



Ministry of Investments and European Projects
Programme Evaluation Office of the Directorate General
Programming and System Coordination

Implementation of the Evaluation Plan of the Technical
Assistance Operational Programme 2014-2020

Evaluation Report for the year 2023, including related dataset and metadata

Final version

29 September 2023





UNIUNEA EUROPEANĂ



Executive summary

Technical Assistance Operational Programme 2014 - 2020

The Technical Assistance Operational Programme (TAOP) 2014-2020 was approved by the European Commission decision in December 2014. The overall objective of the programme is to ensure the capacity and tools necessary for the effective coordination, management and control of interventions funded from the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), as well as for an efficient, well targeted and correct implementation of the TAOP, the Large Infrastructure Operational Programme (LIOP) and the Competitiveness Operational Programme (COP).

TAOP provided horizontal support for all operational programmes, but was the main provider of technical assistance for programmes that do not have a dedicated axis, i.e. the LIOP and COP.

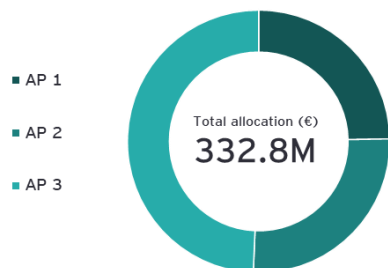
TAOP 2014 - 2020 has been structured into three priority axes (PA) with the following specific objectives (SO):

Priority Axes	Specific objectives
1. Strengthening the capacity of beneficiaries to prepare and implement projects funded from ESIF and disseminating information on these funds	1.1. Strengthening the capacity of beneficiaries of ESIF funded projects to prepare and implement mature projects
	1.2. Ensuring the transparency and credibility of the ESIF and the role of EU Cohesion Policy
2. Support for the coordination, management and control of the ESIF	2.1. Improving the regulatory, strategic and procedural framework for the coordination and implementation of the ESIF
	2.2. Develop and maintain a functional and efficient IT system for the ESIF and strengthen the capacity of its users
3. Increase the efficiency and effectiveness of human resources involved in the coordination, management and control system of the ESIF in Romania	3.1. Develop an improved human resources management policy to ensure stability, qualification and adequate motivation of staff working within the coordination, management and control system of the ESIF

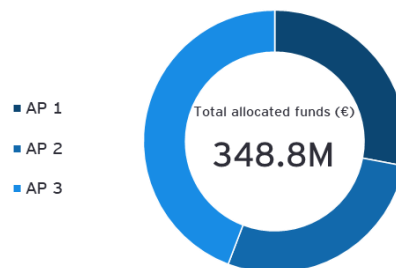
Financial allocation and amount of funding granted

At 31.03.2023, the programme had an EU allocation of €332.8 million. At the end of 2022 there was a decision to reallocate the amounts between the Priority Axes, i.e. the allocation for Priority Axis 1 decreased by 24%, with the amounts being distributed to Priority Axis 2 (+34%) and Priority Axis 3 (+3%). According to the programme document, these changes were due to developments in implementation and the constraints caused by the pandemic and the economic context triggered by the war in Ukraine, which affected the implementation of interventions funded under Axis 1.

Allocated amounts, €



Financing granted (31.03.2023)

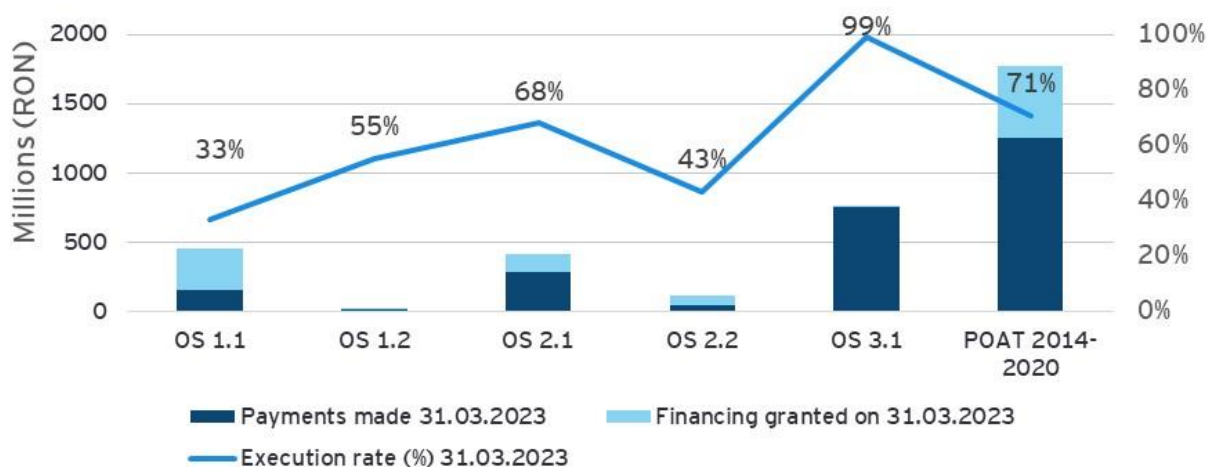


Source: Programming documents for TAOP 2014-2020, versions amended by EC Decision 1119/18.02.2021 and EC Decision 8142/09.11.2022, List of TAOP projects contracted as of 31.03.2023 made available by the Contracting Authority.

