HELPDESK

SOCIAL SERVICES HELPDESK ON EU FUNDS

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

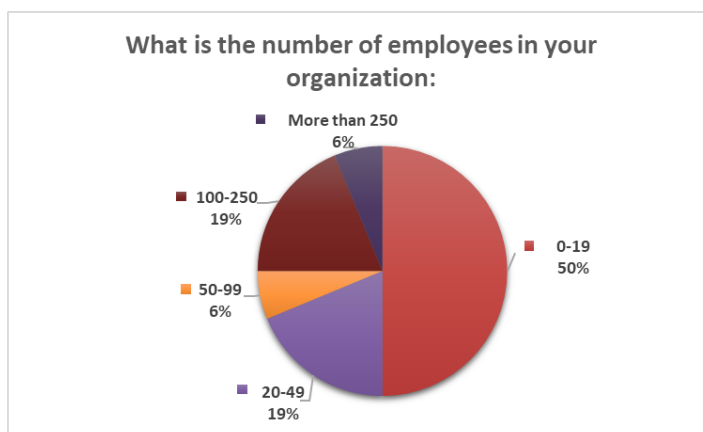Date: 23 Februari 2022

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1) Introduction - identification of country and respondents

There were 16 responses from social service providers. 11 respondents are non-profit organisations, 2 are private and 3 are established by a city. Most of the organizations have less than 20 employees.

10 organizations provide non-residential social work (NACE code 88), 1 Residential care (NACE code 87) and 5 organizations provide both types of social services (NACE code 87 + 88).

It is very positive to find that half of the representatives of the subjects interviewed consider their knowledge in the area of the possibility of drawing EU funds for the social services sector to be good or very good, and almost 38% rate it as average. Absolute ignorance was not mentioned by anyone! It should be added that the achieved result is influenced by the fact that all surveyed organizations implemented at least one EU project within the last program period 2014-2020.

2) Calls for project proposals

The absolute majority of respondents (13 said yes or mostly yes) consider that the calls for projects (activities, target groups, indicators) are clearly formulated. However, some dissatisfactions are highlighted; such as the lack of clarity of certain indicators and the complexity of these, and that the general formulation lacks adaptation to real needs in the field.

3) Application

According to the respondents, the main factors that made them unable to apply for a project in their field of activity are the following:

- The organization is not listed among the eligible applicants (9 responses)
- Lack of money for co-financing (8 responses)

- Too short deadline for submitting the project (6 responses)

We asked respondents about "post-project sustainability rules" (if applicable in their country) to find out if this was an obstacle in submitting their projects. Responses were mixed, with 7 answering "yes" or "somewhat yes", and 9 "somewhat not" or "not". For those who consider it as an obstacle, they explain it by the fact that after the end of the European funding, there are no financial resources to continue the activity. They also say that the obligation to continue the activity after the end of the project, without available funding and without access to similar funding systems at national or municipal level, proves to be an obstacle.

For them the most challenging part when applying for a EU project are:
(average values from 1 to 5 scale, with 1 = no challenging and 5 = most challenging):

1. The allocation of sufficient internal resources
2. Evidence gathering (incl. documents that need to be enclosed)
3. The (mis)alignment between the priorities that are funded and your needs

The majority (14 out of 16) indicated that they use internal staff members to develop project applications. However, it appears that those organizations do not have enough means to train or educate their own staff to better apply for these funds.

4) Co-financing

Most respondents (63%) consider the percentage of co-funding to be a barrier to the implementation of a project.
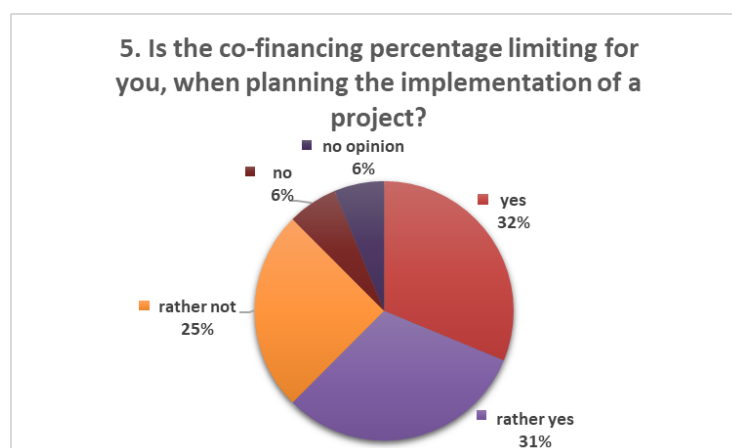
Regarding the source of their co-financing, it is mainly internal funds linked to their economic activity, donations, fundraising or state budget.

