

SOCIAL SERVICES HELPDESK ON EU FUNDS



Managing Authorities: Survey Analysis Report Czech Republic

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1. INTRODUCTION

“The access and use of ESF+ and ERDF by social services¹ – Managing Authorities’ perspective and feedback” survey was completed in the framework of the Social Services Helpdesk on EU Funds project.

Through this survey, the project’s consortium aims to better understand the needs, opportunities, and challenges related to the use of ESF+ and ERDF funds by social services. Hence, managing authorities and authorities responsible for the coordination and design of social services were invited to reflect on the design and implementation of Operational Programs. This will assist to further identification of the leverages that exist to facilitate social services’ access to these funds. Finally, the expressed opinions will form the base on which the tailored activities to support, guide, and facilitate successful participation of social services in ESF+ and ERDF funding programs will be developed.

2. ANALYSIS AND REPORTING METHODOLOGY

Survey was developed in the frame of the project “Social services helpdesk for EU funding”, under the task 2.2. It provided sets of questions for two groups of respondents:

- 1. representatives of social service providers and public authorities in charge of design and coordination of social services on local/ regional/ national level, and**
- 2. representatives of national, sectoral, or regional managing authorities (or corresponding bodies in the EU funding cascade of the shared management).**

At the Steering Committee meeting, the Consortium decided to prepare national reports of EU member states for which representatives of ESF+/ERDF management bodies provide 5 or more responses. This target was achieved for 5 EU member states – Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Greece, Poland, and Spain.

¹ A social services provider is any organisation whose main activity falls under Eurostat’s statistical classification of economic activities (NACE codes 87 and 88). For example, social services include, but are not limited to the following activities: residential care with or without accommodation, including services for the elderly and disabled, temporary shelter for the homeless, refugees, childcare, and vocational training for the unemployed among others. Social services can be either public or private and can have a broader or a more restrictive definition in each Member State.

Respectively, this report consolidates the analysis of responses given by the **representatives of Czech national, sectoral, or regional managing authorities** (or corresponding bodies in the EU funding cascade of the shared management).

Types of questions used in the survey were decided by the consortium respectively as:

1. Multiple choice questions;
2. Rating scale questions;
3. Open-ended questions.

Actual questions of the survey were agreed upon by the coordination of the Work package 2, task 2.2, namely European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD), European Social Network (ESN), Social Services Europe (SSE), European Ageing Network (EAN), Union des entreprises à profit social (UNIPSO), and Asociace Poskytovatelů Sociálních Služeb České Republiky (APSS).

Survey *“The access and use of ESF+ and ERDF by social services – Managing Authorities’ perspective and feedback”* was launched on the [Jotform](#) online tool (external expert support was used to technically support the upload of the survey onto the platform) on the 28/09/2022 and was promoted via link with the cut-off date to receive the answers 15/10/2022.

Distribution of survey was done on two levels:

1. By **project consortium** (respectively 17 organisations: European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD), European Social Network (ESN), Social Services Europe (SSE), European Ageing Network (EAN), Caritas Europa, Eurodiaconia, Federation of European Social Employers, European Network of Social Integration Enterprises (ENSIE), European Platform for Rehabilitation (EPR), Fédération Européenne des Associations Nationales Travaillant avec les Sans-Abri (FEANTSA), Union des entreprises à profit social (UNIPSO), Comité Européen des Associations d'intérêt général (CEDAG), Asociace Poskytovatelů Sociálních Služeb České Republiky (APSS), Fundacion Once para la Cooperación e Inclusión Social de Personas con Discapacidad (FONCE), Consorzio Nazionale Idee in Rete (IIR), Hubbie) among their membership as the organic reach (members) and additional efforts (corresponding contacts, partners, etc.) invested;
2. By the **consortium’s membership, networks, partners, and collaborators** (including the European Commission representatives).

