



Executive summary

1. This evaluation report covers the **first evaluation exercise of POCU in the field of technical assistance and is called according to the contract *POCU Interim evaluation report, together with the data and metadata sets***. It is structured on three themes corresponding to the typology of interventions financed through the specific objectives (SO) of Axis 7 Technical Assistance within POCU 2014-2020.

2. According to POCU Evaluation Plan, this evaluation is a “MESO” type evaluation at program level¹. The evaluation plan provides for each POCU Priority Axis to be evaluated at least once during the implementation period, as regards its contribution to the specific objectives, as well as in terms of other intentional or unintentional effects generated. The evaluation also included project-level analyses, thus integrating the micro-analysis level, through case studies with all specific methods and techniques.

3. The purpose of the evaluation exercises is to facilitate an informed management of the Human Capital Operational Program 2014-2020 and the adoption of evidence-based decisions.

4. The **evaluation exercise** that is the subject of this evaluation report aims at a detailed analysis of the degree of achievement of the objectives set at the level of Axis 7 Technical Assistance in POCU, at territorial, sectoral and target group level (in the fields concerned), in relation to the specific objectives, together with the identification of the impact of the interventions financed so far, respectively the establishment of that part of this progress which is due exclusively to these interventions supported by POCU.

5. The interventions evaluated at the level of this evaluation exercise, financed by POCU 2014-2020 Axis 7 Technical Assistance, were grouped in **three (3) evaluation themes (ET)** that we present below and contribute to the **3 Specific Objectives (SO)** related to this Axis:

- **Theme 1: Evaluating the contribution of POCU to improving the capacity of POCU MA and IB to efficiently and effectively manage and implement the operational program** (Coverage area - specific objective 7.1: *Improving the capacity of POCU MA (Managing Authority) and IB (Intermediate Body) to efficiently and effectively manage and implement the operational program*)
- **Theme 2: Evaluating the contribution of POCU to improving the capacity of POCU beneficiaries to efficiently and effectively implement ESF (European Social Fund)-type projects** (Coverage area - specific objective 7.2 *Improving the capacity of POCU beneficiaries to efficiently and effectively implement ESF-type projects*)
- **Theme 3: Evaluating the contribution of POCU to increasing the degree of informing POCU beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries on activities that can be implemented with ESF support** (Coverage area: *specific objective 7.3 Increasing the degree of informing POCU beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries on activities that may be subject to ESF, harnessing and implementing good practices and initiatives in the field of ESF*)

6. According to the Tender Book, there are **7 evaluation questions** for each topic plus two additional ones for Theme 1:

- Q1: *What is the progress observed in the target areas (less and more developed regions) and target groups in connection with improving the capacity of POCU beneficiaries to implement efficiently and effectively ESF projects?*
- Q2: *To what extent is the observed progress attributed to POCU?*
- Q3: *To what extent are there other unintended, positive or negative effects?*
- Q4: *To what extent does the effect go beyond the areas or groups targeted by the intervention?*
- Q5: *To what extent are the effects lasting over a longer period of time?*
- Q6: *What mechanisms facilitated / prevented the effects? What are the key contextual features for these mechanisms?*

¹ In Romania, two types of evaluations are carried out, namely one of macro type at the level of the Partnership Agreement and the other at the level of each OP (Operational Program) (MESO), thus continuing the approach of the evaluation related to the previous financial framework.



- *Q7: If and to what extent things could have been done better?*

7. Theme 1 related to SO 7.1 has the first evaluation question dedicated to MA and IB capacity plus two additional evaluation questions dedicated to the degree of effectiveness of the mechanisms for coordinating social inclusion policies intended for Romani people, respectively the degree of effectiveness of activities carried out by administrators of global POCU grant schemes and administrators of schemes related to financial tools:

- *Q1: What is the progress observed in terms of POCU MA and IB ability to efficiently and effectively and manage and implement OP?*
- *Q2: What is the degree of effectiveness of the mechanisms for coordinating social inclusion policies intended for Romani people?*
- *Q3: What is the degree of effectiveness of activities carried out by: Administrators of global POCU grant schemes; Administrators of schemes related to financial tools?*

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

8. The evaluation process was based on a combination of methods designed at the level of the entire evaluation and used an integrated approach to ensure both the principle of triangulation and the collection of sufficient data and information for evaluation analyses. During the evaluation, special importance was given to the contextual factors, but also to the way in which the causal links and the mechanisms for producing the results are maintained / modified.

9. The evaluation methods and instruments planned and actually applied in the evaluation process included: documentary research, processing and statistical analysis of data series, system-level interviews, but also at the level of financing beneficiaries, expert panel and a national focus group, as instruments for analysis and validation of findings and conclusions, 9 case studies, 3 opinion polls, analysis of influencing factors in the mechanism of producing results and other effects, graphical representations for data visualization.

