



Executive summary

1. This evaluation report refers to **the last POCU evaluation exercise in the field of technical assistance and is named according to the contract POCU Final Evaluation Report in the Field of Technical Assistance, together with the set of data and metadata.** This is structured on three topics corresponding to the typology of interventions funded through specific objectives (OS) of Axis 7 Technical Assistance within POCU 2014-2020.

2. According to POCU Evaluation Plan, this evaluation is a "MESO" evaluation at program level¹. The Evaluation Plan provides that each POCU Priority Axis will be evaluated at least once during the implementation period regarding its contribution to specific objectives, as well as from the perspective of other generated effects, intentional or unintentional. The evaluation also included analyses at projects levels, thus integrating the analysis micro-level, through the case studies with all the specific methods and techniques.

3. The purpose of the evaluation exercises is to facilitate an informed management of the Human Capital Operational Program 2014-2020 and the adoption of the proof-based decisions.

4. **The evaluation exercise** which is the subject of this evaluation report aims at a detailed analysis of the degree of reaching the objectives set at the level of Axis 7 Technical Assistance from POCU, at regional, sectoral and target group level (regarding aimed fields), in relation to the specific objectives, together with the identification of the impact of the interventions funded so far, respectively the establishment of that part of the progress which is due exclusively to this intervention supported through POCU.

5. The interventions evaluated at the level of this evaluation exercise, funded through POCU 2014-2020 Axis 7 Technical Assistance, have been grouped into **three (3) evaluation topics (TE)** which we refer to below and contribute to the **3 Specific Objectives (OS)** related to this Axis:

- **Topic 1:** The evaluation of POCU contribution to the improvement of the AM and OI capacity of POCU to manage and implement efficiently and effectively the operational program (Scope - specific objective 7.1: Improvement of the AM and OI capacity of POCU to manage and implement efficiently and effectively the operational program)
- **Topic 2: Evaluation of the POCU contribution to the improvement of the capacity of the POCU beneficiaries to efficiently and effectively implement FSE projects** (Scope - *specific objective 7.2 Improvement of the capacity of the POCU beneficiaries to efficiently and effectively implement FSE projects*)
- **Topic 3: Evaluation of the POCU contribution to the increase of the degree of information of the beneficiaries and possible beneficiaries of POCU concerning the activities that can be implemented with the support of FSE** (Scope: *specific objective 7.3 Increase of the degree of information of the beneficiaries and possible beneficiaries of POCU concerning the activities that can be implemented with the support of FSE*)

6. According to the Tender Book, **7 evaluation questions** are provided for each topic plus two additional ones for Topic 1:

- *îE1: What is the progress noticed in the aimed areas (the less or more developed areas) and the aimed groups regarding the improvement of the POCU beneficiaries to efficiently and effectively implement FSE projects?*
- *îE2: To what extent the noticed progress is awarded to POCU?*

¹ In Romania two types of evaluations are performed, namely one of the macro type at the level of the Partnership Agreement and the other one at the level of each PO (MESO), thus continuing the approach of the evaluation related to the previous financial framework.

- *ÎE3: To what extent there are other unintended, positive or negative effects?*
- *ÎE4: To what extent the effect exceeds the areas or groups aimed at by the intervention?*
- *ÎE5: To what extent are the effects longlasting for a longer period of time?*
- *ÎE6: What mechanisms facilitated/prevented the effects? What are the context key characteristics for these mechanisms?*
- *ÎE7: If and to what extent things could have been done better?*

7. Topic 1 related to OS 7.1 has the first evaluation question dedicated to the capacity of AM and OI plus two additional evaluation questions dedicated to the degree of effectiveness of the mechanisms for coordinating Roma social inclusion policies, respectively the degree of effectiveness of the activities carried out by the administrators of the POCU global grant schemes and the administrators of the schemes related to financial instruments:

- *ÎE1: What is the progress noticed in terms of the ability of AM and OI POCU to manage and implement PO efficiently and effectively?*
- *ÎE2: What is the degree of effectiveness of the mechanisms for coordinating Roma social inclusion policies?*

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

8. The evaluation process was based on a combination of methods designed throughout the evaluation and used an integrated approach to ensure both the principle of triangulation, as well as the collection of sufficient data and information for evaluation analyses. During the evaluation, special importance was given to context factors, but also to the way in which the causal links and the results-producing mechanisms are maintained/changed.