The implementation rate - obtained by comparing the amount of payments made to beneficiaries (both from EU funds and from the national budget) to the amount of funding granted (which includes EU funds and the contribution from the national budget) - reflects the level of implementation of projects.

Analysis of the data reveals that progress in the implementation rate differs by Priority Axis, the main influencing factors being the nature of the activities funded under each PA.

Execution rate (%) 31.03.2023



Source
List of TAOP projects contracted on 31.12.2021 and 31.03.2023, made available by the Contracting Authority

TAOP beneficiaries fall into the following types:

- ▶ Institutions involved in the coordination, management and control of the ESIF (MIEP, MA, IO, the Certification and Paying Authority, the Audit Authority, the Fight Against Fraud Department, the Regional Development Agencies);
- ▶ Certain institutions that support the system of coordination, management and control of funds: NAPP, Ministry of Environment, NARW, the National Council for the Settlement of Appeals, the Special Telecommunications Service, the Romanian Intelligence Service;
- ▶ Beneficiaries managing a large number of projects funded from LIOP and COP (Ministry of Water and Forests, MIA, MCIS), or responsible for the implementation of ex-ante conditionality 9.3 (Ministry of Health) or the Association of Regional Development Agencies in Romania as



representative of regional development agencies and regions at national and international level that can submit horizontal support projects for ESIF beneficiaries;

- ▶ Structures supporting the implementation of integrated territorial investments: the Intercommunity Development Association (IDA) Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI) Danube Delta.

Evaluation topics and evaluation questions

In line with the EU Regulation 1303/2013, the TAOP Evaluation Plan and the intervention logic of the programme, six evaluation topics have been identified. Specifically, the analysis focused on understanding how TAOP contributed to:

- ▶ Strengthening the capacity of beneficiaries of the ESIF/TAOP, LIOP and COP - Evaluation topic 1
- ▶ Dissemination of information on ESIF/TAOP, LIOP and COP - Evaluation topic 2
- ▶ Coordination and control of the ESIF systems - Evaluation topic 3
- ▶ Management of the TAOP, LIOP and COP - Evaluation topic 4
- ▶ Functionality and efficiency/effectiveness of the IT system - Evaluation topic 5
- ▶ Efficiency and effectiveness of human resources in the ESIF system - Evaluation topic 6

For each evaluation topic, qualitative and quantitative data were collected in order to provide comprehensive answers to the following evaluation questions:

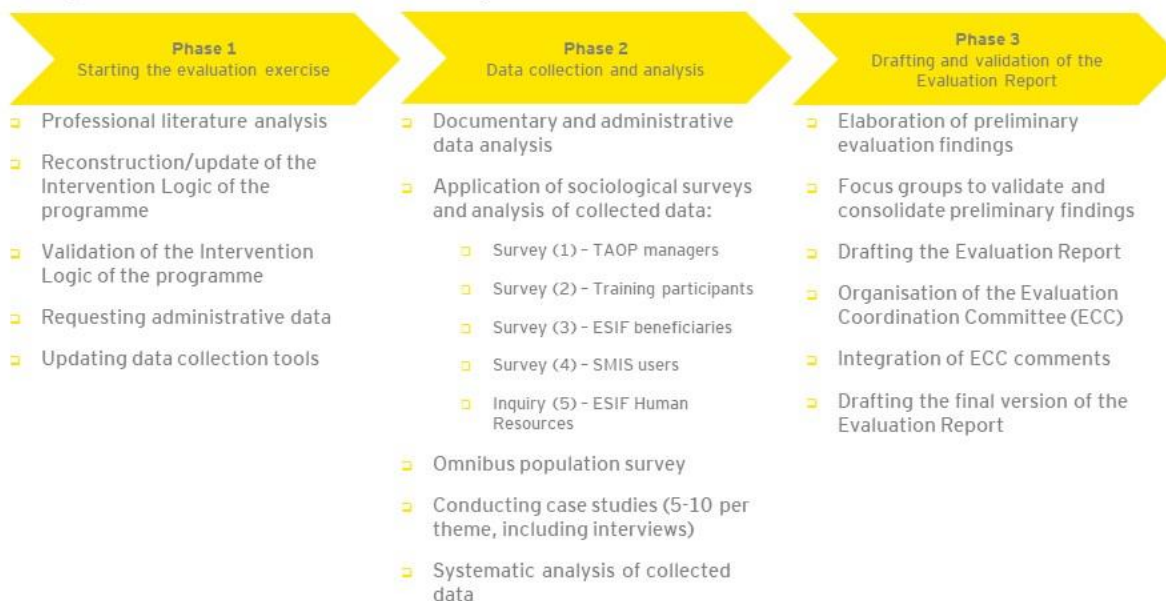
- ▶ What progress has been achieved in the targeted areas, sectors and groups in relation to the specific objectives of TAOP 2014-2020? (effectiveness)
- ▶ What is the effectiveness of the interventions funded from TAOP 2014-2020? (gross effect)
- ▶ To what extent is the observed progress attributable to the programme? (net effect)
- ▶ Are there unintended effects, positive or negative? Are these effects observable in the short, medium or long term? (unintended effects)
- ▶ What is the durability of the effects? (durability of effects)
- ▶ What are the mechanisms that facilitated/prevented the effects and their key contextual characteristics? (mechanisms)

Along with these, the evaluation also addressed the contribution of TAOP to GDP formation and employment. The evaluation exercise of TAOP 2014-2020 was launched in October 2019, ran for four years and included four evaluation cycles.

