

Executive summary

This document is the final version of the second Evaluation Report of the project "Implementation of the Evaluation Plan of the Technical Assistance Operational Programme 2014-2020", within the framework of the service contract no. 61451/09.08.2019, entered into between the Ministry of Investments and European Projects and the Partnership formed by S.C. ERNST&YOUNG SRL (Lead Partner), National Institute for Scientific Research in Labour and Social Protection (Partner) and SC QURES Quality Research and Support SRL (Partner).

The objectives of the evaluation are the following:

- Facilitate the informed management of the Technical Assistance Operational Programme 2014-2020 and strengthen evidence-based decision-making at programme level;
- **Strengthen the annual and progress reports** to be submitted to the European Commission by including evaluation results and reporting evaluation findings by December 2022;
- **Support the strengthening of the evaluation culture** within the European Structural and Investment Funds system and **increase the level of information** to the European Commission and the public on the effects of the interventions financed by the Technical Assistance Operational Programme 2014-2020.

This Evaluation Report covers the period 2014-2020.

Evaluation Themes

The project aims to measure the contribution of the Technical Assistance Operational Programme 2014-2020 to:

- **Strengthening the capacity of beneficiaries of the European Structural and Investment Funds / Technical Assistance Operational Programme, the Large Infrastructure Operational Programme and the Competitiveness Operational Programme;**
- **Dissemination of information on the Structural and Investment Funds / Technical Assistance Operational Programme, Large Infrastructure Operational Programme and Competitiveness Operational Programme;**
- Coordination and control of European Structural and Investment Funds;
- Management of the Technical Assistance Operational Programme, the Large Infrastructure Operational Programme and the Competitiveness Operational Programme;
- Functionality and efficiency/effectiveness of the IT system;
- Efficiency and effectiveness of human resources in the European Structural and Investment Funds system.

The areas mentioned are the "Evaluation Themes" and are related to the intervention logic of the programme, i.e. its specific objectives, as shown in the table below.

Table 1. Evaluation Themes

Evaluation Themes	Specific objective of the Programme within the coverage area
1	1.1. Strengthening the capacity of beneficiaries of projects financed by European Structural and Investment Funds to prepare and implement projects
2	1.2. Ensuring the transparency and credibility of the European Structural and Investment Funds and the role of the European Union Cohesion Policy
3	2.1. Improving the regulatory, strategic and procedural framework for the coordination and implementation of the European Structural and Investment Funds - with the exception of specific support for the Technical Assistance Operational Programme, the Large Infrastructure Operational Programme and the Competitiveness Operational Programme
4	2.1. Improving the regulatory, strategic and procedural framework for the coordination and implementation of the European Structural and Investment Funds - activities related to specific support for the Technical Assistance Operational Programme, the Large Infrastructure Operational

Evaluation Themes	Specific objective of the Programme within the coverage area
	Programme and the Competitiveness Operational Programme
5	2.2. Developing and maintaining a functional and efficient IT system for Structural and Cohesion Funds and strengthening the capacity of its users
6	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 European Structural and Investment Funds

The contract covers four evaluation exercises, 2018, 2019, 2021 and 2023. According to the Terms of Reference, the 2018 Evaluation Report covered six evaluation themes. **This report**, for the second evaluation exercise, **covers only the first two evaluation themes**, as detailed below.

Evaluation Questions

For each of the two Evaluation Themes covered in this Report a series of General Evaluation Questions have been addressed on:

- Effectiveness of the interventions financed by the Technical Assistance Operational Programme in relation to the achievement of planned targets (i.e. measured by result and immediate output indicators);
- Progress achieved on the specific objectives of the Technical Assistance Operational Programme 2014-2020, as identified in the Intervention Logic of the programme (see Table 1);
- The extent to which the observed progress is causally linked to projects funded under the Technical Assistance Operational Programme 2014-2020;
- The extent to which projects funded under the Technical Assistance Operational Programme 2014-2020 produce unintended positive or negative effects different from those identified in the Intervention Logic of the programme;
- Likelihood that the observed progress and unexpected effects will be maintained after the end of the programme;
- Existence of mechanisms or contextual factors that facilitated/prevented progress and unexpected effects.