5) Funding

Most organizations (10 out of 16) consider that EU projects can fund activities that they really need. However, they highlight the lack of targeted funding for early childhood development, such as advocacy, capacity building, policy development, and engagement with the third sector. They also point to the limited access for NGO providers in recent funding schemes. Finally, they highlight a lack of a clear needs assessment process.
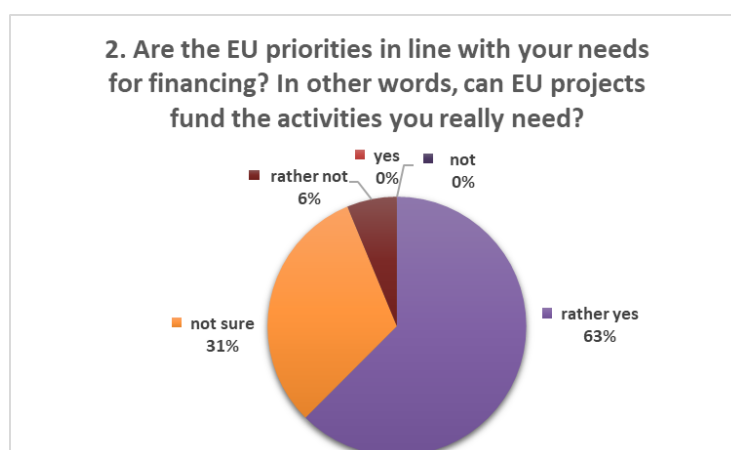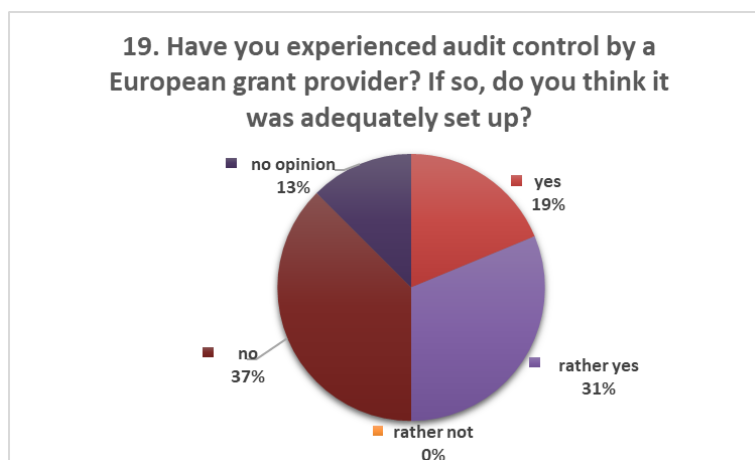

6) Collaboration with Managing Authorities

The majority of the responding organizations (9 out of 16) consider that Managing Authorities communicates sufficiently with them during the drafting, implementation and reporting of the project and provides them with the relevant information and support. However, this same majority has already encountered a situation where Managing Authorities has changed requirements or rules during projects implementation. According to the comments, this was done in several ways, by changing:

- Rules after receiving the audit from the European Commission;
- Requirements in reporting and publicity;
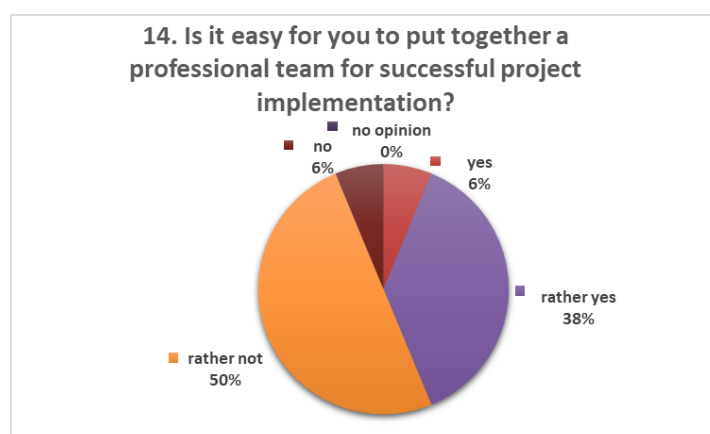- Team accountability requirements; and by changing;
- Decrees.

Roughly half of the respondents have had experience with an audit by a European grant provider. These organizations express through various comments that the teams conducting these audits are not competent in the nature of social work.

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

- no opinion 13%
- yes 19%
- rather yes 31%
- rather not 0%
- no 37%

73 % of the respondents think that the rules defined for public procurement in EU projects are well established. However, sometimes they face difficulties in determining which rules apply when awarding public contracts. There is a different interpretation by different operational programs for the same cases. Also, sometimes representatives of the governing body have different interpretations of the rules, which leads to the risk that NGOs are in breach.

7) Implementation of the project

Opinions are divided as to whether or not it is easy to put together an effective project implementation team.

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

- no opinion 0%
- no 6%
- yes 6%
- rather yes 38%
- rather not 50%

It turns out that especially non-governmental organizations that do not have enough financial resources make up the team only with existing employees, despite the fact that many of them admit that the presence of new employees with knowledge of project management would be a great benefit when implementing projects.
Wages set by the project reflect existing wages on the labour market.

8) Evaluation

Respondents expressed different challenges when writing progress reports It sometimes appears difficult for them to prove that certain facts are happening (photos of each meeting, list of participants with signatures), while many justifications are required. Indeed, a large number of evidentiary documents are required for the realization of an activity - lists, photos, feedbacks, attached documents, protocols, etc. The same documentation is required for each expense incurred.

Between the submission of the project progress report and the receipt of the reimbursement money, most respondents say that 3 – 4 months pass. This time frame is sometimes much longer, with some providers reporting waiting up to 8 months. This wait creates the need for them to take out loans. They find themselves short of liquidity and this has a negative impact on their image.