



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 2023

FINAL VERSION

29 SEPTEMBER 2023

Short executive summary

The project¹ *Implementation of the Evaluation Plan of the Technical Assistance Operational Programme (TAOP) 2014-2020* aims at (i) facilitating informed management and strengthening evidence-based decision making at programme level, (ii) strengthening reporting to the European Commission on the effectiveness and impact of funding, (iii) strengthening the evaluation culture of the European Structural and Investment Funds and increasing the level of information on funded interventions and their impacts.

TAOP 2014-2020 was approved by the European Commission decision in December 2014. The overall objective of the programme is to provide the necessary capacity and tools for an effective coordination, management and control of interventions funded from 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 in three priority axes with the following specific objectives:

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
	Ensuring the ESIF transparency and credibility and the role of the European Union (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

The Executive Summary summarises the main conclusions on the contribution of the Technical Assistance Operational Programme for the period 2014-2020 (until 31 March 2023) 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 the TAOP 2014-2020? (effectiveness)
- ▶ What is the effectiveness of the interventions funded from TAOP 2014-2020? (gross effect)

¹ The service contract no. 61451/09.08.2019, concluded between the Ministry of Investments and European Projects and the Association formed by S.C. ERNST&YOUNG SRL (Lead Partner), the National Institute for Scientific Research in Labour and Social Protection (Associate Partner) and SC QURES Quality Research and Support SRL (Associate Partner), concerns the *Implementation of the Evaluation Plan of the Technical Assistance Operational Programme 2014-2020* and covers four evaluation exercises, related to the years 2018, 2019, 2021 and 2023. According to the Schedule of Conditions, the first Evaluation Report for the year 2018 covered six evaluation topics. The second and third reports covered the first two evaluation topics. The present report, related to the fourth evaluation exercise covers all evaluation topics.

- ▶ 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 the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) formation and employment.

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

The conclusions reached took into account the reallocations at programme level as well as the extension of the implementation period for some of the projects. In general, the intended effects of such complex interventions can be observed and lend themselves to robust evaluation once a representative sample of projects has been completed. In the period 2014-2023, approximately 48% of all projects funded under the programme were completed (i.e. 71 out of 149 contracted). Therefore, the likelihood of the impact expected to be obtained was estimated based on the results achieved by the baseline date. In this respect, all stakeholders were consulted. In cases where the availability to participate in consultations was limited, the analysis was complemented by other data collection and evaluation methods applied. Last but not least, the restrictions adopted as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic context have affected the progress of some activities in the funded projects and thus, their impact estimates.

Effectiveness of interventions

In terms of the effectiveness of the interventions funded from the Technical Assistance Operational Programme 2014-2020, financial and physical progress is good. Analysing the indicators of the programme, it can be deduced that TAOP has been largely effective, as it has ensured a high level of awareness of EU co-financed projects and the functioning of the SMIS2014+ information system (these two indicators at programme level having a level of achievement of over 100%). The effectiveness of the programme is also related to ensuring an absorption rate of over 70% for projects supported by TAOP. The amount achieved will be calculated after the completion of the projects funded from COP and LIOP, whose development was supported from TAOP.

Progress observed in achieving the Specific Objectives of TAOP and the contribution of the programme

During the period under review, **an increase in the capacity of beneficiaries** to prepare and implement ESIF funded projects was observed. The capacity both to prepare quality proposals with strategic impact and to implement contracted projects effectively has increased, although in the latter case, the analysis shows that beneficiaries still feel a need for further support. Although 70% of the projects aimed at strengthening beneficiaries' capacity are still under implementation, the stakeholder consultation and case studies indicated that TAOP has played a key role in increasing the capacity of ESIF beneficiaries.

The analysis also confirms that the programme has ensured a **high level of awareness of the general public about** the ESIF - the 60% target of the indicator has been exceeded (values recorded: 84% in 2020, 83% in 2022 and 85% in 2023). Despite the limited scope of action, TAOP has contributed to strengthening the partnership framework through activities that focused on key logistical support in the consultation processes, the transposition of the provisions of the European Code of Conduct on Partnership and through the methodology for the selection of partners for the implementation of the Partnership Agreement 2021-2027.

From the approval of the TAOP in December 2014 to March 2023, the evaluation identified a rather marked dynamism of the regulations on the ESIF coordination, 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 ESIF coordination. Despite this instability, almost 75% of ESIF beneficiaries consider that procedures for accessing funding and implementing projects are adequate.