In addition to the General Evaluation Questions requested by the Terms of Reference, the Provider has proposed for this evaluation cycle an Additional Evaluation Question, applicable to both themes, on the existence of good practice cases regarding the Technical Assistance Operational Programme interventions and related implementation mechanisms.

The objective of the Report is to provide answers to the Evaluation Questions as well as an overview of the status of the data collection process required for the evaluation, given the limitations on the availability of information.

This version of the Report is based on the Evaluation Methodology approved by the Evaluation Steering Committee on 16.12.2019 and the General Implementation Schedule of the activities updated in the framework of the Additional Act No. 2 to the grant contract of 22.05.2020. **The cut-off date for this Evaluation Report is 31.12.2020.**

Data collection methods

In order to answer the Evaluation Questions, the methodological approach used was built on a mix of data collection methods and tools, both qualitative and quantitative, depending on the particularities of each Evaluation theme. These helped to formulate robust, reliable conclusions on the Evaluation Questions.

The methodological approach used was complex, involving the application of theory-based evaluation methods, impact self-assessment methods, case studies, complemented by other research methods, i.e. literature review, desk research (programming and implementation documents at programme and project level), analysis of administrative data on projects funded at Operational Programme level and data that may indicate unintended effects or sustainability of some effects. The literature review helped to highlight



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the types of potential effects, factors and mechanisms by which the expected (planned) effects occurred, and external factors that enhanced or mediated the occurrence of effects.

To triangulate the information, data were collected using additional collection methods, namely:

- Survey (1) addressed to project managers who manage/have managed interventions financed under the Technical Assistance Operational Programme;
- Survey (2) addressed to persons who have participated in horizontal and/or specific training activities funded under Specific Objective 1.1 of the Technical Assistance Operational Programme;
- Survey (3) addressed to beneficiaries of the European Structural and Investment Funds 2014-2020.

The level of responses collected in the surveys ensured representativeness.

In order to complete the results obtained by applying the above mentioned methods, two focus groups were organized with well-defined purposes, namely:

- A focus group for each evaluation topic to analyse the mechanisms identified or contextual factors that facilitated / hindered progress and unexpected effects;
- A focus group for each evaluation topic to validate the preliminary findings of the evaluations in this Report.

The Stakeholder Analysis Matrix was the tool used to systematically organise the analysis.

Challenges faced and solutions

The second evaluation exercise of the Technical Assistance Operational Programme 2014-2020 analyses developments following the implementation of the programme in the period 2014-2020.

The limited level of implementation of the programme was a first challenge to assess both the main effects of the programme and their sustainability and the existence of mechanisms that facilitated/prevented the achievement of these effects. The effects of any complex programme are visible and lend themselves to robust evaluation when a representative number of funded interventions have been completed. In the period 2014-2020 about 40% of all projects funded under the programme were completed (i.e. 50 of 126). The level of implementation of the programme allowed the evaluation team to assess the status of activities (e.g. level of achievement of planned activities and progress indicators). Also, the effects visible on 31 December 2020 were discussed with stakeholders and the conditions under which the expected effects will be achieved were analysed. The results and conclusions of this evaluation exercise will be verified, developed and integrated into the next two evaluation cycles.

The limited availability of project managers to participate in interviews organised for the case studies was also a challenge for the evaluation team. Also because of this, data collection from stakeholders directly benefiting from Action 1.2.1 of the programme was delayed. In order to facilitate the collection of views from all stakeholders, telephone interviews were planned with relevant stakeholders, subject to their availability, with the possibility of providing written details of the answers to the questions in the interview guides. Also, the Programme Evaluation Office of the Directorate General for Programming and System Coordination of the Ministry of European Investment and Projects, as well as the management of the Managing Authority of the Technical Assistance Operational Programme supported the data collection approach through letters of support to the stakeholders concerned for discussions and encouraging participation in the organised focus groups.

