

HELPDESK

SOCIAL SERVICES HELPDESK ON EU FUNDS

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

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Introduction

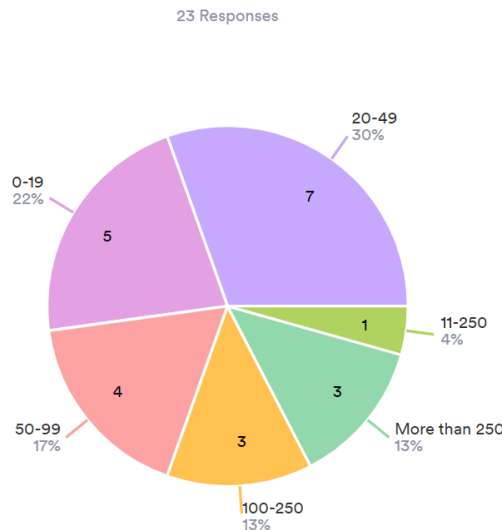
This document summarises the challenges, needs and opportunities of social services in accessing and using ESF+ and ERDF funds in Italy. It's based on answers provided by social service providers in the questionnaire issued by the Helpdesk project.

1. Identification of country and respondents

There were 24 responses from social service providers.

22 respondents were non-profit organisations, 1 was an organisation established by a region and 1 by a city. The division of the organisation taking part in the survey per number of employees is reflected in the graph below.

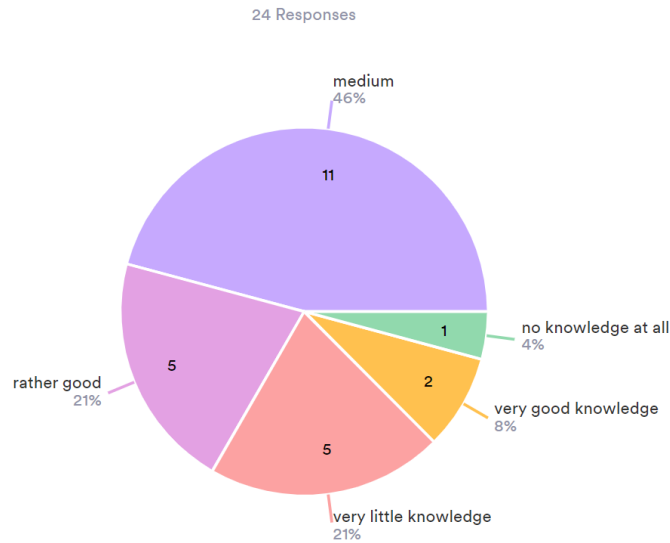
What is the number of employees in your organization:



The majority of respondent organisations (59%) provide non-residential social services, only 5% offer residential care while the remaining 36% affirmed they provide both types of services. Moreover, respondents declared to offer services mainly for the following target groups: persons with disabilities (27%), children (19%), refugees (18%), elderly (16%) and homeless (7%). Other responses included services for women, persons who are unemployed, young people, and people with drug addictions.

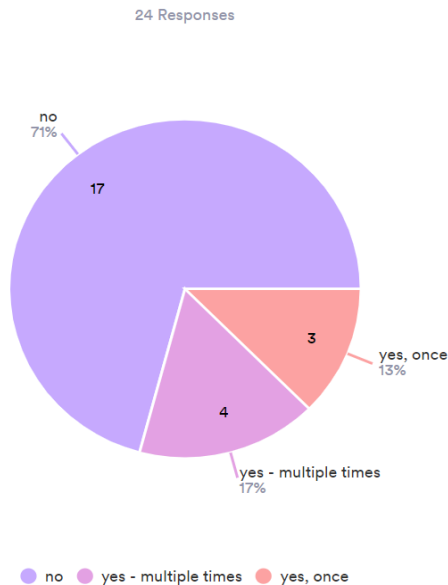
When asked about their level of awareness and knowledge of existing EU funding opportunities, most respondents declared to have a medium level of it (46%), 21% a rather good one and another 21% responded to having very little knowledge. Only a few respondents thought they had very good knowledge (8%) and some thought they had no knowledge at all (4%).