10. The **evaluated period** is the duration of implementation of the Human Capital Operational Program (POCU) from the start until 31.12.2020. The evaluation took place between March 2021 and August 2021.

METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

The **main methodological limitations** were generated by the **low degree of availability of stakeholders (MA and IB)** due to a high degree of load, as well as by the parallel conduct of numerous evaluation exercises. This limitation was reflected in the difficulty of conducting interviews as well as in the low participation in some surveys. Another limitation consisted in the **lack of data available for target groups** (beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries) to participate in the opinion poll provided within the evaluation themes 2 and 3. This limitation was offset by the use of data from the periodic (EB) and dedicated (Flash/FEB) Euro barometers. At the same time, another important methodological aspect resulted from the fact that within POCU, based on the information provided by MA POCU given the fact that there are currently no implemented POCU projects (Axes 1-7) financed by global grant schemes or schemes related to financial tools, the evaluation question n° 3 “What was the degree of effectiveness of activities carried out by: Administrators of global POCU grant schemes; Administrators of schemes related to financial tools?” was no longer the subject of the evaluation team’s analysis.

GENERAL ASPECTS REGARDING THE EVALUATED INTERVENTIONS

11. In order to ensure a coherent and unitary functioning framework of the institutions responsible for the management of the European Social Fund in the period 2014-2020, **Axis 7 of Technical Assistance within POCU** covers the financing needs for the proper implementation of the Human Capital Operational Program. In this sense, POCU Technical Assistance axis acts in complementarity with the Operational Program Administrative Capacity and the Operational Program Technical Assistance in terms of procedural arrangements, respectively the existence of a single salary scale for staff involved in FESI management and control, the existence of common criteria for staff recruitment, etc.

12. For the Priority Axis Technical Assistance there is only **one call for projects** (POCU/155/7/4/Operation related to SO TA POCU Composite objective covering all three specific objectives SO 7.1/7.2/7.3), still in progress, as a

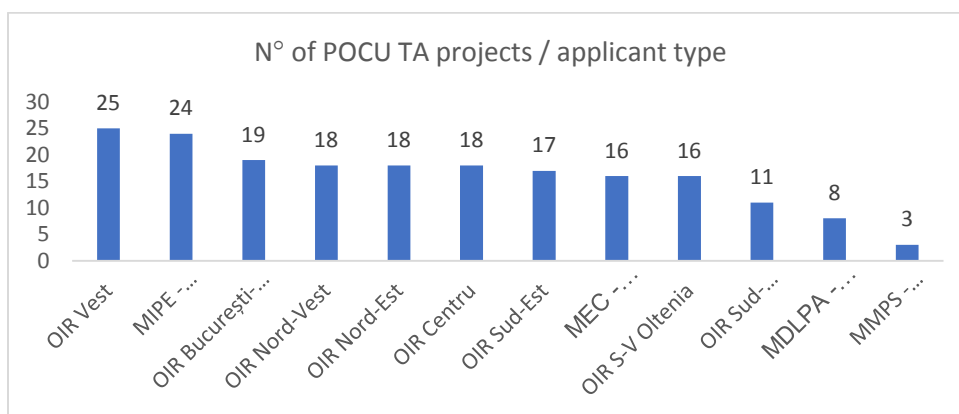


result of the fact that it is with continuous submission until the funds are exhausted or until the closing of the operational program².

13. Within this call, until the reference date of the evaluation, respectively 30.12.2020, 196 projects were contracted for which the data were collected based on a composite objective related to all 3 specific objectives targeted by the Evaluation Themes. In the following sections, the evaluation team conducted a more in-depth analysis of this project portfolio, including from the perspective of the established achievement indicators, in order to see the projects that can be attributed and separately from the perspective of the specific objectives included in the evaluation.

14. From the perspective of distributing the number of projects per types of beneficiaries eligible for Axis 7, it is found that most projects are implemented at the level of IBs (142 projects) with a balanced distribution and MIPE (24 projects), followed by other structures (MDLPA, MMPS, MEC).

Figure n° 1. Number of POCU TA projects per applicant type (situation as of December 31, 2020)



Source: Analysis of the evaluation team based on POCU data

15. SO 7.1 aimed to improve the capacity of POCU MA and IB to efficiently and effectively manage and implement the operational program, and as an expected impact, **a high rate of ESF absorption** in Romania. The assistance provided within SO 7.1 includes financial support for administrative / logistical costs of POCU MA and IB, for wage costs of in-house and contractual staff, financing of projects with technical content (e.g. introduction of data in SMIS, on-site visits, project contracting, etc.) financing of training projects for MA, IB staff and members of POCU MC (Monitoring Committee), financing of projects to support the National Contact Point for Romani people, as well as an evaluation project at program level.