The implementation of measures adopted following the establishment of states of emergency and alert, decreed at national level as of 16 March 2020, in order to protect all persons concerned and to eliminate the risk of spreading Covid-19 infection, prevented the implementation of some activities as originally planned (e.g. study visits, information events, training sessions with physical presence).

The surveys provided information for the analyses and the number of respondents meets the expected precision of the results (details in Annex 2). For some questions and some categories of respondents, the

number of answers is small, below 50 answers, in which case no statistical interpretations have been made, but only the typology of answers has been exemplified.

The methodology did not include a survey of the population aged 18 and over for this evaluation exercise. Thus, data collected in February 2020 were used to calculate the awareness of the population on the European Structural and Investment Funds.

For the immediate output indicators, the analysis was based on indicators reported up to 31 December 2020. According to the case study interviews, there may be situations where reported progress and the state of progress to date may be different because progress on outcome and immediate achievement indicators has been reported to the Managing Authority after the evaluation baseline date or, in some cases, is yet to be reported. The values of the indicators will be monitored and analysed in the next evaluation exercises under this contract.

Effectiveness of the interventions financed by the Technical Assistance Operational Programme 2014-2020

As of 31.12.2020, the total number of projects contracted under the Technical Assistance Operational Programme is 126, with a total value of the public budget of approximately 1.44 billion RON. The amount of payments made to beneficiaries is approximately 927 million RON. Thus, the execution rate is 64.2%, up from the value recorded at the end of 2019, according to the data in the following table.

Table 2. Amount of funding granted through the Technical Assistance Operational Programme, in RON, detailed by Priority Areas and Specific Objectives, 31.12.2020 versus 30.11.2019

PA / S.O.	Funding granted on 30.11.2019	Payments made 30.11.2019	Funding granted on 31.12.2020	Payments made 31.12.2020	Execution rate (%) at 30.11.2019	Execution rate (%) 31.12.2020
PA 1	236643202.7	41710497.9	235484502.3	74674909.6	17.6%	31.7%
S.O. 1.1	187,394,288.1	39,378,285.1	196,173,130.5	65,611,279.5	21.0%	33.4%
S.O. 1.2	49,248,914.6	2,332,212.8	39,311,371.8	9,063,630	4.7%	23.1%
PA 2	313,664,170.3	100,118,611.8	438,442,939	155,558,711	31.9%	35.5%
S.O. 2.1	295,466,441.2	92,373,661.9	371,253,969.2	146,799,327.3	31.3%	39.5%
S.O. 2.2	18,197,729.1	7,744,949.9	67,188,969.7	8,759,383.7	42.6%	13.0%
PA 3	801,566,117.6	515,268,746.8	769,941,724.9	696,914,225.4	64.3%	90.5%
S.O. 3.1	801,566,117.6	515,268,746.8	769,941,724.9	696,914,225.4	64.3%	90.5%
Total	1,351,873,490.5	657,097,856.5	1,443,869,166.2	927,147,846	48.6%	64.2%

Source: List of projects of the Technical Assistance Operational Programme as of 30.11.2019 and 31.12.2020, made available by the Ministry of Investment and European Projects

The effectiveness of the interventions financed under Specific Objective 1.1 is consistent with the state of implementation of the 16 projects contracted to date, of which only five have been completed. The implementation rate is 33.4%, up compared to the value recorded at the end of 2019 and corresponds to the fact that most of the interventions under implementation are approximately halfway through the implementation period. However, no firm conclusion can be drawn on the effectiveness of the interventions given the lack of intermediate targets that could facilitate monitoring of progress. The analysis of the level of achievement of indicators shows that progress has been made during this period, but there is a risk that the targets set in the programming documents will not be met, given the number of projects still under implementation and the concentration of activities in the period 2020-2023.

