



Executive summary (short version)

The project *Implementation of the Evaluation Plan of the Technical Assistance Operational Programme 2014-2020* aims at: (i) facilitating the informed management and strengthening the 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.

The Executive Summary summarises the main conclusions on the results and impact of the Technical Assistance Operational Programme for the period 2014-2020 (until 31 December 2020), in terms of:

- Strengthening the capacity of beneficiaries of the European Structural and Investment Funds in general and of the Technical Assistance, Large Infrastructure and Competitiveness Operational Programmes in particular to prepare and implement mature projects;
- Dissemination of information on the Structural and Investment Funds in general and the Technical Assistance, Large Infrastructure and Competitiveness Operational Programmes.

These issues have been analysed in the second Evaluation Report for the project¹ from the perspective of:

- Effectiveness of the interventions financed (i.e. the extent to which the programme's objectives have been achieved in terms of financial execution and achievement of the indicators set);
- The extent to which the capacity of beneficiaries to prepare and implement projects and the level of awareness of the general public about EU funds has increased during the period under review;
- The extent to which the funding provided through the Technical Assistance Operational Programme has contributed to increasing the capacity of beneficiaries and the dissemination of information on non-reimbursable funds;
- The occurrence of unintended positive or negative effects of interventions, the sustainability of their impact and the internal and external factors that affected the implementation of the programme and its effects.

The methodological approach used combined qualitative and quantitative evaluation methods. The information obtained was verified by applying 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 with programme stakeholders in focus groups.

The conclusions drawn took into account the **limitations** in carrying out the analysis. The main challenge in assessing the impact of the programme was the limited level of implementation of the funded interventions. In general, the intended effects of such complex interventions can be observed and lend themselves to robust evaluation when a representative sample of projects have been completed. In the period 2014-2020 about 40% of all projects funded under the programme were completed (i.e. 50 of 126). Therefore, the likelihood of the expected impact being realised was estimated based on the results obtained up to the cut-off date. All stakeholders have been consulted in this respect. Where 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 Covid-19 pandemic have affected the progress of certain activities in the funded projects and thus their impact estimates.

Effectiveness of interventions

¹ Service contract no. 61451/09.08.2019, entered into between the Ministry of Investment and European Projects and the Partnership formed by S.C. ERNST&YOUNG SRL (Lead Partner), the National Institute for Scientific Research in Labour and Social Protection (Partner) and SC QURES Quality Research and Support SRL (Partner), aims at 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. The contract covers four evaluation years, 2018, 2019, 2021 and 2023. According to the Terms of Reference, the first Evaluation Report related to 2018 covered six evaluation topics. This report, for the second evaluation exercise, covers only the first two evaluation topics, on capacity building of beneficiaries and dissemination of information on the European Structural and Investment Funds.



UNIUNEA EUROPEANĂ



In terms of the effectiveness of the interventions funded by the Technical Assistance Operational Programme 2014-2020, financial and physical progress is limited. The limited level of financial execution is a consequence of the stage of implementation of projects. At the same time, although the indicator targets set at programme level have been partly met or exceeded, there is a risk that the project level targets will not be met by the end of programme implementation in 2023. This risk cannot be quantified exactly as no interim indicator targets have been set.

Evolution of beneficiaries' capacity to prepare and implement projects and of the level of dissemination of information on the European Structural and Investment Funds in the period 2014-2020

During the period under review, an increase in the capacity of beneficiaries to prepare and implement projects financed by the European Structural and Investment Funds was observed. The capacity both to prepare quality proposals with strategic impact and to effectively implement contracted projects has increased, although in the latter case the analysis shows that progress has not been optimal. Also, the level of information and awareness of citizens about the opportunities offered and the impact of the Structural and Investment Funds increased at the end of 2020 compared to 2014. However, the development of a partnership culture on grant funding could not be comprehensively assessed due to limited monitoring and various contextual factors affecting this progress.

Contribution of the Technical Assistance Operational Programme 2014-2020 to increasing beneficiaries' capacity and awareness of non-reimbursable funds

The Technical Assistance Operational Programme 2014-2020 has contributed largely to increasing the efficiency of project implementation and the capacity to identify and prepare quality proposals with strategic impact. However, it is not possible to quantify exactly to what extent the increased quality and strategic impact of the projects is due to the programme, but there are indications. At the same time, it was not possible to observe the contribution of the programme to raising public awareness of European funded projects, given the persistence of institutional bottlenecks in the implementation of information and dissemination actions. However, the evidence shows a moderate contribution to strengthening the partnership framework of the European Structural and Investment Funds.

Unintended effects and sustainability of programme impacts

Assessing both the unintended effects and the sustainability of the impact of funded interventions is premature given the limited stage of implementation of the programme. What could be observed, however, is that both the unintended effects and the sustainability of the impact are significantly influenced by the type of interventions funded. For example, training activities tend to strengthen intra- and inter-institutional communication and collaboration and their impact is sustainable as long as the specific activities of the trainees do not change. The main novelty is the Covid-19 pandemic, which has generated both positive (e.g. increased use of digital media) and negative (e.g. increased dissatisfaction due to poor digital skills or activities not sufficiently adapted to the online environment) unintended effects. At the same time, it has limited the observation of the sustainability of the effects of certain interventions.

Factors that positively or negatively influenced the interventions

The Covid-19 pandemic is also the main factor that has affected the implementation of planned activities and the expected impact in the last period. It was no longer possible to organise study visits, information events or training sessions, at least not in the form originally envisaged. On the other hand, institutional instability or status quo, in some cases, has negatively affected project implementation. There was also a lack of clarity on the development of a new strategic vision on increasing the dissemination of information on the European Structural and Investment Funds, as well as low stakeholder involvement.

Best practice

However, some examples of best practice in implementing funded interventions have been identified: (i) creation of single teams of experts with strategic vision on interventions in specific areas, (ii) verification of the quality of the deliverables made by the relevant institutions in the areas concerned, (iii) regular analysis of the needs of the target groups of the interventions, (iv) implementation of horizontal interventions for



UNIUNEA EUROPEANĂ



beneficiaries of the European Structural and Investment Funds complementary to specific interventions for certain operational programmes.

Recommendations

Thus, the Technical Assistance Operational Programme has contributed to strengthening the capacity of beneficiaries to prepare and implement projects financed by the European Structural and Investment Funds, but its impact has been rather limited in terms of ensuring the transparency and credibility of European funds and the role of the Cohesion Policy. The main recommendations to optimise this contribution both in 2014-2020 and in the next programming period concern:

- Introduction of intermediate targets for monitoring projects and identification of projects particularly targeting beneficiaries in the private and government sectors;
- Conduct training needs analyses with a particular focus on how often training should take place to optimise impact;
- Reformulation of the strategic communication vision for the European Structural and Investment Funds and re-abstracting the National Information Centre project, which operationalises this strategic vision.