The first and last evaluation cycles addressed all six evaluation topics, and the second and third cycles addressed the contribution of TAOP to strengthening the capacity of the beneficiaries of the ESIF/TAOP, LIOP and COP, respectively to the dissemination of information on the ESIF (evaluation topics 1 and 2).

The formulation of robust answers to the evaluation questions was based on a combination of data collection and analysis tools, with the objective of triangulating findings from both primary and secondary sources.

The phases for each evaluation cycle



Conditions and limitations of the evaluation

One of the most important limitations identified was the level of implementation of the programme. Given that in the last evaluation cycle (with *cut-off date* 31.03.2023), most projects were under implementation, the analysis focused on the likelihood of the TAOP to generate planned impacts and the risk factors that may influence this likelihood.

Another challenge was the limited availability of project managers contacted to participate in individual interviews for the case studies.

The evaluation team was successful in consulting a relevant sample of stakeholders. However, feedback in the validation process was limited. In this context, the formulation of robust conclusions and the definition of concrete recommendations was based on the data collected and the triangulation of information from various sources.

Despite the improvements implemented in recent years in the ESIF monitoring system, there is still potential for improvement in terms of data quality and accuracy. The poor quality of some of the data sets extracted from the IT system involved an unanticipated effort to check and clean the data used in the evaluation. Where this was not possible, the evaluation team relied exclusively on data received from the Programme Managing Authority.

TAOP project managers

50

Consulted through surveys in 4 evaluation cycles

Beneficiaries training activities

1700

Consulted through surveys in 4 evaluation cycles

TAOP Projects

80

Analysed in detail in the case studies

ESIF beneficiaries

4200

Consulted through surveys in 4 evaluation cycles

Another tool for collecting quantitative and qualitative data was the five surveys addressed to TAOP project managers, training participants and ESIF beneficiaries. For some questions and some categories of respondents, the number of responses was limited, which only partially affected the representativeness of the results. By comparing the results recorded in the four evaluation cycles, it was possible to identify evidence reflecting the findings and patterns identified through triangulation of the data.

Effectiveness of interventions funded from TAOP 2014-2020

Physical progress

Analysing the indicators of the programme, it can be deduced that TAOP has been largely effective, given that for two of the indicators set at programme level, the level of achievement against the target set in the programming document exceeds 100%. For the indicator "Projects with an absorption rate higher than 70% of the total number of projects whose development has been supported by TAOP", the earned value will be calculated after the completion of the projects whose development has been supported by TAOP, funded from COP and LIOP.

Level of achievement of result indicators

Indicator code	Indicator name	Basic value	Expected value foreseen in the programming document	Achieved value	% achievement
6S1	Projects with an absorption rate higher than 70% of the total number of projects whose development has been supported by the TAOP	0%	75%	N/A	N/A
6S2	Level of awareness of EU co-financed projects	46%	60%	85%	141%
6S3	Share of beneficiaries who consider the proceedings concerning the ESIF as appropriate	23,5%	75%	74%	98%
6S4	Degree of use of SMIS 2014+ to fulfil reporting obligations at OP -level to the EC	0%	85%	100%	118%

The TAOP contribution to capacity building of ESIF/TAOP, LIOP and COP beneficiaries

The funded projects aimed at increasing the capacity of ESIF beneficiaries by:

- ▶ Training and capacity building activities, including the organisation of information events;
- ▶ Support for project preparation and/or preparation of grant applications;
- ▶ Co-financing of the staff costs of the structure coordinating the integrated territorial instrument.

For almost all indicators, the level of achievement is close to 80% and there is a high probability that the targets will be met by the end of 2023.

The only exceptions relate to:

- ▶ Number of funding applications for infrastructure projects funded from LIOP and COP whose development was supported from TAOP;
 - 60% of the programme's objective concerns the project with SMIS code 140564 (Assistance to LIOP MA in the process of preparing projects to ensure compliance with Directive 92/43/EEC on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora and Directive 79/409/EEC on the conservation of wild birds). Based on the information collected during the case study, there is evidence that the objective of the programme will be achieved by the end of the implementation period.
- ▶ Number of projects prepared to develop project portfolios for the 2021-2027 programming period (the indicator relates to projects with majority of activities completed in 2023).



The TAOP contribution to the dissemination of information on ESIF/TAOP, LIOP and COP

The TAOP interventions concerned:

- ▶ Dissemination of information and publicity actions related to the ESIF in general and to the TAOP, LIOP and COP in particular;
- ▶ Actions to develop a partnership culture in the programming, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of operational programmes.