16. The specific objective 7.2 aimed at **improving the capacity of POCU beneficiaries to efficiently and effectively implement ESF-type projects** which is also reflected in the way the **expected result** is formulated, namely the **strengthened capacity of POCU beneficiaries to implement ESF-type projects**.

17. OS 7.3 had as **specific objectives** the increase of the degree of informing POCU beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries regarding the activities that can be subject to ESF and the capitalization and implementation of good practices and initiatives in the field of ESF³. The main **expected results** are an increased degree of informing beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries regarding POCU opportunities and possibilities for accessing ESF funds, as well as an increase in the awareness level on EU co-financed projects from 46% in 2013 to 60% in 2023.

² According to the Applicant's Guide Specific Conditions AP7 TA POCU

³ Approved version of the Human Capital Operational Program - December 14, 2020



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE EVALUATION

Conclusions on interventions in the field of technical assistance (SO 7.1/7.2./7.3)

18. The evolution of POCU MA and IB capacity in the period 2014-2020, analysed both in terms of the results obtained regarding the efficient and effective implementation of the program, and in terms of capacity elements, structures, human resources, systems and instruments, improved compared to 2007- 2013.

19. SO 7.1 had an important contribution to increasing the capacity of POCU MA and IB, the available financing was used more intensively than during POSDRU period, but similar to POSDRU period, SO 7.1 financing managed to partially meet the needs of POCU implementation system. The increase in MA and IB capacity was due to a significant extent to factors other than the intervention of SO 7.1, in particular the experience gained through the job stability of employees and management factors at the level of Intermediate Bodies. The financed interventions mostly supported the functioning of MA and IB for the performance of current tasks and less for the development of their capacity in the strict sense, such as the development of staff skills, system development, simplification of procedures, etc. At the same time, SO 7.1 contributed only to the financing of the logistical costs of organizing MC POCU meetings, not to the development of the skills of the members of this body. Regarding the contribution to the development of the National Contact Point capacity for Romani people, the financing granted within SO 7.1 had an important contribution to meet the conditions imposed on Romania regarding the existence of a National Strategy for the integration of Romanian citizens belonging to Romani people minority.

20. The main factors with negative influence on the progress of POCU implementation and on MA and IB capacity to efficiently and effectively implement the program were mainly related to: difficulties generated by the novelty degree of some interventions, insufficient capacity in terms of human resources volume which persisted at POCU MA and IB level; lack of calls with continuous submission related to AP 1-AP 6; the overly extensive system of program indicators, as well as the cost-based project monitoring system, not the results.

21. Analysing the capacity of beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries in terms of the results obtained regarding the efficient and effective implementation of ESF type projects, a development of this capacity can be concluded during the programming period 2014-2020, as well as compared to the previous programming period, 2007-2013. With regard to interventions financed through SO 7.2, there is no clear evidence of specific projects that serve only this objective, but it has been found that all activities directly targeting beneficiaries have a high positive impact on the quality of projects being implemented and, implicitly, on POCU targets and objectives - including on the degree of absorption at the project level.

22. From the perspective of progress in increasing the awareness degree among POCU beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries, the activities financed through SO 7.3 were effective: +10% notoriety of investments from European funds to increase the quality of life at the population level, +9% confidence in the EU at the population level compared to the European average. The perceived degree of informing beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries is high (around 8.5 points out of 10 possible) without the regional differences being significant and under the conditions of using 11.5% of the allocation for POCU communication strategy until the evaluation reference date.

23. The effects registered at the level of beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries are generated indirectly by the actions undertaken at POCU level, these not being a direct target group of the projects financed through the Technical Assistance axis. For example, POCU website and MySMIS platform (both financed from other sources) have determined an increase in the level of appreciation of POCU quality communication compared to POSDRU, but the centralized institutional nature has determined a number of communication problems such as the lack of unitary treatment of the message, insufficient coordination between the centre and regions and different communication agendas.



RECOMMENDATIONS ON INTERVENTIONS IN THE FIELD OF TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Recommendations for the programming period 2014-2020 and for programming period 2021-2027

24. It is necessary for both the Managing Authority and the Intermediate Bodies to receive financing from the technical assistance axis without drawing up financing applications, each of these institutions having allocated technical assistance budgets established as lump sums depending on the estimated volume of activity.

25. Regarding the National Contact Point for Romani people, it is recommended to finance studies from POCU technical assistance axis on the effects of the actions carried out by this institution.

