

HELPDESK

SOCIAL SERVICES HELPDESK ON EU FUNDS

Key Findings – The Use of EU Shared Management Funds by Social Services in BELGIUM

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1. Introduction - identification of country and respondents

A total of 62 social service operators responded to our survey.

70% of the respondents have a "non-residential" social work (NACE code 88), against 30% who provide residential care (NACE code 87).

Regarding the type of organizations, more than 50% are from organizations established by a region, 30% are non-profit organizations and the rest are private and associations. However, considering the different categories as suggested, one cannot identify the profile of respondents, from the public/private sector nor their legal statute.

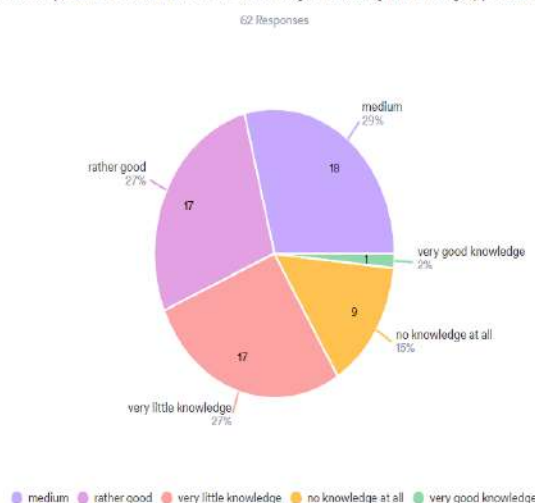
The organizations that responded are mostly small and medium-sized enterprises, with 50 % of them having 0-49 employees, and 24 % of them are big enterprises having more than 250 employees.



The target groups for which these organizations operate are mainly people with disabilities (26 %) and children (23 %), followed by the elderly (11 %) and refugees (9 %).

Concerning the knowledge of these funds, the opinion is divided (see the graph below). However, 2/3 of the respondents have already submitted a project for European funding one or more times.

1. How would you assess your level of awareness and knowledge of existing EU funding opportunities for your sector?



2. Call for proposals

Concerning the clarity and precision of the definition of the calls for projects (definition of priorities, target groups, indicators, etc.), the answers are divided. Half of the respondents said they were satisfied, and the other half were not.

They justify this dissatisfaction by highlighting that calls for proposals are complicated and not always adapted to the realities of the field. There is a lack of clear information on how to complete them and it is difficult to know if requests are being met.

3. Application

We asked social service operators about their ability to apply for European funding in their field of activity. Some difficulties are more recurrent than others. Two of these difficulties that predominate for 40% of the respondents are the short deadline to submit a project, and the lack of financial means to hire a professional that could help in submitting/applying a project.

Then, in order of importance, some reasons that come up the most are:

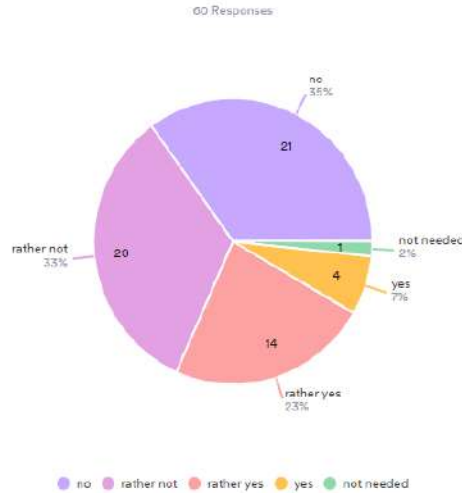
- Ineligibility of the organization;
- Inability to find an eligible project partner; and,
- Complexity of project rules.

For most respondents, the "post-project sustainability rules" are not a barrier to submitting their project or are not applicable.

The operators also put forward several points of difficulty in applying. What is most emphasized is the difficulty to comply with the rules on public procurement and/or state aid. These organizations are not always able to get help from the managing authorities. Also, they complain about the complexity of the application form (especially on the costs part) and its length, and the lack of clarity of the calls for projects and the rules related to European funds.

Most of social service operators apply for a project with by mobilising internal staff (92% staff member, 8% external body). This is due to the lack of financial means. Most often, organizations do not have the means to train their staff members internally and therefore find themselves in difficulty when applying.