Planned activities on dissemination of information on structural funds were most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic context, but also by bottlenecks and delays requiring changes in affected contracts, financial allocation and targets, both at project and programme level to achieve a satisfactory level of effectiveness. The TAOP support for information and dissemination has been reduced by almost half compared to the funding initially allocated.

In order to meet the needs of information dissemination and publicity, the beneficiary of the funding, the Directorate General for Information, Transparency and Social Dialogue of the Ministry of European Investments and Projects, has compensated from its own resources for the *helpdesk* services, which could not be funded under the blocked contracts. The situation was unblocked at the end of 2021, when a new strategic vision on information and dissemination was formulated, leading to streamlining actions and creating the prerequisites for achieving the revised objectives at programme level.

Also, in the case of the partnership culture development action, the constraints of the COVID pandemic required a change in the way some of the activities designed with physical presence were carried out, coupled with delays and administrative bottlenecks that led to a significant drop in funded support.

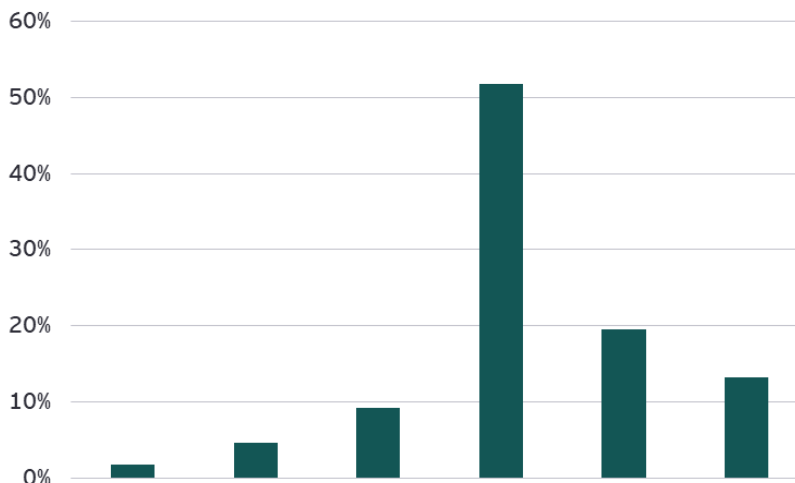
However, the use of technical assistance to support partnership structures has proved effective and has been appreciated by the social partners. Better adaptation to changing needs and continuity of assistance are seen by social partners as essential for partnership effectiveness and the development of partnership culture.

The TAOP contribution to the coordination and control of the ESIF

Interventions included:

- ▶ development of studies and evaluations;
- ▶ the functioning (including logistical aspects) of the structures involved in the coordination, management and control of the ESIF;
- ▶ evaluation of the ESIF with better quality monitoring systems and statistics.

Extent to which beneficiaries consider the ESIF - related procedures to be appropriate



Source: Results of the survey of ESIF beneficiaries. Authors' processing. Number of respondents N=575

The degree of achievement of the targets set for the output indicators exceeds 100%, with the programme objectives being exceeded 9 months before the end of the implementation period. The target for the result indicator is very likely to be achieved or very close to being achieved (the survey shows that over 72% of the ESIF beneficiaries consider the project management procedures to be adequate or very adequate/adequate, compared to the target of 75%. The 3% difference is within the margin of error of the survey used for this indicator, so the data allow a positive assessment of the programme's performance). This is due to the experience of both programme authorities and beneficiaries.

All institutions involved in the coordination and control of the ESIF have received logistical and operational support under the TAOP. TAOP evaluation support has been provided to the Partnership Agreement and the implementation of the recommendations of these evaluations contributes to the coordination of the ESIF. On the other hand, the partnership coordination structures (CCMAP and the thematic sub-committees established at Partnership Agreement level) have been supported only indirectly through support to some of their member authorities.

The TAOP contribution to the management of TAOP, LIOP and COP

The general need to support the management of TAOP, LIOP and COP as operational programmes managed by structures within the Ministry of European Funds without a dedicated technical assistance priority axis was identified at the time of preparation of these operational programmes. The need was driven by a number of threats clarified in the programming documents, including through ex-ante evaluation. Thus the analyses carried out for programming purposes revealed:

- ▶ Overall, the interventions funded under SO 2.1. are largely effective;
- ▶ The result indicator target and the output indicator target have been exceeded.

The output indicators related to S.O. 2.1. have achieved their targets by more than 100%. The projects achieved their targets only on the basis of the amounts achieved by 31.03.2023, but according to the Funding Applications/Additional Acts, the contracted projects under implementation will contribute more to the value of the indicators through the expected achievements at their level. The value of result indicator 6S3 is 73.56% of ESIF beneficiaries considering the ESIF procedures as appropriate, representing a target achievement rate of 98.08%.



The TAOP contribution to the functionality and efficiency/effectiveness of the IT system

Interventions to develop and maintain a functional and efficient IT system for the ESIF and to strengthen the capacity of its users have focused on:

- ▶ Improving information security;
- ▶ Introducing the possibility to customise system menus for end beneficiaries;
- ▶ Ensure full compatibility with user applications,
- ▶ Ensuring user skills at all levels of the ESIF implementation system;
- ▶ Hardware and software renewal.

