

1 Introduction

1.1 Objectives of the evaluation

The ex-ante evaluation generally takes place at the beginning of the cycle before a programme has been adopted.

Romanian Operational Programmes are intended to be submitted at the beginning of 2007, as soon as the country becomes member of the EU. Evaluation activities of TA OP started in August 2006, when general strategy, as well as priorities and measures of the OP had already been drafted.

Two complete drafts of the programme have been examined by the evaluator, both versions were almost complete in terms of necessary content and both were structured according to the relevant regulations, thus, are considered as proper documents for carrying out the evaluation. First comments and proposals were formulated on the basis of an April 2006 version of the document "Technical Assistance Operational Programme 2007-2013", by the Ministry of Public Finance of the Government of Romania, then, current report is based on the amended version of the same programme, dated November 2006.

General objective of an ex-ante evaluation is to help ensure that the final programme is as relevant and coherent as possible. Current report aims to briefly summarize recommendations made by evaluator on the first version of the programme, and, and also provide conclusions proposed to be integrated into the programme when further decisions are made.

The ex-ante evaluation activity intended further to:

- Focus primarily on an analysis of the strengths, weaknesses and evolving needs of Romania.
- Provide the relevant authorities with a prior judgement on whether needs have been diagnosed correctly, whether the strategy and objectives proposed are relevant, whether there is any incoherence in relation to Community policies and guidelines, whether the expected impacts are realistic.
- Serve as a a-priori quality assurance of programming and a cost-efficient budgeting, thus optimization of the program effects with consideration of the limited resources available;
- Provide also the required foundations for monitoring and for future evaluations, by ensuring that there are explicit and, where possible, quantified objectives.
- Help to specify selection criteria for the selection of projects and to ensure that Community priorities are respected.
- Finally, help to ensure the transparency of decisions by allowing for a clear explanation of choices made and their expected effects.

Current report focuses on the first four points as mentioned above, however, aims expressed in remaining points are touched upon, too. Selection criteria, nevertheless, is one of the core elements of the evaluation of the Draft Programme Complement, being subject of a separate report.

Some recommendations made in course of the evaluation has also relevancy for further documents Romanian authorities intend to use for internal management purposes, e. g. the Programme Complement.

1.2 Methodology

The standard procedure for ex ante evaluation is laid down on the Commission's draft guidelines document (October 2005). Information has been gathered and validated via:

Document and data analysis for an evaluation of the experiences and results of preceding programmes as well as current drafts and background studies for analysis of objectives and strategies. In addition, evaluations on pre-accession programmes have also been studied.

The main written sources of information are:

- Draft regulations on the Structural Funds ("General", 1083/2006 of 11 July 2006 and "ERDF", 1080/2006 of 5 July 2006) for 2007 – 2013, with special emphasis on the management requirements regarding the Funds
- Draft Commission Strategic Guidelines on Cohesion Policy 2007 - 2013
- The National Strategic Reference Framework 2007 – 2013 for Romania, with special emphasis on the needs and management framework (tools, systems and policies) regarding the coordinated implementation of the NSRF (version October 2006)
- Commission Draft Working Papers on ex ante evaluation (October 2005) and on indicators (January 2006);
- Documents received from the Evaluation Central Unit on the existing training mechanisms as well as foreseen other capacity development actions like staffing plan.
- The results of previous evaluations executed for current PHARE and ISPA programmes, with special emphasis on one hand the lessons learned regarding the implementation and absorption of these funds, on the other hand the size and quality and human and institutional capacities these programmes developed
 - Sectoral Interim Evaluation of the EU pre-accession instrument Phare, Sector: Economic and Social cohesion, (report R/RO/ESC/0609, by ECOTEC, 27 July 2006)
- Additional information on Romanian Policy papers as they appear important during the execution of the evaluation activities;
 - Analysis of Absorption Capacity of the EU funds in Romania (2006, European Institute of Romania)
 - Study on the potential and needs of the new MS's – country report Romania (2005, edited by EPRC, Glasgow, UK)
 - Single Action Plan aiming at improving the EU funds management systems in Romania , pre-accession funds and structural instruments (Annual report, January 2006)

- National Evaluation Strategy (October 2006)
- OP for Administrative Capacity, version April 2006 and October 2006
- The TA priorities of all proposed Programme under the NSRF, versions April 2006

Interviews with key persons "Key persons" refers to decision makers and responsible persons or participants who have taken part in the programme development at the different levels. For the purpose of current report, face-to-face interviews have been carried out with Head of Managing Authority and pre-accession advisers of Ministry of Finance.