The execution rate of payments under Specific Objective 2.2 and the level of achievement of progress indicators are below plan. Although some delays have been recovered, the restrictions imposed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic have led to further delays and required the extension of funding contracts. Two out of eight projects contracted under this Specific Objective are completed. The implementation rate is below the average programme implementation rate and no progress has been



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reported for three of the five output indicators. There is a significant risk that for these three indicators the targets will not be met by the end of the implementation period. Although efforts have been made to mitigate these risks, the interventions funded have faced major delays due to restrictions imposed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and administrative bottlenecks.

Progress achieved in the targeted areas, sectors and groups in relation to the specific objectives of the Technical Assistance Operational Programme 2014-2020

The review identified evidence of progress towards meeting the programme's Specific Objectives.

Overall, the analysis shows an increase in the capacity of beneficiaries of projects financed by the European Structural and Investment Funds to prepare and implement projects. Their positive perceptions of their increased capacity to identify and prepare quality project proposals with strategic impact are confirmed by the increased success rate of contracted projects in relation to the number of proposals submitted, i.e. the total eligible and average values of contracted projects. The increased success rate is a clear indication that the capacity to prepare quality project proposals has increased. The increase in contracted amounts suggests a greater complexity of the projects submitted and therefore an increased strategic impact.

Improvements have also been perceived in the **capacity to effectively implement projects financed by the European Structural and Investment Funds**. Progress is perceived in particular in terms of the integration of management and control systems at the level of beneficiary organisations with those of the implemented projects, as well as the management capacity of human resources involved in project implementation. These positive perceptions are, however, partly reflected by the quantitative data on the degree of implementation of projects contracted under the Operational Programmes. The execution level at the end of 2020 compared to the end of 2013 is lower. However, there is a strong possibility that the measures adopted in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic may have affected the implementation of planned project activities and, therefore, reimbursement claims.

On the other hand, with regard to Specific Objective 1.2, progress has been observed in terms of the level of information and awareness of citizens since the beginning of the programming period. In terms of partnership culture, it is difficult to identify and assess progress, as there is no such indicator at programme level, and involvement may vary according to different contextual factors. In addition, it has been observed that the social partners fail to ensure stable representation, often delays occur in the consultation processes and thus the continuity of this process is affected. The progress observed for Specific Objective 1.2 is less evident compared to Specific Objective 1.1.

Extent to which observed progress is attributed to the programme

Following the analysis, the evidence identified indicates that the above-mentioned progress is consistent with the Specific Objectives of the Technical Assistance Operational Programme and is largely due to the funded interventions.

For example, the Technical Assistance Operational Programme has made an important contribution to increasing the capacity of beneficiaries of projects financed by the European Structural and Investment Funds to prepare and implement projects. Based on the perceptions collected and the case studies analysed, evidence was found that the funded activities supported the beneficiaries in particular in terms of **increased efficiency in project implementation**. From this point of view, improvements have been observed mainly in the integration of management and control systems at the level of the implemented projects with those at the level of the beneficiaries, i.e. the increased capacity to manage human resources involved in the implementation of projects. In terms of **capacity to identify and prepare quality project proposals with strategic impact**, the Technical Assistance Operational Programme has contributed in particular to **increasing beneficiaries' capacity to identify and access funding opportunities**. Although it is not possible to quantify exactly to what extent the programme has contributed to increasing the quality and strategic impact of the projects, given the stage of implementation of the projects, there is evidence that skills have also increased in this respect.

The contribution of the Technical Assistance Operational Programme is more visible for Specific Objective 1.1 than for Specific Objective 1.2. With regard to Specific Objective 1.2, some bottlenecks in



the implementation of information and dissemination actions were noted. The progress achieved, below expectations, is not sufficient to discuss a noticeable contribution to **raising public awareness of EU-funded projects**, especially as there have been other complementary information actions funded by other Operational Programmes. On the other hand, despite limited progress, the programme has contributed to the active involvement of partners by **strengthening the partnership framework** and logistical support. However, the contribution was also moderate because many of the planned activities could not be implemented due to travel and physical interaction restrictions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

In addition, as most of the planned activities will be concentrated in the last three years of implementation, there is a risk that not all the expected effects will be visible at the end of the programming period in 2023.