This is an effect of the experience gained and demonstrates the effectiveness of the TAOP. All three operational programmes directly concerned by the TAOP interventions (TAOP, LIOP and COP) have made sufficient progress in implementation since their launch. TAOP has ensured adequate capacity of the institutional system to manage the three Operational Programmes. TAOP support has also ensured improved logistical conditions for the implementation of the TAOP, LIOP, COP, supporting the closure process of the 2007-13 period, preparing the post-2020 programming period and carrying out the evaluations foreseen in the TAOP, LIOP and COP evaluation plans.

As far as the IT system is concerned, the development and improvement of its functionalities, efficiency and effectiveness have been fully ensured by the TAOP. The same can be concluded for the increased ability of users to make optimal use of the available modules of the MySMIS2014 application.

Staff stability and performance targets have been met. TAOP has made a major contribution to meeting the training needs of the ESIF institutions, but 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. The evaluation confirms through quantitative analysis that there is no correlation between the salary reimbursements provided by 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.

The Technical Assistance Operational Programme 2014-2020 has contributed to progress on all aspects defined by the specific objectives, with the development and maintenance of an efficient/effective IT system being fully attributed to the programme.

Unintended effects and durability of effects

The projects implemented with TAOP support have had unexpected effects both for the authorities involved in the management and implementation of the ESIF (increased inter-institutional collaboration, as well as knowledge transfer in areas such as communication and the legal framework) and for the beneficiaries of the funding. The capacity development activities supported by TAOP provided an important opportunity for public officials to lead their own development and to transfer the knowledge and skills acquired within their organisation and throughout the ESIF system. However, there is a difficulty in identifying qualified training providers.

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 ESIF beneficiaries 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 managing the projects they manage.

Although projects include measures to ensure sustainability of effects, given the nature of technical assistance interventions, the effects are not sustained after the end of funding for some types of activities (e.g. salary costs, IT system development).

Mechanisms that positively or negatively influenced the interventions

Good communication with the Managing Authority, project partners, as well as intra/inter-institutional communication, the possibility to strengthen expertise/capacity in terms of human resources (outside hires, experts/consultants) remain essential mechanisms with a positive influence on the implementation of interventions. At the level of the whole 2014-2020 programming period, the main factor influencing projects is legislative and institutional stability/instability. Procurement procedures continued to be a negative factor influencing project implementation. The COVID-19 pandemic context, which temporarily blocked some of the 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.

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) TAOP contribution to employment indicates an increase of 86,163 jobs (in full-time equivalent).

Recommendations

The main recommendations, with applicability in the 2021-2027 programming period, concern:

- ▶ Define, in coordination with other managing authorities and/or structures of the Ministry of European Investments and Projects, specific interventions to support the capacity building of ESIF beneficiaries in terms of project management and resource management at organisational level.
- ▶ Analyse the potential use of new technologies (e.g. artificial intelligence, process automation with software robots) to streamline processes related to project implementation/monitoring.
- ▶ Establishment of *knowledge* management systems for the transfer of knowledge to staff in the supported organisations.
- ▶ Conduct regular reviews of the evolution of training needs, paying particular attention to the frequency with which training should take place for increased effectiveness and sustainability of the intervention, depending on the type of training/field, and identify mechanisms to encourage the continued exchange of information/skills that will ensure knowledge updates in the network of training participants.
- ▶ Ensuring a stable strategic framework with a functioning coordination mechanism on information dissemination actions for the whole system of EU funds.
- ▶ A comprehensive support concept dedicated to partners highlighting the following benefits: recognition of their importance, of their specific needs, and integrated approach to forms of support (traditional forms, remote collaborative system).
- ▶ Building on the experience of the 2014-2020 period and ensuring the transfer of experience on programme management procedures that have proven to be appreciated by the ESIF beneficiaries to the new managing authorities, in particular the Regional Development Agencies.
- ▶ Conducting practical training sessions for beneficiaries, allowing the transfer of best practices from experienced beneficiaries to those with less experience in managing European funds.
- ▶ The possibility to hire additional staff outside the organizational chart should be maintained for the period 2021-2027.
- ▶ Longer contract period for experts employed outside the organizational chart.
- ▶ Implementing extensive communication activities between decision-makers and the technical level (demand and supply side of evaluation) on planned evaluations and their results to strengthen their relevance, usefulness and use.
- ▶ Consultation with all stakeholders in the use and management of the IT system to ensure the definition and continuous adaptation of system functionalities in line with user needs for the period 2021-2027.
- ▶ Analyse the opportunity to implement automated data validation systems within SMIS2014+/MySMIS2014.
- ▶ Reconceptualising training by integrating three principles that are proving their benefits in the adult learning environment: technology-based learning; self-directed, motivating and stimulating learning; application and performance-oriented learning.
- ▶ Implement the system-wide performance culture development programme.