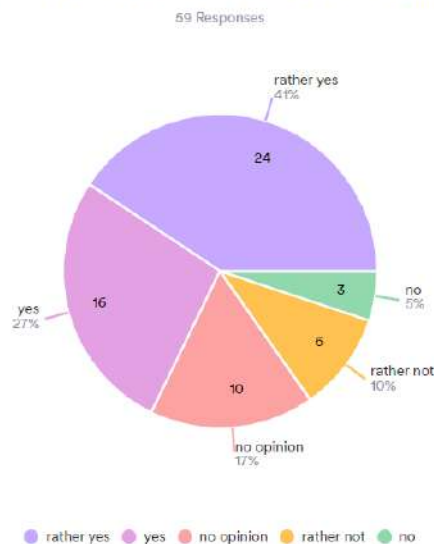
11. Do you have means to train or educate your staff so that your organization can better apply for European funds?



4. Co-financing

For 68% of respondents, co-financing is a constraint in the project implementation planning.

5. Is the co-financing percentage limiting for you, when planning the implementation of a project?



Many of the respondents say they get their co-financing from the national public authorities, in this case the Walloon region or the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles (public authority for French-speaking community in Belgium). The problem is that more and more local and national authorities want to reduce their financial investment in ESF+ / ERDF projects. The survival of these associations depends on it. Some of them, more rarely, obtain their co-financing from private donations.

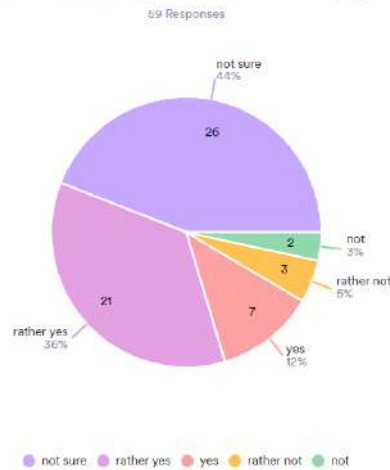
The small structures complain about the complexity of these financial arrangements for the managers of small associations. According to them, the European co-financing does not especially play an incentive role for other types of financing. Even more so as this co-financing is full of uncertainties and time limits. This European co-financing seems to be very often indispensable for the survival of these associations.

5. Funding

We asked to social service providers if the funds allocated by EU-funded projects were sufficient to finance their activities.

On average the answers are divided, half of them being satisfied while the other half is not.

2. Are the EU priorities in line with your needs for financing? In other words, can EU projects fund the activities you really need?

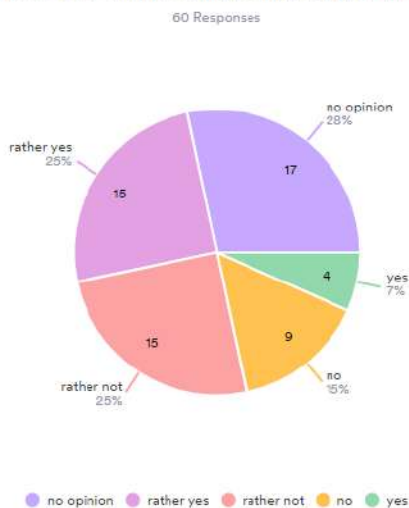


The clarity of the calls for projects is problematic, the procedures are complex, proof must be provided even for very low-cost equipment. There is a general insufficiency of allocated funds (need for additional funds), which in the long run puts operators in a situation of bankruptcy and makes them dependent. There is a gap between the assessment of needs in the field and the openings for funding new projects.

6. Collaboration with Managing Authorities

Regarding communication with the management authorities throughout the process, there is clearly more a lack of communication. Although one-third feel that they have enough communication, 40 % think the contrary and 28 % have no opinion.

12. Does the European grant provider (your Managing Authority) communicate sufficiently with you during the project writing, implementation and reporting and provides you with relevant information and support when necessary?



Of the 40% for whom communication and collaboration are not effective, 32% of respondents have already experienced a situation where the managing authority has changed rules and requirements during the implementation of the project, without communicating these changes to the beneficiary organisations. These rules are then applied retroactively, and the operators are audited on the basis of the regulations of the year of the audit and not on the basis of the regulations in force at the time of the action. This leads to rejections or difficulties in justification. Some even explain that the managing authority sometimes unilaterally changes the pre-financing amounts and that this leads to major cash flow difficulties.