Dissemination of the survey link and QR code by the above-mentioned actors was executed using following means:

- **E-mail** (sent by the consortium using the template email text with the adjustment possibility)
- **Newsletter** (number of consortium members are producing regular – weekly, monthly, newsletter shared via email with their membership and registered receivers)
- **Social network posts** (post including picture, short description and the survey link were shared as posts on LinkedIn and Twitter accounts of consortium members)
- **Website content** (consortium members prepared and published web articles to promote the survey to website visitors)

As consortium established the tracking of their efforts to contact the managing bodies in the EU members states, 780 individual contacts were established via email and 66 in total in Czech Republic.

3. EU FUNDING CONTEXT (2021-2027) IN CZECH REPUBLIC

The European Social Fund Plus (ESF) and the ERDF Czechia will provide €4.4 billion to:

- improve access to employment, especially for those who face difficulties;
- promote a gender balanced labour market;
- increase the level of skills of the labour force to successfully master the digital transition;
- ensure equal access to quality and inclusive education and training;
- improve the integration of third-country nationals;
- improve the living standards of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion;
- increase the availability of social services and access to healthcare services in underserved areas and for the most disadvantaged groups of the population.

As a complement to this information, the Helpdesk website provides further information about the architecture and the state of play of shared management funds in each EU member State, with a focus on ERDF and ESF+.

4. QUANTITATIVE & QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

4.1. PART A: PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

In total **11 responses** were received in the frame of the survey from representatives of Czech national, sectoral, or regional managing authorities (or corresponding bodies in the EU funding cascade of the shared management).

Respondents were, for the purpose of their identification, requested to share the name of the operational programme they represent. From received responses, following distribution can be concluded:

- 8 respondents decided to declare the level of authority of the organisation they represent and respectively 1 respondent was representing sectoral level authority, 4 represented regional, and 3 represented national level authority (one representing both regional and national level authority);
- Regarding their positions, 3 persons acted as top-level managers, 3 persons acted as mid-level management, 2 NGO support officers, 1 as head of the project coordination department, 1 as member of the working group;
- ERDF managing structure was represented by 5 respondents and ESF(+) by 10 respondents (with overlapping of both funds in certain cases);
- operational programmes represented by respondents were as follows:
 - Integrated Regional operational programme (2021-2027)
 - operational programme Employment (2014-2020)
 - OP Prague – Growth Pole (OPPPR)

4.2 PART B: ASSESSMENT OF THE ESF+ AND ERDF OPERATIONAL PROGRAMS' RELEVANCE FOR SOCIAL SERVICES

Regarding the quality of involvement of social service providers as project beneficiaries, several questions allowed for respondents to reflect on their satisfaction level and perceived challenges in the process of EU funding allocation, as well as assessing their internal capacity and ambitions for improvements.

Social service providers rather participate in the EU funding programmes managed by the Czech managing authorities

In order to establish the relevancy of the individual respondent for the purpose of this survey, the respondents were asked to reflect on involvement of social service sector actors in the EU operational programme as project beneficiaries.

Most (5 or 50%) respondents declared that social service actors are somewhat active in mobilising EU funds, and additional three (30%) declared that those actors can be considered as very active in mobilising EU funds. Out of ten received answers, two (20%) respondent declared that social service actors are less active than other beneficiary groups in the frame of the operational programme that they are managing.

Satisfaction with the efficiency of allocation of EU funds (ESF+ / ERDF) to social services

Self-assessment of respondents for their satisfaction level concerning the efficiency of the operational programmes (ESF+/ERDF) to operationalise allocation of funds resulted with 5 (45%) answers rating this segment as “good” (2 or 18%) or “rather good” (3 or 27%), while two answers (18%) were given for “I don’t know” and one (9%) “rather weak” option.