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



Finally, as regards respondents' experience in applying for EU funds, survey's results show that most organisations (71%) have never submitted a project application financed by ESF+ or ERDF, 17% submitted one multiple times and 13% submitted an application once.

Have you submitted a project financed by ESF+ or ERDF before?

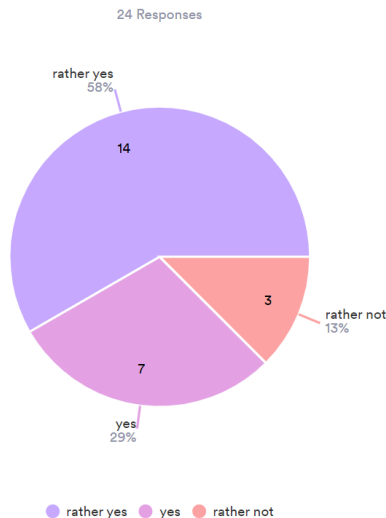


2. Calls for project proposals

The survey shows that the majority of respondents think that calls for projects are rather clear in the definition of priorities, target groups, indicators, etc. (58% replied "rather yes" and 29% "yes"). Only 13% of them submitted a negative answer in this regard. However, some respondents highlighted that calls for projects sometimes could be formulated more clearly and that often the language used is very technical and understandable only by specialised project designers. It was also noted that

some calls are mainly oriented towards supporting large projects where it is easier to set indicators, targets and schemes.

Are the calls for projects clearly formulated? Are the supported activities, target groups, indicators, etc. clearly defined?



3. Application

The survey shows that, when applying for EU projects calls, social services face different challenges. Among them, allocating sufficient internal resources, the complexity of the application form and the need to follow public procurement and/or state aid rules were the main difficulties mentioned by respondents.

The survey also reveals that, in the past, applicants have failed to apply for a project in their field of intervention because of three main reasons:

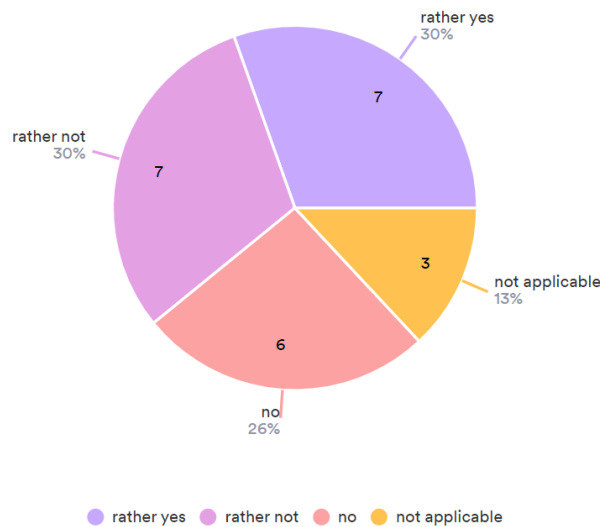
1. too short deadlines for submitting the project (27%)
2. lack of money for co-financing (22%)
3. ineligibility of the organisation as applicant (18%).

Some organisations (12%) also mentioned the inability to find eligible partners and the unclear project rules as factors that prevented them from submitting an application in their field of activity on previous occasions.

The survey also examined whether the so-called “post-project sustainability rules” (when applicable) represent a barrier for submitting a project application. As results demonstrate, 30% of respondents do not believe that these rules can be a major obstacle with regard to the application process, 26% responded to the relevant question with “rather not”, while another 30% consider the rules as a challenge. More specifically, a respondent highlighted that the main difficulty relies on the fact that, if a project must have continuity in time, it is often not easy to guarantee if there are no continuous public contributions. As a matter of fact, social care and support services require the use of very professionally prepared staff, a factor that, in turn, can make these services too expensive for the users who might benefit from them.

Are the so-called "post-project sustainability rules" (if applicable for your country) a barrier for submitting your projects?