The needs outlined above have been addressed by implementing the following activities:

- ▶ Improving hardware capacity for data storage and processing;
- ▶ Improving the functionality of the monitoring system by developing new modules (e.g. "Funding Application", "Contracting", "Implementation", "Procurement" and "Communication").
- ▶ Ensuring network availability.
- ▶ Supporting users of SMIS with guides and materials and specific training sessions/programmes.

All performance indicators have been largely achieved in the funded projects. The exception is the number of training days, due to the pandemic context which *de facto* limited the implementation of planned activities involving physical presence.

The TAOP contribution to the efficiency and effectiveness of human resources involved in the ESIF system

Funded interventions are large and complex, with large funding and a wide area of coverage. The funded projects will absorb the contracted amounts by the end of the programming period.

Monitoring data indicate, as of 31.03.2023, a high degree of meeting or even exceeding the targets for:

- ▶ performance indicators (number of training days, number of staff in the ESIF whose salary is co-financed by the TAOP);
- ▶ programme outcome indicators (average score obtained from the evaluation of staff employed in the ESIF system; average annual staff turnover rate in the ESIF system).

Progress towards the achievement of the TAOP Specific Objectives and contribution of the programme

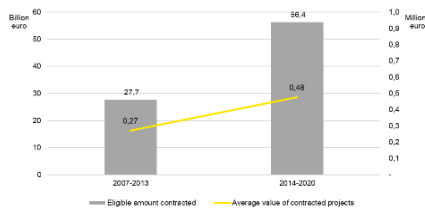
Strengthening the capacity of ESIF beneficiaries

The analysis revealed that ESIF beneficiaries are better prepared to identify and access funding opportunities and to prepare quality project proposals with strategic impact compared to the 2007-2013 programming period. This is evident when comparing the level of eligible value contracted and the average value of projects implemented. Beneficiaries themselves believe that they are able to:

- ▶ identify funding opportunities more easily;
- ▶ prepare better and more complex project proposals with less effort in terms of time.

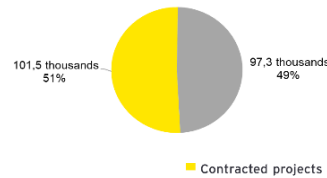
However, beneficiaries are of the opinion that further capacity building support is needed, especially during the implementation period of projects.

Eligible amount contracted and average value of contracted projects

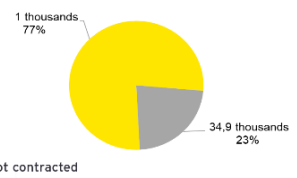


CONTRACTING RATE

198.8 thousand projects submitted in 2007-2013



153 thousand projects submitted in 2014-2020



Although 70% of the projects aimed at strengthening the capacity of beneficiaries are still under implementation, the stakeholder consultation and case studies indicated that the TAOP has been instrumental in increasing the observed capacity of ESIF beneficiaries.

When comparing the responses collected from the ESIF beneficiaries who received TAOP support with those who did not, it becomes clear that the programme has contributed to this development.

The evolution of the capacity to identify and prepare complex proposals with strategic impact in the period 2014-2020 compared to 2007-2013

ESIF beneficiaries supported under TAOP 2014-2020

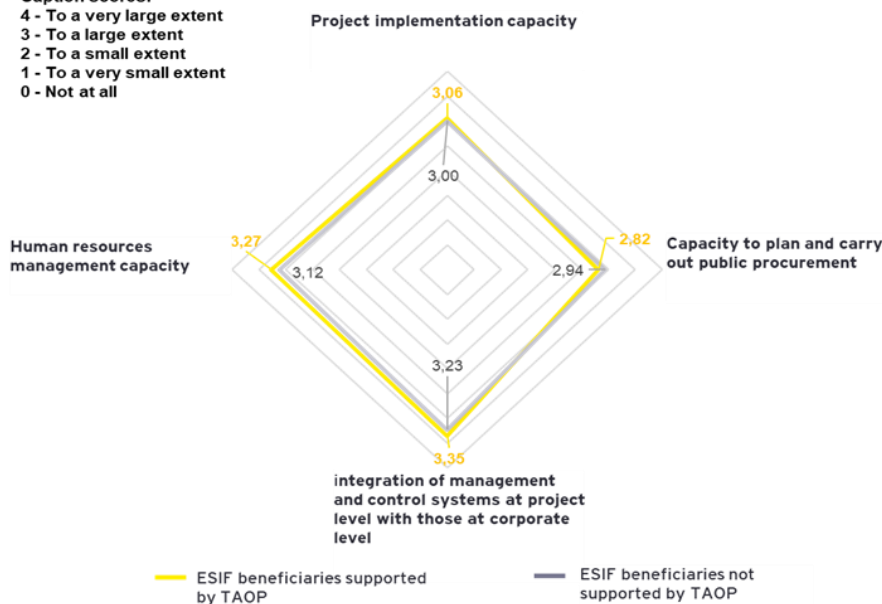


ESIF beneficiaries not supported under TAOP 2014-2020



Efficiency in the projects implementation. Improvement perceived by FESI beneficiaries

Caption scores:
 4 - To a very large extent
 3 - To a large extent
 2 - To a small extent
 1 - To a very small extent
 0 - Not at all



Dissemination of information on the ESIF

The evaluation confirms substantial overachievement of the target for the programme indicator "**Level of awareness of the general public on the ESIF**", **indicating a consistently high level** with values of 84% (2020), 83% (2022) and 85% (2023).