Thematic priorities used by social services ESF+ / ERDF

To establish what thematic focus was given to projects proposals submitted by social services actors in the frame of Czech ESF(+) and ERDF, respondents were given the option to provide their answer in the open (textual) format. The following key words (phrases) have been provided:

- Social service facilities and infrastructure (equipment)
- Residential social services
- Staff costs (professional and administrative)
- Housing
- Employment
- Social prevention
- Outpatient care
- Mobile services

Challenges of ESF+/ERDF management authorities when funding social services

Asked to assess comparatively their perception of challenge when faced with proposed phases of operational programme (ESF+/ ERDF) planning and implementation, respondents were able to select one option as “the most challenging”. Implementation phase was most commonly chosen option (8 or 51% of respondents), where 4 respondents (25%) chose “defining the “rules” for applicants”, 2 (13%) respondents opted for “reaching and informing potential applicants (social service providers) and 2 (13%) opted for “monitoring and assisting the project implementation and performance assessment and reporting”. Planning phase of the Programme implementation was selected among provided options by total 7 respondents (44%), more specific, 6 (38%) respondents selected “setting priorities and allocating funds” as the most challenging, while one (6%) respondent pointed out “consultations and involvement of relevant

stakeholders”. “Post-implementation” was respectively selected among options by one (6%) respondent.

Main leverages at the disposal of managing authorities to overcome challenges

Respondents were given the option to elaborate their opinion on the leverages to use in their work to overcome the changes they marked as the most significant. Knowledge of those indicates the existence of capacity for solutions within the managing bodies of operational programmes (ESF+/ ERDF). Ten respondents opted to provide their answer to this question, out of which 2 expressed negative response – not seeing or using a leverage at their disposal, and 8 respondents gave their positive opinion that can be summed up as follows:

- Territorial consultations in the frame of working groups
- Lowering the administrative burden

Sectoral consultations (EU financing structures and social care authorities) Outsourcing as an option to cover missing capacities and raise the quality of procedures

To assess the past and current capacity of managing bodies to find solutions for perceived challenges in operational programme management, the respondents were able to provide their answer to the question about outsourcing of services covering parts or entire programme planning or implementation process. Received answers (9) reflected divided approach of programme management in this respect. Six respondents carry out the implementation of the operational programme without involvement of the expertise of external actors, while one respondent lacked the knowledge to provide answer. Positive answers highlighted the use of the external expertise for development of integrated territorial investment strategy.

Involvement of intermediate bodies and assessment of their performance

In order to divide the responsibility and involve more competent public authority into the allocation of EU funds to social services, managing authorities sometimes entitle secondary (intermediary) level of Programme management. Nine respondents provided their answer, out of which neither of the respondents showed capacity (understanding, knowledge, et.) to answer the question in a way to support publicly available information on existing intermediary bodies in Czech Republic.

Assessment of the current state of simplifications implemented

The Common Provisions Regulation for the financial period 2021-2027, after a comprehensive consultation, stipulates the obligation or possibility for Operational Programmes to use several simplifications for the implementation of the national ESF+ and ERDF Operational Programmes. Therefore, respondents were asked to assess the application those simplifications in their Operational Programmes. Out of 11 responses

to this question, 5 (45%) respondents rated their Programme as “rather good” while 6 (54%) responded with “rather weak” (5 or 45%) or “weak” (1 or 9%).

Asked to comment their answer, respondents pointed out the following reasons standing behind their ratings:

- Simplification of the mandatory content for the feasibility studies in the Czech ERDF;
- The funding scheme does not meet the specific needs of the actors in the region;
- Less formal errors occurrence rate;
- Bureaucratic burden remains on the high level.

Preferences among simplifications

Asked to express preferences of simplifications on their disposal (Regulation (EU) 2021/1060), 8 respondents provided their answers, out of which four expressed their inability to decide, or lack of relevancy of the question for the position they obtain. Of the responses with relevant content, the simplified forms and the simplified cost option (40% lump sum) were considered important simplifications for the respondents.