9. Planned and effectively applied evaluation methods and tools in the evaluation process included: documentary research, processing and statistical analysis of data series – based on contextual data collected, interviews, workshops, a national focus group as a tool for analyzing and validating findings and conclusions, case studies, opinion polls, analysis of influencing factors in the mechanism of producing results and other effects, charts for data visualization.

10. The evaluated period was the duration of the implementation of **POCU interventions 2014-2020 in the field of technical assistance**: from the start of the POCU until the reference date **31.06.2023**. This report focuses on the evaluation of the POCU 2023 (covering the period January 2021 - June 2023), including references to the 2021 evaluation exercise previously concluded. The evaluation took place between **March and July 2023**.

METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

11. The evaluation methodology was mostly applied without notable difficulties within OS 7.1, which reduced the methodological limitations. However, there are some significant limitations such as in the case of OS 7.1 and 7.2 the one related to the limited options for choosing projects to be included in case studies except for the ASA POCU project (the only project that also included specific activities to increase the capacity of beneficiaries). This limitation occurred due to the predominant type of support interventions for AM and OI which were mainly logistical. Also, the high degree of involvement of different factors interested in the evaluation added an additional challenge. Under OS 7.3, the main methodological limitations derived from the absence of information provided by target groups and the general population. This lack of data was a significant challenge in the evaluation process. However, in order to obtain data on the perception of the general population, information from periodic and dedicated Euro-barometers was used.

12. At the same time, another important methodological aspect resulting from the level of the previous evaluation exercise was that, within POCU, based on the information provided by AM POCU, there are no POCU projects undergoing implementation (Axes 1-7, 8, 9) *funded by global grant schemes or schemes related to financial instruments*. Therefore, the Evaluation Question no. 3 *“What was the degree of effectiveness of the activities carried*



out by: Administrators of POCU's global grant schemes? Scheme administrators related to financial instruments?" was no longer subject to analysis by the evaluation team.

GENERAL ASPECTS REGARDING THE EVALUATED INTERVENTIONS

13. In order to ensure a coherent and uniform framework for the functioning of the institutions responsible for the management of the European Social Fund between 2014-2020, **Axis 7 of Technical Assistance within POCU** covers the financing needs for the good implementation of the Human Capital Operational Program. In this sense, the POCU Technical Assistance axis acts in complementarity with the Administrative Capacity Operational Program and the Technical Assistance Operational Program regarding the procedural arrangements, respectively the existence of a single salary scale for the staff involved in the management and control of FESI, the existence of common criteria for staff recruitment, etc.

14. For the Technical Assistance Priority Axis there is **only one call for projects** (POCU/155/7/4/Related operation OS AT POCU composite objective covering all three specific objectives OS 7.1/7.2/7.3)), still in progress, due to the fact that it is with continuous submission until the funds have been exhausted or until the moment of closing the operational program.

15. Until the evaluation reference date, respectively 30.06.2023, 239 projects were contracted under AP 7, for which the data were collected based on a composite objective related to all 3 specific objectives targeted by the Evaluation Topics. From the perspective of the distribution of the number of projects by types of beneficiaries eligible for Axis 7, it is found that most projects are implemented at the level of OIRs (178 projects) with a balanced distribution and MIPE (38 projects), followed by other structures (MDLPA, MMPS, MEC).

16. OS 7.1 aimed to improve the ability of POCU AM and OI to manage and implement the operational program efficiently and effectively, and as an expected impact **a high rate of absorption of the FSE** in Romania. The assistance provided under OS 7.1 included in the light of the portfolio of projects analyzed financial support for administrative/logistical expenses of AM and OI POCU, for expenses with the salaries of own and contractual staff, funding projects with technical content (e.g. data entry in SMIS, on-site visits, project contracting, etc.), funding of training projects for AM staff, OI and members of the POCU CM, funding projects to support the National Contact Point for Roma, as well as a program-level evaluation project.

17. Specific objective 7.2 aimed **to improve the capacity of POCU beneficiaries to effectively and efficiently implement FSE projects**. This should have led to a strengthened capacity of POCU beneficiaries to implement such projects, with the expected result of a more efficient and effective implementation of these projects and, implicitly, at a higher rate of absorption of European funds under the POCU.

