

SOCIAL SERVICES HELPDESK ON EU FUNDS



Managing Authorities: Survey Analysis Report

Poland

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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 designing 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 Polish 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 24 in total in Poland.

3. EU FUNDING CONTEXT (2021-2027) IN POLAND

Commission adopts €76.5 billion Partnership Agreement with Poland for 2021 – 2027².

The Partnership Agreement with Poland paves the way for the investments from the Cohesion Policy funds on the ground. It covers 8 national programmes, 16 regional programmes, 8 cross-border cooperation programmes and 4 interregional cooperation programmes.

- a. **European Funds for Social Development 2021-2027 (FERS)** - the successor of the Knowledge Education Development (POWER) Programme.

The main areas of FERS activity are: work, education, health and accessibility. The program will support projects in the field of:

- support for people in the changing labour market,
- development of education and developing competences,
- support for health services,
- social integration,
- development of social services and social economy,
- helping parents in caring for children,
- support for people with special needs.

² Source: <https://www.funduszeuropejskie.gov.pl/>

The budget of the entire Programme: PLN³ 21.9 billion, EU contribution: PLN 18.5 billion.

- b. European Funds for Food Aid 2021-2027** - a program that includes food aid in the form of food parcels or meals and the implementation of accompanying activities (e.g. workshops, counselling) aimed at improving the situation of people in need and the poorest.

The budget of the entire program: PLN 2.7 billion, EU contribution: PLN 2.4 billion.

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 **9 responses** were received in the frame of the survey from representatives of Polish 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 and other relevant information. From received responses, following distribution can be concluded:

- 6 respondents decided to declare the level of authority of the organisation they represent and respectively 6 respondents represented regional level authorities;
- Regarding their positions, 2 persons acted as top-level management, 2 acting as chief specialist and 1 as programming officer (chief specialist);
- ERDF managing structure was represented by 4 respondents and ESF(+) by 6 respondents (with overlapping of both funds in certain cases);
- operational programmes represented by respondents were as follows:
 - Regional Operational Program for the Podkarpackie Voivodeship for 2014-2020 (RPO WP 2014-2020),
 - Regional Operational Program European Funds for Podkarpacie 2021-2027 (FEP 2021-2027)
 - Operational Program Knowledge Education Development

³ PLZ - Polish Zloty

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

The objective of this survey section was to define a set of questions determining the view of respondents on the frequency and quality of involvement of social service providers (and corresponding actors) in EU funding under shared management in Poland, mainly focusing on ESF(+) / ERDF Polish experience. 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.

Participation of social service providers in the EU funding programmes managed by the Polish managing authorities

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

Out of nine received answers, 8 respondents stated that social service actors are or very active (5 or 56%) or somewhat active (3 or 33%) in mobilizing EU funds, while one (11%) respondent declared that social service actors are less active than other beneficiary groups in the frame of the operational programme they are representing.

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

All respondents had a rather good (6 or 67%) or good (3 or 33%) assessment of the effectiveness of the operational programmes (ESF+/ERDF) in operationalizing the allocation of funds. The result suggests that the representatives of the Polish managing organizations are very satisfied with their own work.

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 Polish ESF(+) and ERDF, respondents were given the option to provide their answer in the open (textual) format. Analysis of answers gave the overview of key words (phrases) used as follows:

- day care homes for elderly;
- care services provided at the residence of a person in need;
- day support programs in centres for children and youth (Act of 9 June 2011);

- rental of care, rehabilitation, and support equipment (and training) for home care;
- development of care and assistant services;
- support for the DI⁴ process of 24-hour facilities, operation of sheltered housing;
- Combating poverty and social exclusion and developing assisted and sheltered housing;
- family support in crisis and foster care;
- care and assistance services in the local environment;
- professional activation for inactive persons.

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 several options as “the most challenging”.

Planning phase was most commonly chosen option (8 or 45% of respondents), where 5 respondents (28%) chose “consultations and involvement of relevant stakeholders (including social services)” and 3 (17%) respondents opted for “setting priorities and allocating funds”. Implementation phase of the Programme was selected among provided options by total 7 respondents (40%), more specific, 5 (28%) respondents selected “defining the “rules” for applicants” as the most challenging, while one (6%) respondent pointed out “reaching and informing potential applicants (social service providers)” and one (6%) selected “monitoring and assisting the project implementation and performance assessment and reporting”.