26. From the perspective of improving the capacity of beneficiaries, it is recommended that measures to support beneficiaries be continued and intensified through a mix of methods based on both the formal training system (training sessions in classic format) and the online system (including video tutorials). With regard to topics of interest to beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries, a unitary approach to training needs is recommended for them, including from the perspective of ensuring regional coverage. Among the topics of interest, Mysmis reporting system is recommended after it has been made more efficient.

27. In order to consolidate the result indicators⁴, it is recommended to schedule a communication campaign at the end of the programming period (2023) at the level of the general population, a campaign doubled by precise actions to inform (existing or potential) beneficiaries about the support they can receive under the following capacity-building programs (POEO, POIDS). This support will have to be provided in accordance with: a) their development needs (increasing the capacity to solve the social problems they target), b) the process of implementing projects (how to write the application, how to use the tools, how to operationalize concepts etc.) and with c) the need to professionalize them in the field of public communication (how to promote their projects) and specialized communication (how to convince people, target groups to get actively involved).

Recommendations for the programming period 2021 - 2027

28. The Operational Program Education and Employment and the Operational Program Inclusion and Social Dignity should set a small number of specific objectives and indicators (e.g. 10-12 specific objectives, 10-15 outcome indicators and finance mostly mature interventions, designed based on clear policies, addressed to an institutional framework ready to implement them.

29. The future operational programs Education and Employment and Inclusion and Social Dignity should include the following:

- a multi-annual planning of the implementation of the program (preferably over the entire programming period) setting out annual targets for the values of project submissions, contracted values, values of payments made;
- monitoring the financial progress of the program compared to the established multi-annual plan, identifying and managing risks and identifying the necessary corrective measures;
- use of the continuous submission system for most calls for projects;
- a 100% target of ESF absorption indicator;

⁴ Notoriety at the population level and number of supported beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries



- reducing administrative requirements by switching from an activity-based and cost-based monitoring system to a result-based monitoring system, in line with the simplification measures adopted by the European Commission for the period 2021-2027⁵.

30. For a proper management of human resources, the future operational programs Education and Employment, respectively Inclusion and Social Dignity should provide both a multi-annual planning (preferably over the entire programming period, with annual updates depending on the evolution of implementation) of the necessary human resources at MA and IB level but also an adequate sizing of the number of jobs required at MA and IB level according to this planning. At the same time, it is recommended to reconsider the decision to eliminate from IB organizational chart the positions related to the middle-level management (heads of services, heads of office) by reintroducing these positions.

31. A plan for the use of technical assistance (involving all stakeholders within the Managing Authority and Intermediate Bodies in the planning process) is needed to provide several activities intended to develop the capacity of the Managing Authority and Intermediate Bodies, beyond the financing of the routine activity of these institutions, aimed at increasing staff skills (training, coaching, exchange of experience, etc.), simplifying internal systems and procedures, innovating at the level of the management systems, etc.

32. Regarding POCU Monitoring Committee and the future operational program, it is recommended on the one hand to increase the capacity of the members of this body, the involvement and collaboration between members through training activities / exchange of experience / study visits, analyses / debates / working groups but also the efficiency of the meetings through more synthetic presentations, with a format accessible to MC POCU members and observers, supplemented by debates, recommendations (some meetings may take longer).

33. Considering the principle of decentralization and taking into account the structure of economic macro-regions of Romania, it is recommended that the Regional Intermediate Bodies have more and more responsibility and authority at regional level, with the aim of becoming Managing Authorities at regional level in the post-2027 programming period.

34. Regarding communication activities, it is recommended to define the beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries as a special target group to which networking / network consolidation, motivation and increase of institutional skills and capacities should be directed in the field of public communication and communication with special groups. Recommendable are also: a) website development in the sense of integrating information from Operational Programs and increasing transparency by representing the results of implementation; b) increasing the functionality of MySMIS platform in communication with beneficiaries (direct communication interface / chatbots⁶).

35. At the level of the implementation system, it is recommended to establish an active partnership between OIR and the Directorate for Communication of Structural Instruments in order to build a common agenda, complementary activities and common instruments for monitoring and evaluating performance. Currently, in the case of beneficiaries, there is no monitoring and evaluation of communication activities, but only an endorsement of compliance with the elements of the visual identity manual. For this reason, we recommend delegating to OIR responsibilities related to the monitoring and evaluation of the beneficiaries' communication activity and responsibilities related to carrying out activities to increase the beneficiaries' skills to communicate in the public space and with the target groups.

⁵ Measures n° 31, 43, 44 of the *SIMPLIFICATION HANDBOOK: 80 simplification measures in cohesion policy 2021-2027* (European Commission, Regional and Urban Policy).

⁶ An example / details here: [Ce este un robot de chat | Oracle România](#)