18. The main objective of the 7.3 aimed **to increase the degree of information of POCU beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries** on FSE subject activities and to capitalize on and implement good practices and initiatives in the field of FSE². Expected results included a higher degree of information for beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries on the opportunities offered by the POCU and how to access FSE funds, as well as raising awareness of projects co-funded by the European Union, from 46% in 2013 to 60% in 2023.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE EVALUATION

Conclusions regarding the interventions in the field of technical assistance (OS 7.1/7.2./7.3)

19. Despite similar initial difficulties, POCU performed better than POSDRU. However, both programs have suffered from initial delays, lack of human resources and delayed access to technical assistance. In the case of POCU, delays have often been related to the complexity of interventions, pilot systemic interventions and collaboration with

² The approved version of the Human Capital Operational Program -14 Dec. 2020



other operational programs. Overall, the evolution of the POCU between 2014-2022 shows that there have been both successes and challenges, emphasizing the need for careful management, investment in human resources, simplification, automation and optimization of procedures and work processes so as to achieve the objectives of future operational programs. Moreover, multi-annual planning and close monitoring could have prevented certain encountered problems.

20. OS 7.1 had a significant impact on building the AM and OI POCU capacity. There have been improvements in structures, human resources, systems and working tools, both compared to the POSDRU period and compared to the previous evaluation. The employment of contract staff has also significantly contributed to covering the needs of human resources at AM and OI level, but the issue of insufficient human resources remains a current concern, given the legislative context and the uncertainty regarding the possibility of hiring contract staff during the next programming period. To meet this challenge, it is necessary to maintain and retain the permanent staff of the MA and IO and to extend the personnel scheme when possible. Last but not least, the increase in the AM and OI POCU capacity was also influenced by factors such as the experience gained in 16 years of operation and the stability of the management factors at OI level.

21. Assessing the capacity of beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries to effectively and efficiently implement FSE projects shows a development of this capacity during the 2014-2020 programming period, compared to the previous programming period, 2007-2013 but not as a direct effect of OS 7.2. It is also found that all activities that had a direct impact on beneficiaries contributed positively to the quality of the projects being implemented and, implicitly, to achieve the objectives and targets of the POCU, including the degree of absorption of European funds at project level.

22. Technical Assistance Agreement (ASA POCU) played a key role in strengthening the AM and OI capacity on all capacity dimensions - human resources, structures, procedures, systems and tools but also that of beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries to develop and implement POCU projects.

23. However, the factors with the greatest negative impact on the progress of the implementation of the POCU were the lack of adequate skills of beneficiaries, their diversity and significant differences in support needs, low quality and low frequency of support activities provided by AM/OI, excessive tasks of OI staff, institutional changes and political instability that have been reflected in frequent changes in legislation and regulations. The negative effects of these factors were partially offset by the interventions organized by ASA POCU and other actions taken by AM and OI, especially in the second half of the programming period. Information sessions, training videos, updates and improvements to the Beneficiary Manual, as well as direct communication actions or through the helpdesk system were tools with varying degrees of usefulness in supporting beneficiaries and developing their capacity to develop and implement POCU projects.

24. One of the most significant achievements of communication efforts was the improvement of the administrative capacity of POCU beneficiaries, a key competence for the management of projects funded from European funds. Approximately 77% of beneficiaries consider that over 90% of their current level of administrative competence is due to the POCU management system and the relationship of this system with the beneficiaries.

25. POCU has had a significant positive impact at local and regional level, contributing to the improvement of the decision-making process in these areas and having a horizontal multiplying effect on interventions in the field of human capacity development at national level. Moreover, almost two thirds of entities expressed their intention to apply for funding for future operational programs in areas such as social inclusion, employment or education. However, the centralized approach to communication has failed to significantly reduce regional disparities in the evaluation and approach of the same types of projects or to stimulate collaboration with other institutions in the field of communication, outside the current beneficiaries, or significantly improve the quality of communication between beneficiaries and target groups.



RECOMMENDATIONS ON INTERVENTIONS IN THE FIELD OF TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Recommendations for the programming period 2021 - 2027

26. Given the management between 2021-2027 of a double budget of the POEO and POIDS compared to the POCU budget, in order to cope with the increased workload, complementary to the correct sizing of human resources needs and its multi-annual planning, it is necessary to simplify and align operational procedures, to optimize and automate some processes (in accordance with GEO 23/2023³), to improve the IT system, to make efficient the use of the facilities offered by digitization and to make wider use of simplified costs (with an increase in their share in total expenditure categories). In this way, both the administrative burden of the beneficiaries and the workload at the level of the MA and especially at the level of the OI are reduced. Moreover, the current high level of administrative work at AM and OI level is largely due to excessive administrative requirements. It is therefore recommended to significantly simplify these requirements, in particular by switching to a results-based monitoring system instead of cost-based monitoring, in line with the simplification measures adopted by the European Commission for the period 2021-2027⁴

27. In line with the facts mentioned above, it is recommended to streamline the MySMIS reporting system and train beneficiaries on its use, on the one hand, to streamline the reporting process and, on the other hand, to reduce the workload of both intermediate bodies and beneficiaries.