Operational interventions to improve efficiency of EU funding for social services

Regardless of the Common Provisions Regulation (Regulation (EU) 2021/1060), EU Member States can establish procedures to close the gap between the required or planned quality of management and administration (e.g. to achieve better transparency, create inclusive and beneficiary friendly environment, etc.) tasks and current state of capacity. Outsourcing of different services could add value, in short term, in described situations. Survey respondents were asked to list such efforts in their operational programmes, in case implemented in 2014-2020 financial period or planned for the 2021-2027 period.

Six respondents offered their answers, out of which four expressed the inability to decide or to provide answer due to their lack of knowledge. One respondent states that the operational programme includes the “social work methodologies” to be followed by all beneficiaries financed for the programme to unify the indicator achievement, while one respondent states that their operational programme recognises the national control system for social service providers in order to avoid unnecessary waste of time and human resources for the control tasks.

4.3 PART C: ASSESSMENT OF THE SOCIAL SERVICES CAPACITY TO MOBILISE ESF+ AND ERDF FUNDS

The ESF+ and ERDF operational programme managing authorities were given the opportunity to express their perception on the capacity of Programme beneficiaries to

comply with Programme requirements. The intention of the consortium is to compare these assessments with self-assessments in the same segments given by the social service providers acting as beneficiaries in the national/regional ESF+ and ERDF financing structures.

Readiness of project applicants to write and implement EU projects

Asked to rate the current readiness of project applicants to prepare and implement projects in the frame of the national (regional) ESF+ and ERDF, the majority (7/11 - 64%) of respondents rated the readiness of applicants as somewhat poor or poor. The remaining respondents rated the readiness of project applicants as good or somewhat good, except for one who did not know how to respond. They justified this by pointing to the lack of capacity (financial, human - knowledge/skills, etc.) of non-governmental organizations, administrative complexity for staff, managing inflation and the energy crisis. The answers provided suggest the experience of existing (past) applicants in the operational programme for which certain respondents are providing answers.

Internal factors as a guarantee for the successful implementation of EU projects

Respondents were asked to give their perception on the important internal factors to guarantee the success of social service providers implementing their EU-funded project. Possible answers were provided, and more than one could have been selected. 16 respondents provided answers to give their opinion, out of which 4 (29%) was distributed to each from following:

- Financial capacity: solid financial management and available cash flow
- Institutional capacity: dedicated staff for EU funding programmes
- Experience in using EU funds (skills, knowledge, and the right people)

One respondent selected “Good network and knowledge of available opportunities for the sector” among provided options, while one respondent provided a unique response stating that “NGOs in social services do not have resources for co-financing”.

Recurring problems faced by project applicants and managers

Representatives of ESF+ and ERDF Czech national management bodies were asked to list the most recurring problems which, in their opinion, project applicants and managers face during project application and project implementation phase. Answers could have been submitted as text.

In total, 7 respondents provided answers to elaborate their perception that can formulated as follows:

- Co-financing rates for non-governmental sector actors (which could be provided on local and regional level) are benefiting from the activities of non-governmental organisations;

- Ambiguities in project forms (application, reporting);
- Non-existence of preliminary eligibility checks of applications disqualifies not only the organisation applying for funds, but also the target groups supposed to receive social services;
- National laws allowing social services to develop project activities out of the scope of the operational programme;
- Official notes (documents) produced very often to justify the real situation deriving the project activity from its initial plan;
- Complexity of administration;
- Lack of qualified personnel;
- Complexity of the indicators and their interpretation; Aversion of target groups to get involved and stay involved into project activities.

Additional information from respondents

Respondents had the opportunity to share with the project consortium other thoughts on the proposed topic, which in their opinion, was not covered by the survey. Four respondents provided the following comments:

- Residential social services, although needed, are not supported by the EU funding Programmes;
- Perception of project management suggests that programme officers, in addition to development and provision of project relevant forms, impose the strict attitude and unsupportive environment;
- Significant negative impact of the economic crisis to the social services (workload, capacity and quality) affects their ability to undergo complex application process.