Existence of unintended effects

The not very advanced level of implementation makes it premature to assess unexpected effects. However, the case study analysis has already identified some examples of unexpected effects.

The vast majority of unintended effects as a result of the implementation of Specific Objective 1.1 have been noted in projects that included training activities, and these have been largely positive (e.g. improved collaboration and communication with people from different institutions and fields and the acquisition of new ideas in various fields of activity). However, this finding shows that unintended effects are closely linked to the types of interventions implemented.

On the other hand, in the case of Specific Objective 1.2, the Covid-19 pandemic has generated a pressure to replace traditional methods of information and communication with remote ones via the Internet. This has had positive effects in increasing efficiency and accessibility to information and events, but also negative effects in generating dissatisfaction when target groups lack digital skills and familiarity with digital tools, or when the approach has not been sufficiently adapted to the online environment.

Sustainability of effects

The possibility to observe and analyse the sustainability of the effects of interventions is closely linked to the stage of implementation. Thus, it is premature at this stage to formulate a conclusion, as most of the contracted projects are still in the implementation phase.

However, it can be noted that, in the case of Specific Objective 1.1, the sustainability of effects is closely linked to the type of interventions financed and implemented. For example, activities involving knowledge transfer are influenced by factors such as the type of work carried out by training participants and changes in the areas in which training has been carried out (changes in legislation, changes in procedures, etc.). The effects of interventions financing salary costs for contract staff are limited in their sustainability as contract staff stop working after the intervention is completed.

In the case of Specific Objective 1.2, the restrictions imposed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic severely affected the implementation of planned activities and thus the possibility of seeing sustainable effects. The blocking of project activities did not allow the continued use of some products of previous projects. However, examples of products with sustainability potential could be identified. For example, the methodology for the selection of social partners in the partnership structures of the European Structural and Investment Funds could form the basis for coordination and support to social partners during the implementation of interventions. This contributes to the sustainable functioning of the structures created. This potential for sustainability will be the subject of analysis in future evaluations based on data on the functioning of partnership structures.

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

Compared to the previous evaluation exercise, the main novelty and at the same time factor that affected the implementation of the planned activities and the achievement of the expected outcomes under Specific Objective 1.1 is the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, the restrictions imposed by the authorities no longer allowed the organisation of study visits, information events or training sessions, at least not in



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the form originally envisaged by the project. On the other hand, a strong influencing factor, also observed in the previous evaluation exercise, relates to 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).

As regards the mechanisms that influenced the implementation of Specific Objective 1.2, the implementation of interventions and the achievement of impacts were affected by the loss of the initial strategic vision and the lack of clarity of a new vision, the insufficient involvement of stakeholders providing complementary actions while benefiting from the effects of informing their own beneficiaries and target audience. Administrative bottlenecks, amplified by the Covid-19 crisis, have led to bottlenecks in the mechanism at operational level. A specific factor of Action 1.2.2 is the adaptation to the specific needs of social partners characterised by high heterogeneity. Although administrative difficulties have created bottlenecks in implementation, the evaluation finds a good understanding of the needs of the social partners, which creates the conditions for effective future actions.

Best practices in Technical Assistance Operational Programme interventions and related implementation mechanisms

The examples of best practice identified under Specific Objective 1.1 contribute to the streamlining of project implementation procedures (e.g. design of flexible action plans, forward planning of activities) and the coherence of project activities and objectives at the level of the beneficiary institution (e.g. definition of a single team with an overview of all projects in a given area).