TAOP has contributed to this growth mainly through actions with a wide territorial coverage of the target audience. However, the contribution could have been stronger as the initially planned activities were implemented partially and with some discontinuity.

Despite its limited scope, TAOP has contributed to strengthening the partnership framework through activities aimed at:

- ▶ essential logistical support in consultation processes;
- ▶ transposition of the provisions of the European Code of Conduct on Partnership;
- ▶ the methodology for selecting partners for the implementation of the 2021-2027 Partnership Agreement.

The TAOP contribution to supporting the 2021-2027 programming process is highlighted, by funding activities that allowed partners to participate in a transparent selection process, to provide opinions and comments to which they received personalised feedback. The contribution was moderated due to the limited scope of the funded action, as some of the originally planned activities could not be implemented due to travel and physical interaction restrictions caused by the COVID pandemic.

Coordination and control of the ESIF

From the approval of TAOP until March 2023, the evaluation identified a rather marked dynamism of the regulations on the coordination of the ESIF, reflecting a concern for improving the regulatory framework, but also a high degree of legislative instability, with a possible impact on ensuring coherence in the coordination of the ESIF. On the other hand, the procedural framework for the ESIF has remained largely stable and has allowed both authorities and beneficiaries to gain experience and improve their working practices with the structural funds.

The TAOP has contributed to improving the ESIF coordination and control system:

- ▶ **Indirectly**, by supporting the operational functioning of structures within the Ministry of European Investments and Projects;
- ▶ **Directly**, by supporting:
 - development of procedures (at the beginning of the programming period);
 - the preparation of the Partnership Agreement and programmes for the period 2021-2027;
 - funding of evaluations at Partnership Agreement level and development of evaluation capacity.

Management of the TAOP, LIOP and COP

All three operational programmes (TAOP, LIOP and COP) have made sufficient progress in implementation since their launch, by contracting the allocation for each Priority Axis and by contracting a sufficient number of projects that by their expected outputs can ensure the achievement of the output indicator targets.

The TAOP projects make an important contribution to the adequate capacity of the TAOP, LIOP, COP in particular in terms of functions: evaluation of applications for funding, monitoring, on-the-spot checks, verification of procurement and reimbursement claims, settlement of appeals. The TAOP projects make an important contribution to ensuring improved logistical conditions for the management of the TAOP, LIOP and COP and have made a major contribution to the efficient closure of the 2007-2013 period, in particular to the closure of the SOP IEC through the funding of the RDAs which have taken over the function of Intermediate Body. Further, the TAOP has made an important contribution to the preparation of the post-2020 period in terms of increasing the capacity of the regional RDAs to fulfil the function of Managing Authority. Finally, TAOP contributed to the evaluations of the TAOP, LIOP and COP.



Functionality, efficiency and effectiveness of the IT system

Due to its nature, the implementation of EU co-financed programmes requires constant updating of the IT system to take advantage of technological advances and meet the evolving needs of users. Once the efficient functioning of the IT system is ensured, interventions are needed to ensure that the correct data is generated in a timely manner so that it can be used by decision-makers when designing and implementing operational programmes.

The development and improvement of the functionalities of the SMIS IT system, its efficiency and effectiveness have been fully ensured by TAOP. The same can be concluded for the increased ability of users to make optimal use of the available modules of the MySMIS application.

Efficiency and effectiveness of human resources involved in the ESIF system

Staff stability and performance level targets have been met, with staff turnover remaining below 10% throughout the review period, 2014-2023, and the performance level reflected by the evaluation system score is high in all ESIF institutions eligible for TAOP support.

The average score exceeded 4.6 throughout the review period (the programme target was 3.5).

The TAOP contribution to ensuring stability has been significant and is mainly due to the provision of an attractive income level in relation to the labour market and job security.

TAOP has made a major contribution to meeting the training needs of the ESIF institutions. However, the training methods adopted do not sufficiently capitalise on the opportunities offered by information technology and the advantages of performance-oriented, self-directed and person-centred learning.

Individual performance is perceived as improved, but there is a widely held view that performance appraisal scores are an imperfect tool for reflecting actual employee performance, and not a tool for incentivising individual performance. The evaluation confirms through quantitative analysis that there is no correlation between the salary reimbursements provided by the TAOP and the results of the individual performance appraisal system. However, the usefulness of the TAOP intervention lies in its potential to indirectly influence performance by providing a level of income that gives recognition for complex work.

Moreover, the performance appraisal system enables managers to use their managerial skills to drive performance improvement. This makes managers with leadership skills an important resource to boost individual, team and institutional performance in the future.

