HELPDESK

SOCIAL SERVICES HELPDESK ON EU FUNDS

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

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INTRODUCTION

This report gives an overview of the challenges, needs and opportunities of European Social Services providers in accessing and using the European Social Fund (ESF+) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) in Spain.

The key findings in this report stem from a survey undertaken as part of the Helpdesk project. The Helpdesk is a two-year (May 2022-April 2024) project funded by the European Commission aimed at launching the building blocks for a Social Services Helpdesk. The proposed Helpdesk will have two main priorities:

- to support social services in accessing and using EU funds (ESF+, ERDF and ReactEU in particular);
- to help Managing Authorities use EU funds (ESF+, ERDF and ReactEU in particular) to finance quality interventions in the field of social services.

The survey was disseminated in all EU Member States, and addressed to both social services and managing authorities.

This report summarises the answers provided by **social services** (i.e. non-profit social service providers as well as public authorities with responsibilities for social services design and planning) in **Spain**.

1. IDENTIFICATION OF RESPONDENTS

When this report was written, **a total of 77 responses** were received from social service providers and public authorities with responsibilities for social services' design and planning in Spain.

77% of the respondents work for **non-profit organisations**. 12% work for an organisation established by a city. The remaining respondents (11 %) work for organisations established by the State, the Special Employment Center, a religious non-profit organisation, an organisation established by the Region and a public law corporation of a social nature.. The majority (60%) works for an organisation with less than 100 employees. 12% works for an organisation with 100-250 employees, and 29% works for an organisation with more than 250 employees.

Most of the respondents (78%) are **providers of non-residential social work**, whereas 22% of the respondents work for organisations which provide residential care. The

respondents (mainly) provide services for the following target groups: persons with disabilities (33%), homeless (13%), children (11%), seniors (10%), refugees (10%), persons at risk of social exclusion (2%). Other responses included services for women, persons who are unemployed, young people, and people with drug addictions.

**What is the number of employees in your organization:**
77 Responses
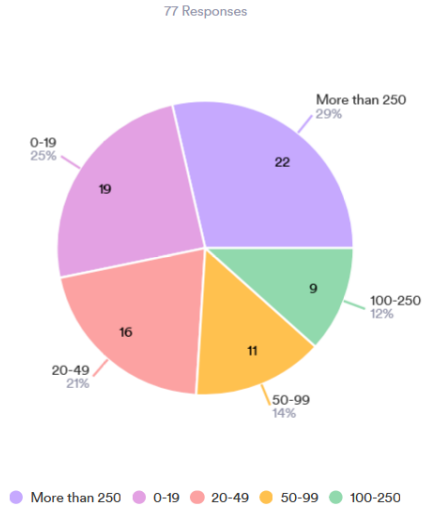
What type of social services do you provide (multiple answer possible)?
85 Responses
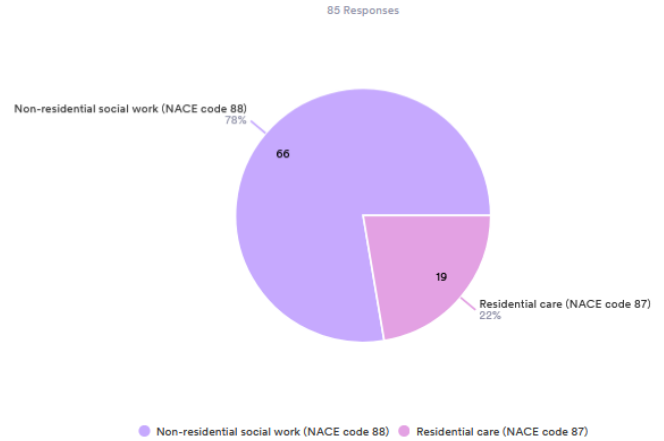
Most of the respondents thought that their level of awareness and knowledge of existing EU funding opportunities was medium (40%) or rather good (38%). Only a few respondents thought they had very good knowledge (5%) and some thought they had very little knowledge (17%).

1. How would you assess your level of awareness and knowledge of existing EU funding opportunities for your sector?
77 Responses
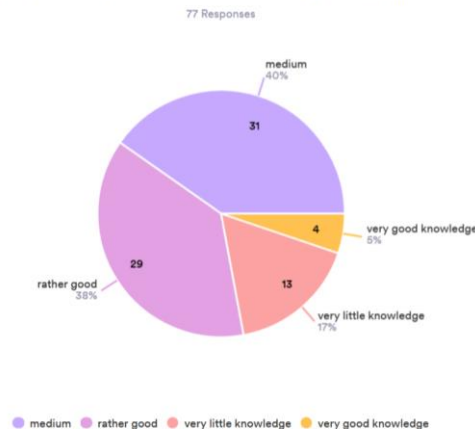
Most of the respondents have experience with applying for EU funding: 51% of the respondents submitted a project application financed by ESF+ or ERDF multiple times and 20% submitted an application once.