28. Future Operational Programs Education and Employment (PEO) and Social Inclusion and Dignity (POIDS) should provide for **multi-annual planning of the implementation of the program** (preferably throughout the programming period), with the establishment of annual targets on the values of project submissions, contracted values, payment amounts made. It is also necessary to monitor the financial progress of the program towards the established multiannual plan, as well as to identify and manage risks and to identify the necessary corrective measures.

29. Based on the forecast for the implementation of the operational program, a **multi-annual planning of human and material/financial resources** at AM and OI level is needed, including the appropriate sizing of the necessary positions. Although the provisions of GEO 34/2023 may affect this action, the recommendation is for resource planning and job sizing to be carried out and possibly recalibrated once the personnel scheme is possible.

30. In order to ensure constant and structured support for the management of POEO and POIDS, it is recommended **to contract a complex technical assistance project with an integrated approach** that provides support on all dimensions of the AM and OI capacity – human resources, structures, systems, tools and procedures-, as well as as itemized support according to the needs arising during implementation.

31. It is recommended to increase the capacity of the Human Capital Operational Program (POCU) Monitoring Committee through training and collaboration activities between members, as they did not receive training during the POCU 2014-2020 period. It is also proposed to streamline Committee meetings through more concise and accessible presentations, complemented by debates and recommendations.

32. In connection with OS 7.2, it is recommended to strengthen and diversify support initiatives for beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries. The training sessions organized within the ASA were considered to be good practice. This approach should be extended and adapted to new FSE programs, with greater frequency, regional coverage and a

³ Emergency Ordinance 23/2023 on the establishment of simplification and digitization measures for the management of European funds related to Cohesion Policy 2021 – 2027. The new normative act simplifies the way of evaluating the projects, ensures the digitized development of all stages of a project and introduces the interoperability mechanisms dedicated to simplifying the processes that applicants will go through for the implementation of projects.

⁴ Measures No. 31, 43, 44 of the SIMPLIFICATION HANDBOOK: *80 simplification measures in cohesion policy 2021-2027* (European Commission, Regional and Urban Policy).



wider target audience. Video tutorials created within the SAA and available on the MIPE website should also continue and be extended for the POEO and POIDS programs.

33. A mixed approach to communication is recommended - centralized at AM level for the general aspects of managed and regional programs at OIR level for specific issues related to the specific needs of beneficiaries and potentials beneficiaries in the region. It was proposed to develop an integrated communication plan between AM POIDS/POEO and OIs, with an emphasis on online communication through the online helpdesk service. Also, it is suggested to use online communication media and platforms to increase the visibility of training videos and to optimize search engines (SEO) for greater accessibility on Google. An online portal dedicated to informing beneficiaries could be developed to provide additional resources, examples of practical cases, answers to frequently asked questions and other relevant guides.

34. With regard to the Beneficiary's Manual, it is recommended that the content be regularly updated to reflect the changes and needs of the beneficiaries. Regular analyses to identify needs for clarification and additional instructions should be performed in collaboration with AM and OI staff. This approach could contribute to more effective implementation and a unified approach at the level of organizations that will manage the new FSE programs.

35. The recommendations for OS 7.3 focus on the communication implementation system in the context of future operational programs. It is proposed to maintain an integrated and centralized approach to communication in order to maximize the impact of financial allocations. These recommendations aim:

- To use common performance and outcome indicators for all operational programs, integrated into the Structural Instruments Communication Strategy and the Annual Communication Plans. Descriptive sheets should clearly indicate how data is collected and how it is collected.
- To maintain and improve the MySMIS platform for communication with beneficiaries. To strengthen the network of Structural Instruments communicators at national level and develop activities and tools to increase the communication skills of beneficiaries in relation to project target groups.
- To involve monitoring officers and other communication specialists, including universities and private companies, in communication activities and in the network of information multipliers on Structural Instruments. This would help reduce regional differences in the evaluation of similar projects.

- To continue activities so as to increase the administrative capacity of beneficiaries and the implementation system, including from a communication perspective. It is also recommended to improve the involvement of beneficiaries in local and regional decisions.