity for the provision of equitable quality socio-medical services across the country.

Evaluation recommendations

R1. At the level of public policies in the field of social inclusion, the evaluation recommends the creation of institutional and funding mechanisms, allocation of financial, technological and human resources, necessary to continue and expand the provision of social and health services supported by projects.

The recommendation is addressed to the two line ministries, the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection and the Ministry of Health, and is tailored by categories of interventions.



For marginalised communities, it is recommended to create national programmes complementary to ESF (European Social Fund) interventions that extend support, capitalizing on project results. In order to improve access to social services and impact, it is recommended to ensure the financing of the social services system at the real level of need, to update cost standards, to take over the methodologies and tools piloted in the implemented systemic projects, to provide legislative support to the processes started on deinstitutionalisation, to increase the attractiveness of the social work profession and positions especially in rural areas, and to modernise the human resources training framework. In the case of screening programmes, the recommendation refers to the development of national plans for screening programmes, taking into account the results of the projects, increasing the capacity for testing and uptake in diagnosis and treatment.

R2. The programme strategy and calls should facilitate funding and support for vulnerable groups with the most pressing needs, towards piloting new methods that can amplify effects and lead to a positive impact on a wider scale of the vulnerable population. We are considering funding for high-needs communities, populations with a high proportion of vulnerable people but low capacity to attract funding, creating systemic resources or addressing *sectoral causes* (such as child or elderly neglect with parents respectively substitute decision-makers working abroad) so that the framework for long-term effects can be created. In terms of digital literacy, interventions should consider an integrated approach to accessibility facilities, a community approach aimed at using the infrastructure created and a specific approach aimed at prioritising communities with the highest shortage.

R3. When defining calls for projects, it is recommended that effective approaches, methods and practices and lessons learned from the experience gained so far be taken up, adapted and translated into future interventions funded by ISDP (Inclusion and Social Dignity Programme), among which we highlight: integrated service provision models, continuity of service provision over a period of time that can lead to exit from vulnerability, methods to ensure sustainability, cooperation with NGOs to capitalize on their experience, community involvement, strengthening the role and capacity of TAUs (Territorial Administrative Units).

R4. It is recommended to improve the administrative registers for all categories of vulnerable persons by: collecting and disseminating up-to-date data relevant to the analysis of the current situation of vulnerable persons and its dynamics, including data on support received by linking to programme monitoring data.

R5. At the level of the implementation system, we recommend continuing the simplification and de-bureaucratisation effort. This recommendation refers to the elimination of excessive justification requirements, making the system more flexible by allowing for adaptations of activities imposed by contextual factors without addenda generating delays and administrative costs, extending digitisation, storing data in workable formats, improving MySMIS functionalities, introducing simplified costs and uniform application of instructions by all intermediate bodies.