Feed-back sessions with the teams that are responsible for drafting the Operational programmes and their Complements. Two feed-back sessions have been organized, both with the participation of the staff of the Managing Authorities and members of the Technical Assistance Working Group, made up by officials of MA's for sectoral and regional OP's, responsible for the TA priorities within the OP.

After initial assessment of the objectives of the NSRF and the proposed structure of OP's within, the following additional elements of the methodology can be given concerning the ex-ante evaluation of the Technical Assistance OP:

In order to appraise TA OP correctly, outline appraisal of the TA components of SOP's and ROP's is inevitable. Areas of concern covers

- Potential overlaps of activities between SOP/RTA OP and TA OP (main concern about training, publicity & information)
- Right balance between assisting project and project pipeline development on one hand and management/administration of funds on the other
- Appropriateness and availability of TA resources for the MA's of the ROP and SOP's to effectively implement "their" OP's

Other potential risks for overlaps has already been identified with the Administrative Capacity OP. Focus areas of appraisal covers

- Potential overlap in the field of training activities
- Coherence of objectives and expected results between the two OP's, regarding mainly capacity development goals for the longer term

Findings of the evaluation will then be based on the content of these OP's, too.

Nevertheless, major limitation of this evaluation method is that obviously handles TA similarly to "normal" programme aiming for socio-economic development in a certain sector or region. TA resources are for assisting these programmes, therefore must provide appropriate resources to solve various kind of - very often unexpected - problems occurring in the course of implementation. Due to the fact that Romania never had to face with a challenge of implementing Structural Funds, upcoming difficulties of the programme management and implementation are difficult to "program" for the whole period, therefore responsiveness and flexibility of the program shall be maintained. By following strictly the program may very easily result in a situation when activities are carried out according to the program but still, the interventions fail to address real important issues, bottlenecks or obstacles coming up in the process.

The risk inherent with the limitation shown above is to be handled by efficient management of the program. This efficiency can only partially be evaluated ex-ante, given the fact – as referred above – that no really relevant previous experience exists in Romania for the management of the Structural Funds.

1.3 Conceptual remarks

1.3.1 General approach for evaluation of the TA OP

Basic aim of TA funds is to help the programs perform. Performance relies on two basic factors:

- Proper management of the program (staff, systems, tools, processes, etc.)
- Existence of sufficient projects to absorb the funds („project pipeline“)

Additionally, also covered by regulation, TA funds can also contribute to the longer term capacity development of the recipient MS.

Taken this approach, following preliminary remarks have been made on potential problem areas:

- TA OP concentrates mainly (not exclusively, nonetheless) on assisting the management of programmes. During the evaluation justification will be sought whether this concentration of resources is effective, whether sufficient resources are available also for sectoral and regional OP's and whether assumed bottlenecks of project pipeline are addressed in these OP's.
- Pre-accession funds achieved a lot preparing Romania for the use of SCF. Evaluation of the TA OP shall prove that capacities built earlier are used and smoothest possible transition between EDIS and SFs is secured in order to avoid non-necessary duplications in training and system developments. Specific attention will be given to assess the feasibility of the SMIS, as key element of monitoring absorption.
- TA components (priorities) are planned in the ROP and the SOP's, too. Justification of transparent and clear „demarcation“ of certain activities will be sought, with specific focus on training-, publicity- and information-related activities.
- Training programmes are foreseen both in the ROP's and the SOP's TA priorities and TA OP, training is also central element of the Administrative Capacity Development (ACD) OP. Overlap may exist, additionally, absorption capacity of targeted groups may be limited. TA components of ROP/SOP's will be evaluated in a coordinated way with TA OP, as well as with AC OP, focusing on training in the latter case.
- Sustainability of activities and systems to be put in place with the assistance of the TA OP shall also be looked at, to ensure that funds are contributing to create a sound administrative system that performs substantially better after program period, too.