One respondent added in comments some challenges they face:

- The lack of fluidity in the flow of information/decisions from the EU to the national level and from the national (ministerial) level to the regional level;
- Lack of management of delays (last minute) in taking decisions on the definition of intervention directions (important from a programming point of view);
- The modification of deadlines previously set by the European Commission or the Ministry for the preparation of programs, which creates uncomfortable and stressful working conditions for the employees of the management institutions;
- The difficulty of standardizing cost options while trying to adapt to the individual needs of the beneficiary.

⁴ DI - Deinstitutionalization

Main leverages at disposal to managing authorities to overcome challenges

Respondents were given the option to elaborate their opinion on the leverages to use or used 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).

Five respondents opted to provide their answer to this question, except one that expressed not being able to comprehend the question. The 4 respondents expressed the following main leverages:

- Programming the scope of intervention under the announced calls for proposals, taking into account the specificity of the region and the growing demand for services provided outside the institutional care system;
- Giving the opportunity for potential beneficiaries to participate in information meetings and individual consultations;
- Developing the mechanism of bonus criteria and targeting support to the so-called “white spots”, i.e. areas with the greatest deficit in access to given services;
- Creating manuals for beneficiaries, facilitating the process of implementing project activities.

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 (7) reflected divided approach of **programme** management in this respect. Four respondents carry out the implementation of the operational programme without involvement of the expertise of external actors, while three respondents provided positive answers which can be paraphrased as follows:

- conducting evaluation studies;
- preparation of the methodology for estimating indicators (planning process);
- expert study commissioned to define marginalization criteria in access to school education for children and youth in the Śląskie Voivodship.

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. This is a way for managing authorities to close the gap in capacity to serve the specific group of beneficiaries. Four respondents provided their answers to the question, out of which one of the respondents stated that ERDF Programme in Poland does not delegate tasks to the intermediary body. Among other respondents, and in line with the management cascade of ESF(+) in Poland, intermediary bodies were listed for the period 2014-2020 as follows:

- Labor Office in Rzeszów (IP WUP)
- Intermediary Body for Integrated Territorial Investments (IP ZIT)
- Voivodeship Labor Office
- Ministry of Family and Social Policy
- Voivodship Labor Office in Katowice
- Silesian Center for Entrepreneurship and Integrated Territorial Investments (ZIT) / Regional Territorial Investments (RIT).

One of the provided answers specified that “in the 2021-2027 perspective, the role of Intermediate Bodies under the ESF was abandoned” and regardless of that, institutions acting previously as intermediary bodies were highly participating in different stages of Programme planning and implementation.

Assessment of the current state of simplifications implemented

Since Common Provisions Regulation for the financial period 2021-2027, after the comprehensive consultation process with the interested stakeholders, stipulates the obligation or possibility for operational programmes to use number of simplifications, respondents were asked to assess their operational programme when it comes to the application or planning of those simplifications.

Out of 9 received responses to this question, 7 (78%) respondents rated their Programme as “rather good” while one (17%) responded with rating “good” and one (17%) with “I don’t know”.

Asked to comment their answer, respondents pointed out the reasons supporting their ratings on the provided scale as follows:

- Increase of the budget size binding the Programme to use SCO⁵s to 200.000 EUR (with risk of higher irregularity rate);
- Usage of the electronic form of applying for co-financing (co-financing applications);

⁵ SCOs - Simplified Cost Options

- Separation of allocations for supporting non-governmental organizations in terms of capacity building for the implementation of social services in the local environment;
- Coordination projects of regional social policy (service) centres will be implemented as a one-stop-shop (planned in collaboration with regional authorities to reflect their specific needs);
- Simplified cost options: unit rates, increased project value threshold for lump sums. The simplified method of settling expenses will now be available to more entities in the field of social services than before;
- Adaptation of the documentation to "plain language" favourable to the applicants (as response to the known obstacles: complicated national regulations, frequent external inspections, changing recommendations, e.g. the requirement to collect certificates and not declarations in the case of projects where the target group was unemployed or professionally inactive people).