23 Responses



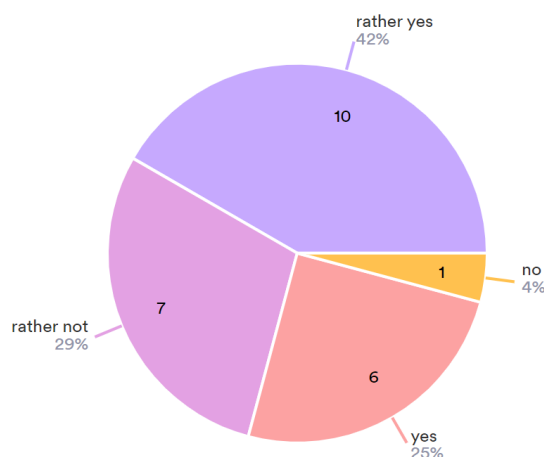
A further challenge that social services providers may face when applying for EU funds may refer to their capacity to build up a team with the capacity to implement a project successfully. The survey shows that, when developing project applications, 54% of respondents tend to look for external consultants, while 46% rely on their internal staff. 46% of participants affirmed to have the means to train their staff to make sure they are better prepared to face the application process, 38% responded with a "rather not" to the relevant question, while the remaining 17% declared not to have the adequate resources at all.

4. Co-financing

When asked whether the co-financing percentage represents a limit when planning the implementation of a project, the majority of survey participants (42%) replied with "rather yes", 25% with "yes" and 29% with "rather not". Only 4% affirmed this factor does not represent a limit at all.

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

24 Responses



Results also show that organisations mostly get their co-financing from their own resources, from activities related to the provision of direct services to users, as well as from members, local authorities and foundations. One respondent also mentioned donations from the Catholic Church. As regards the possibility that EU co-financing can work as an incentive to attract other types of funding, survey participants highlighted the following points:

- it can be difficult to attract other funding linked to an already funded project;
- EU co-funding is leverage to activate funding at local level and can be an incentive for network involvement;
- EU co-financing sometimes allows to attract contributions from private foundations, which are willing to co-finance. Occasionally, the promoted activity becomes economically sustainable during the project and allows for internal co-financing.

5. Funding

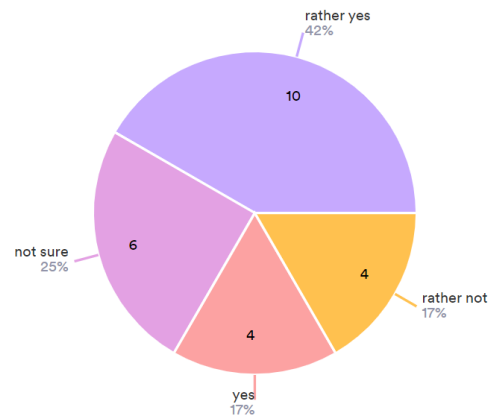
According to most survey respondents (42%), EU priorities are in line with their needs for financing. 25% were not sure about this, while 17% affirmed that EU projects cannot fund the activities they really need to implement.

Survey participants also highlighted the following points:

- The target groups of the calls are not always the ones organisations want to target.
- EU priorities in general are in line with the topics organisations want to face; however, sometimes, EU funds are designed for large interventions which they are not always able to implement.
- It would be good to have more calls combining the social and environmental spheres, promoting social, economic and environmental sustainability.
- In some cases, organisations lack a wider partnership network as well as a more adequate management structure to be able to manage EU funds.
- Many funding lines are for investments (e.g. ERDF) or for innovative aspects. Often, however, there is also a need for additional resources for ordinary management, especially in the case of services launched on an experimental basis.