The contribution of support to performance improvement can be enhanced by supporting managers, creating a performance culture to make more effective use of the appraisal system tools and day-to-day performance management.

Unintended effects

Projects implemented with TAOP support have had unexpected effects for two main categories of stakeholders:

- ▶ Authorities involved in managing and implementing the ESIF;
- ▶ ESIF beneficiaries.

In the first case, funded projects have contributed to increased inter-institutional collaboration as well as knowledge transfer in specific areas (e.g. communication and legal framework). This was made possible by the organisation of numerous trainings, as well as the improvement of the IT system and the legal framework.

The capacity development activities supported by the TAOP provided an important opportunity for public officers to lead their own development and transfer the knowledge and skills they have acquired within their organisation and across the ESIF system. On the other hand, there is a difficulty in identifying training providers with an appropriate level of qualification.

Improved visibility of funding opportunities has increased the interest and confidence of potential beneficiaries to apply for funding, as well as efficiency in the process of identifying opportunities.



At the same time, the revised legal framework has promoted participation, trust, inspiration and cooperative learning among both the beneficiaries of the ESIF and the public authorities involved in the implementation and management of the funds.

Another unexpected effect identified relates to the more efficient IT system. Users at all levels find the IT system a useful tool for monitoring and administering the projects they manage.

Sustainability of the observed effects

The sustainability of the effects of eligible technical assistance activities is primarily dependent on the continuation of financial assistance in the case of projects involving the contracting of consultants with techno-economic expertise, but is also influenced by changes in the context (e.g. legislation) in the case of capacity building activities. Interventions that aim to finance the salary costs of contractual staff run the risk that project effects are not sustained after completing the projects. However, more than 80% of TAOP project managers anticipate that project effects will persist after project completion.

Regarding the activities aimed at increasing the visibility of the ESIF, although many of the specific outputs and outcomes of these actions are limited in their sustainability, the actions implemented provide outputs and outcomes for the coming period that can further contribute to the objectives of dissemination and application of the partnership principle. Sustainable outputs and outcomes include the following: strategic communication elements such as unique slogans dedicated to target groups, communication tools and channels, applications, web pages that constitute the infrastructure on which the new communication products will be adapted, know-how acquired, code of conduct for partnership and methodology for partner selection. The analysis highlights favourable premises for the sustainability of the results, namely the strategic and institutional framework regulated for information and dissemination, the capacity of the responsible entities - Directorate General for Information, Transparency and Social Dialogue and Directorate General for Programmes and System Coordination of the Ministry of European Investments and Projects - to support the relevant operations in the absence of funding and through the know-how accumulated through the 2014-2020 experience.

In terms of strengthening the ESIF coordination and control systems, the effects are sustainable or have the potential to be sustainable, but their sustainability manifests itself differently. Projects that have provided support for the functioning of coordination and control structures should be continued in the next programming period. The evaluations and studies carried out prove their sustainability through the implementation of the recommendations made in them, and to ensure this sustainability, the Ministry of European Investments and Projects is implementing a system for monitoring the recommendations. This is a good practice that should be continued.

Capacity building activities through expertise implemented with the help of the TAOP are sustainable to a medium to high extent if the input of contracted/hired experts is used. The evaluation identified numerous cases where the MAs/IOs of the COP and LIOP have used expert deliverables, but the biggest risk from a sustainability perspective for this type of intervention is its discontinuation when the 2014-2020 projects are completed. However, given the specificity of the activities providing logistical, operational support, continued funding is very important to ensure sustainability.

The sustainability of the effects of IT system interventions in the medium and long term requires considerable efforts and covers the purchase of equipment, the development and improvement of the IT system, ensuring communication security, alignment with international standards and adaptation to legislative changes. Sustainability measures include technical support, staff training, system administration and maintenance, and functionality upgrades.

The sustainability of training is ensured by the applicability of competences in work processes, through their transfer into the organisation and institutional memory. Institutional human resource management systems improve sustainability through the consistent, systematic application of practice models, including formal or informal in-house training. TAOP projects provide models of good practice that can be extended.

Stability, performance and motivation of human resources have a low sustainability by nature of human resources, with a high degree of sensitivity to external factors. For this reason, HR policies and effective management are key elements that can maintain and foster attitudes and behaviours that will ensure stable, motivated and high performing staff.

Mechanisms that facilitated/prevented the effects and their key contextual characteristics

Good communication with the Managing Authority, project partners and intra/inter-institutional communication remain essential mechanisms with positive influence in the implementation of interventions aimed at increasing the capacity of beneficiaries. For the whole 2014-2020 programming period, the main factor influencing projects aiming at capacity building of beneficiaries is legislative and institutional stability/instability, both for projects involving knowledge transfer activities (where this factor mainly influences the sustainability of interventions) and for projects providing other types of support (where this factor may facilitate or block the implementation of certain activities). The COVID-19 pandemic, which temporarily blocked some project activities (working visits, information events or training sessions) and forced a transition to the online environment, was in the initial phase rather a negative factor influencing project implementation. However, the project implementation teams and the TAOP Managing Authority demonstrated a high capacity to adapt to new challenges and a willingness to transform projects where appropriate.