Preferences among simplifications

Asked to express preferences of simplifications on their disposal (Regulation (EU) 2021/1060), 4 respondents listed these following simplifications:

- Specific Programme guidelines identifying minimum standards for social services;
- Simplified cost options: unit rates, lump sum, flat rates;
- E-cohesion – usage of the IT monitoring system.

2 others respondents expressed their inability to decide or lack of relevancy of the question for the position they obtain.

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.

Four respondents offered their answers, out of which one expressed the inability to decide or to provide answer due to their lack of knowledge. Two respondent state that their operational programme implemented or plans to introduce:

- Training and consultations for beneficiaries during announced calls for proposals;
- Providing access to materials;
- Longer and reasonable timeframe for announcing calls for proposals (adequate to the amount of allocation, and extended if the situation required);
- Introduction of non-competitive mode (agreed based on level of preparedness of projects);

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 in the frame of the survey, 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, 7 out of 9 respondents (78%) rated the readiness of applicants as “rather good”. Two (22%) respondents rated the readiness of project applicants as “rather weak”. The answers provided suggest the experience of existing (past) applicants in the operational programme for which certain respondents are providing answers.

Respondents were allowed to provide additional comments to their answers. Four received textual comment supported the reasoning behind ratings given in the first part of the question as follows:

- Regional program of ROP Pomorskie 2014-2020 show the enormous human resources/personnel and institutional potential, including financial, of beneficiaries in applying for and implementing projects financed from EU sources
- Events of recent years force the beneficiaries to react flexibly and adapt to the existing situations, and to constantly invest in training their own human resources to effectively implement social policy in the area covered by the intervention

- After the experience of the 2014-2020 perspective, entities applying for support have basic knowledge and experience enabling them to effectively apply for EU funds
- Insufficient potential of non-governmental organizations and local governments to provide social services in specific local communities in the region
- Experience in project implementation in previous financial perspectives allowed for dissemination of knowledge in the field of submitting applications for project co-financing and the implementation of support itself
- Intermediate Body always prepares detailed documentation of the competition, including its regulations, and answers the questions of potential beneficiaries.

Internal factors as 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 project financed from EU sources. Possible answers were provided, and more than one could have been selected.

16 responses were received providing answers to give their opinion, out of which answers were distributed to each as following:

- 6 (38%) – Experience in using EU funds (skills, knowledge, and the right people);
- 5 (31%) - Institutional capacity: dedicated staff for EU funding programmes;
- 3 (19%) - Financial capacity: solid financial management and available cash flow;
- 2 (12%) - All the indicated factors are very important. To achieve the best results, it is necessary to combine them

Recurring problems faced by project applicants and managers

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

In total, 6 respondents provided answers to elaborate their perception which paraphrased state as follows:

- Insufficient knowledge of the basic program documents and the recruitment rules
- Inability to apply procedures related to the selection of contractors/service providers based on the principle of competition and public procurement law

- Failure to meet the applicable deadlines at the stage of submitting reimbursement claims, which results in delays in verifying payment applications and disbursing subsequent tranches
- Failure to comply with the rules resulting from the Act on the Protection of Personal Data when providing documentation confirming the eligibility of project participants
- Lack of will and awareness of cooperation within the project team and inter-institutional cooperation
- Inconsistency within the provisions of the programming and specifying documents (interpretation problems)
- Questionable eligibility of expenditure
- Changes of the staff working on the design of the Programme
- Lack of appropriate mechanisms to ensure continuity in the implementation of social services after the end of financing from EU funds
- Implementation of the project contrary to the assumptions of the project
- Lack of sufficient potential to apply for EU funds (e.g. problem with ensuring own contribution to the project)
- Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are very often applicants in competitions for social services, where a repeated reported problems are maintaining sustainability in projects, insufficient staff, lack of substantive and often highly specialized knowledge required to write, implement and settle the project
- Difficulty in obtaining appropriate staff for the project, as limited contracts can be provided
- Increase in the number of companies that write applications for EU funding - for a fee, on behalf of Applicants - there are cases where a social service provider (Applicant) receives an application/project for implementation that does not meet its expectations and is a major implementation problem.

Additional information from respondents

Respondents had the opportunity to share with the project consortium any other thoughts on the proposed topic, which in their opinion, was not covered by the survey. None of the respondents was open to raise a point not covered by the survey.