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

24 Responses



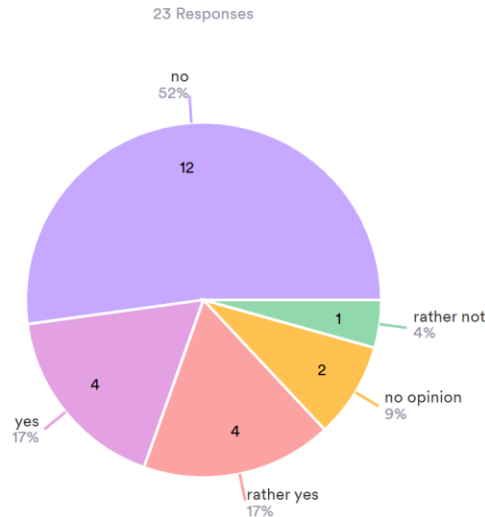
6. Collaboration with Managing Authorities

Results from the survey reveal that, for 42% of participants, the European grant provider communicates sufficiently with them during the project writing, implementation and reporting, providing relevant information and support when necessary. On the other hand, 38% of them responded “rather not”, 17% did not have any opinion on that, while 4% gave a negative answer.

The majority of respondents (86%) also affirmed they have never encountered a situation where the European funding provider (Managing Authority) changed requirements or rules during the project implementation. Those who provided a positive answer mentioned a change in the deadlines and not in the fundamental requirements or the modification of reporting rules for ESF projects. A respondent highlighted that changing of requirements or rules happens when the initial indications are not clear enough; rules in progress always have an impact that changes what was planned until then.

Another element to consider as regards the effective communication and collaboration between Managing Authorities and social services providers organisations concerns the setting up and management of the audit controls. Most respondents declared to have never experienced an audit control by a European grant provider. Among those who did, some considered the audit as positive and constructive, while one respondent pointed out that controls are usually little qualitative and very formal and that the actual impact of the interventions is not assessed.

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

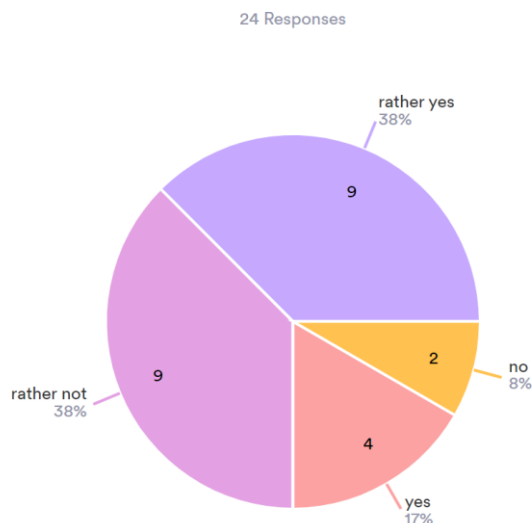


A last factor that was taken into account within the survey concerned the rules set out for public procurement in EU projects. In this regard, most participants (85%) answered that rules are usually well set. However, it was mentioned that the national rules are usually more severe and complex than the European ones.

7. Implementation of the project

When asked whether it is easy to put together a professional team for a successful project implementation, 54% of respondents answered “yes” or “rather yes” and 46% “rather not” or “no”.

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



What emerged from the survey's results is that, when building up a team, most organisations tend to rely on existing employees (some have a part of their staff exclusively dealing with projects' implementation) and employ external experts when needed. However, several respondents indicated that the internal staff is not always adequately trained. This is due mainly to the lack of the

necessary personnel needed to train and support the new resources, especially in the case of young professionals with little experience and specific skills. Generally, the internal staff that is employed for the implementation of a new project is paid according to the standard salary with no possibility of extra payment.

8. Evaluation

When writing the project progress reports, survey's participants usually encounter different challenges. The most common ones are the following:

- having adequate reporting time;
- keeping track of project expenditure;
- carrying out data collection on indicators over time;
- reporting exactly the hours of the staff;
- collecting all the necessary information and documentation from the partners;
- respecting the timeline set in the GANTT chart.

When it comes to how much time it takes between submitting the project progress report and receiving reimbursement money, respondents most frequently indicated a period ranging from 3 to 6 months. Some of them considered the time period in question too long, highlighting the fact that a factor that can have negative implications on an organisation. More specifically, most respondents pointed out that this factor can severely affect their finances as they need to draw on bank credit with increased interest costs or advance sums themselves, creating a liquidity gap which affects the investment of resources in other development opportunities. A participant also mentioned that, sometimes, partners do not join projects because of difficulties in advancing expenditure.