For projects that aimed to ensure the transparency and credibility of the ESIF, the functionality of the impact generation mechanisms is based on the two result chains - dissemination and development of partnership culture - and reflects the theory of programme implementation. The two logical chains converge towards a common objective of ESIF transparency and require an integrated strategic media approach. The intervention logic is partially validated due to the absence of the capacity development component of the causal chain partners i.e. the information centre actions operationalised late and at a significantly smaller scale.

Administrative bottlenecks, exacerbated by the COVID crisis, rigid procurement procedures have led to bottlenecks in the mechanism at operational level, delaying implementation and limiting expected effects.

Adapting communication methods and channels to target groups, exploiting the opportunities of technology and communication science, a continuous quality improvement approach are key success factors for value-added information and dissemination actions. A specific factor of action aimed at developing partnership culture is the adaptation to the specific needs of partners characterised by a high heterogeneity, but a high interest in and expectation of involvement with the ESIF.

In terms of coordination and control of structural and investment funds, the most important mechanisms that have facilitated the TAOP effects are related to the support strategy for the functioning of the MIEP structures through the implementation of horizontal logistical/operational support projects. These projects have ensured efficiency of support, and efficiency of support for input elements (logistics/operational) also ensures effectiveness. The most important negative factors that caused delays in the implementation of the projects are related to the management of public procurement which caused delays.

Specifically for the TAOP, LIOP and COP (SO 2.1), there are a number of mechanisms and factors that have facilitated the implementation of TAOP 2014-2020 funded projects. These include effective collaboration between the TAO MA and beneficiaries, the possibility of hiring staff outside the organisation, the quality of the expertise involved, the provision of material and logistical resources, collaboration between departments and institutions, the quality of the expertise involved and the flexibility of technical projects. On the other hand, the mechanisms with negative impact are: low salary level, restrictive selection criteria and short contract period for experts employed outside the organisation chart, low salary level of civil servants, management of a large workload, high degree of difficulty in managing horizontal logistics projects, changes in the composition of evaluation teams, lack of evaluation culture in Romania, problems in the conduct of public procurement.

Under SO 2.1 (TE4), a number of mechanisms and factors have been identified that have influenced the implementation of projects funded under the TAOP 2014-2020. These have included effective collaboration between TAOP Managing Authorities and beneficiaries, the ability to hire additional staff outside existing organisational structures, the high level of expertise involved, the provision of adequate material and logistical resources, and interdepartmental and inter-institutional collaboration. On the other hand, negative impact mechanisms were also identified, such as low remuneration of external technical experts, specific selection criteria and limited contract period for experts employed outside the organisation chart, low salary levels for civil servants, high workload management, high difficulties in managing horizontal logistics projects, frequent



changes in the composition of evaluation teams, lack of evaluation culture in Romania and problems encountered in the procurement process.

For projects designed to ensure the functionality of the IT system, a number of internal and external factors were identified as influencing the occurrence and manifestation of effects. The emergence of beneficial effects was facilitated by internal factors such as the strengthening of a team of experts responsible for the development and maintenance of SMIS2014+. This team had a shared vision of the architecture and functionality of the system. Previously, the diversity of perspectives brought by different experts made it difficult to develop the system, with over 2800 open tickets at the time of the team's formation. Effective collaboration between institutions was also a positive internal factor. As negative factors, the low capacity at the level of the MIEP to organise and execute public procurement procedures was identified, as was the resistance of users to change, especially after the introduction of new functionalities.

The logic of the intervention is validated in terms of the contribution of training to skills development and the financing of wage costs to staff stability, but the link to job performance is weak and indirect.

The impact of interventions aimed at developing ESIF's HRM policy is influenced by a multitude of external factors, starting with the framework of HRM policies and practices in ESIF entities, the performance orientation of processes, leadership and management capabilities to take advantage of opportunities offered by training technology, and the potential of employees to manage their own development by taking advantage of attractive opportunities.

Economic and social impact of TAOP 2014-2020

The macroeconomic impact of TAOP 2014-2020, measured in terms of contribution to GDP formation and employment, is significant, in particular in terms of jobs created as a result of acquisitions generated by the implemented activities. Given that TAOP contributes to strengthening the capacity of ESIF beneficiaries, this can generate a more significant indirect contribution to these macroeconomic indicators through the supported operational programmes.

The total contribution (direct, indirect and induced) of TAOP to GDP formation has been estimated at around **0.036% of GDP value at 2020 level**, with a direct contribution of 0.022%. On the other hand, the assessment of the total (direct, indirect and induced) contribution of TAOP to employment indicates an **increase of 86,163 jobs** (in full-time equivalent). The TAOP contribution was concentrated in the *Professional, scientific and technical activities* economic sector, with numerous public procurement contracts for technical and economic documentation and design services. In the case of GDP formation, the second most important sector to which TAOP has contributed is *Real Estate Transactions*, due to the renting of work premises. In the case of employment, the second most important sector to which TAOP has contributed is *Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles*, due to contracts for the purchase of workspace equipment (e.g. office and stationery, IT equipment, etc.).