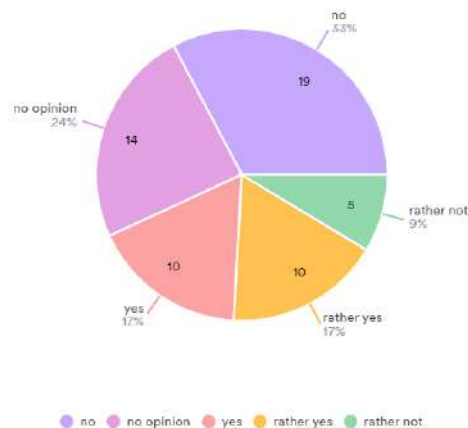
It also often happens that there are changes on targeted beneficiaries of activities, This creates a risk of financial penalties. Another major difficulty also comes from the permanent need to go through public contracts and the obligation to justify small expenses.

We also asked operators whether they had ever experienced an audit with their European grant providers and whether this had been implemented effectively.

As shown below, there were mixed views on whether they were satisfied with the implementation of audits.

19. Have you experienced audit control by a European grant provider? If so, do you think it was adequately set up?

58 Responses



For those 42% who were rather dissatisfied, they highlighted some inconsistencies.

Sometimes the audits take place a long time after implementation (e.g., one year later) and therefore these audits have no added value for the implementation of the project. One suggestion from a respondent was that these audits should be conducted as soon as possible after project implementation so that everything is easier to trace.

Some inconsistencies are sometimes highlighted regarding the difference in practices between local authorities and European institutions. This creates problems beyond their control.

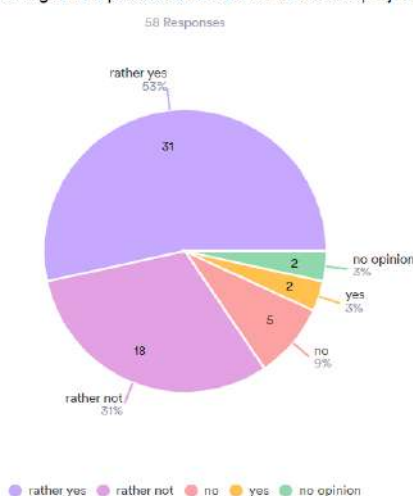
Respondents expressed the disproportionality of these controls which are sometimes going too much into details. From the perspective of social services, inspectors are controlling with an initial attitude of suspicion. According to the smallest operators, these controls should be proportionate to the means used and to the effectiveness of the actions.

We also asked the social services about public procurement, in order to understand whether the rules for European projects were well established. According to them, these public contracts require a lot of work time. Every little expense has to be justified and meeting these requirements wastes the time of the teams on the ground. These rules are not adapted to the emergency situations that workers face. This adds a heavy administrative burden for small associations, which do not always have the means or the capacity to carry out these specifications.

7. Implementation of the project

We asked the social services about the complexity of setting up work teams to participate in these European projects, and the answers were divided.

14. Is it easy for you to put together a professional team for successful project implementation?



We then asked respondents to explain how they put together their work teams. The majority explained that internal staff members are mobilised for these specific missions because they do not have the resources to hire new workers or to have dedicated staff for European projects. Otherwise, external people are sometimes recruited, but they are part-time or people who receive employment benefits to avoid expenses. The majority of respondents expressed an inability to pay these workers above the standard wage. Often, staff is not trained for these administrative tasks, and it can then be time consuming.

8. Evaluation

Regarding progress reports, operators expressed some of the challenges they faced. They indicate the difficulty sometimes to bring evidence to each expense and to ensure their eligibility. There are many conditions that must be met, and this makes the drafting rigid. The indicators are sometimes difficult to measure, observe and achieve. This rigidity of the report does not always allow the qualitative added value of the projects to be highlighted and therefore to show the impact beyond the classic indicators.

The results are often different from what was envisaged in the report, so it is necessary to be able to put them forward clearly and succinctly.

Finally, writing this report requires a lot of time, which associations do not always have.

We asked social services about the time it takes from filing the report to receiving reimbursement. The majority complained about very long delays, ranging from 1 year to 3-4 years sometimes. They receive a small advance (about 100 days after submission of the report), but it is still very disabling to receive the full balance only years later.

These delays have several consequences. Jobs become uncertain and organizations have to put in place internal restrictions to ensure their survival (restriction of supplies, stop internal training, search for loans, etc.). The services find themselves in financial difficulty, with the need to take out loans and advance money over 1 or 2 years, which incurs debts. This situation is particularly difficult to bear for small organisations because their financial reserves are insufficient.

These organizations find themselves in a situation of insecurity and hesitation in submitting new ESF projects.