Under Specific Objective 1.2, the experience of implementing the actions reveals an example of best practice from Action 1.2.2. The technical assistance offer available through the second component of the project was used to create a transparent partner selection procedure for the 2021-2027 partnership structures. The way the assistance was used ensured, on the one hand, the creation of a sustainable product (which can be used later on) and, on the other hand, the expertise of the consultants taken over through the creation of the procedure is internalised in the Directorate-General for Programming and Coordination System, strengthening its capacity to further manage the partnership structures. The opinion of the social partners interviewed confirms their satisfaction with this approach which adds value to the partnership processes experienced in the previous programming period.

Conclusions and recommendations

The main conclusion is that the Technical Assistance Operational Programme has contributed to the progress made in the 2014-2020 period in strengthening the capacity of beneficiaries of projects financed by the European Structural and Investment Funds to prepare and implement projects. In terms of ensuring the transparency and credibility of the European Structural and Investment Funds and the role of the EU Cohesion Policy, the impact of the Technical Assistance Operational Programme is limited. Slight effects of the funded interventions have been identified in particular in terms of strengthening the partnership culture of the European Structural and Investment Funds, but the progress observed is below the expected level, as the implementation of the interventions is affected by many factors, both programme implementation and external contextual factors.

On the other hand, areas of intervention have been identified where improvements can be made. For example, as regards the **capacity of beneficiaries of projects financed by the European Structural and Investment Funds to prepare and implement projects**, the main recommendations from a strategic point of view concern: (i) improving the programme and project monitoring framework by introducing interim targets for physical and financial progress indicators and (ii) identifying projects that particularly target EDF beneficiaries in the private and government sectors.

From an implementation point of view, an applicable recommendation for knowledge transfer projects is to carry out training needs analyses that pay particular attention to the frequency with which training should take place for increased effectiveness and sustainability of the intervention. This could counteract the effects of legislative/procedural changes.



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With regard to ensuring the transparency and credibility of the European Structural and Investment Funds and the role of the European Union Cohesion Policy, the main strategic recommendations are: the reformulation of the strategic communication vision on the European Structural and Investment Funds, with the involvement and assumption of the contribution of the authorities in the field at the level of all the Operational Programmes and, subsequently, the re-abstracting of the National Information Centre project, a project which practically operationalises this strategic vision for the remaining period of the current programming period and for the future.

In terms of the implementation of the programme, the following recommendations have been made:

- The Management Authority of the Technical Assistance Operational Programme, together with the Directorate General for Information, Transparency and Social Dialogue, to undertake a joint action plan for the operationalization of the new communication strategy and its transposition into action 1.2.1 of Specific Objective 1.2, with a priority focus on (i) implementing the revised National Information Centre project with realistic deadlines, (ii) updating the programme indicator targets, (iii) ensuring the expected effects and meeting the needs for which Specific Objective 1.2 was designed;
- Adopt more flexible, less prescriptive designs in terms of processes and methods. They could thus allow adaptation to specific conditions, integration of new methods, techniques and tools identified during implementation that add value to the results. This recommendation concerns the future programming period, i.e. the concept of project calls and related documents;
- Continue support activities for social partners, developing forms of support appropriate to their specific needs, including the following: (i) the creation and implementation of a web-based remote communication tool dedicated to the development of a partnership culture and the involvement of partners in the management of the European Structural and Investment Funds. The instrument needs to be integrated into the communication strategy of the European Structural and Investment Funds and related instruments, so that it is not perceived as a new instrument, (ii) ensuring the human resources necessary for continuity in communication, including specialised expertise such as in facilitating online communication, specialist expertise on specific areas, (iii) diversifying the forms of consultation, adapted to the specific stakeholders, location and territorial level at which they operate, including innovative methods complementary to traditional ones that can create interest for social partners in dynamic, innovative areas, (iv) facilitating access to information, relevant experiences that can support the understanding of the theme and context of the consultation (e.g. creation of preparatory synthesis documents, such as summaries of lessons learned from a selection of evaluations relevant to the topic).