2. CALLS FOR PROPOSALS

The survey shows that 82% of respondents think that calls for projects are rather clear in the definition of priorities, target groups, indicators, etc. (57% replied "rather yes" and 25% "yes"). Nevertheless, 10% of them submitted a negative answer, while 8% did not express any opinion in this regard.

Despite this, respondents highlighted a series of problems that they usually encounter when applying for EU projects. More specifically, it was pointed out that, for certain funding programs, calls are far too complex and specific in terms of subjects, supported activities and target groups. According to the respondents, this means that there is no room to express the creativity and added value of projects through the closed boxes of calls for projects. Moreover, most calls require the creation of a transnational project consortium involving partners from different EU Member States. On many occasions, this can constitute a barrier given the difficulty of finding partners who share exactly the same approach to a given project.

In addition to this, other factors concerning the clarity and precision of calls for projects were mentioned by survey participants:

- often it is not easy to find information on the calls and on subsidies.
- Calls for proposals sometimes do not arrive on time.
- over the years, more and more requirements to be met are included, which makes applying for a call quite difficult.
- project indicators can be redundant and often do not reflect the specificity of groups at risk of exclusion, as well as all the different situations in which they may find themselves.
- there are times in which specific groups are not mentioned, such as the homeless, which makes it challenging to apply for some calls.
- in some cases, the objectives are difficult to meet because they are not entirely aligned with the social reality.

3. PROJECT APPLICATION

When applying for EU project calls, social services can face several difficulties. The results of the survey show that the main challenges faced by respondents concern the rules and regulations related to EU funding, as well as the length and complexity of the

application form. Frequently, processing funding requests, interpreting the application and being able to provide all the administrative documentation required by the call can be quite demanding.

Understanding and using simplified costs was also indicated among the principal challenges to face.

The survey also shows that, in some cases, in the past, applicants have failed to apply for a project in their field of intervention because of the difficulty in finding adequate resources for the co-financing (36%) as well as because of the short deadlines set for submitting proposals (26%). 17% of respondents also identified as the cause of the unsuccessful application the fact that they found themselves not eligible to apply for a call; others were unable to find partners that were suitable (16%).

Another element that was explored in the survey to better understand the challenges social services organisations face when applying for EU funds were the so-called "post-project sustainability rules". It is well known that, in the approval of a project, its sustainability represents an important criterion taken into account by the grant provider. As survey results demonstrate, the majority of respondents (75%, if we do not consider those for whom these rules do not apply) do not believe that sustainability rules can be a major barrier for submitting their projects. However, those who provided a positive reply indicated as a major challenge the lack of long-term funding, which prevents projects to be economically sustainable over time.

Another element highlighted concerned the training of the staff. The administrative complexity of calls for projects usually need specialised, well trained and fully dedicated staff, which organisations are not always able to provide. When applying for EU funds, social service providers do not always have the capacity to build up a team that is experienced enough and that has the capacity to ensure the smooth and correct implementation of a project. The survey shows that, when developing project applications, the majority of respondents (93%) tend to rely on the skills, expertise and capacity of their internal staff. Only 7% indicated the need to look for external consultants. Nevertheless, 43% of participants pointed out that they do not have means to train their staff to make sure they are better prepared to face the application process.

4. CO-FINANCING REQUIREMENTS

As already highlighted previously in the analysis, for most of social services providers, co-financing can be a real limit when planning the implementation of a project. Indeed, 67% of respondents gave a positive response when asked if the co-financing could represent an obstacle in this regard.

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

77 Responses
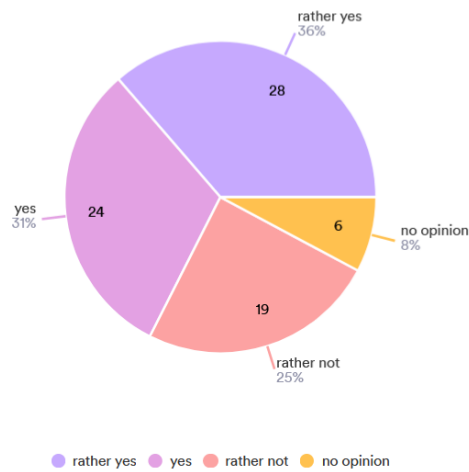
Results also show that the majority of survey participants tend to use their own funds to cover the co-financing rate. However, these resources are very often inadequate, which means that social services may find it difficult to apply for calls. Respondents also indicated that other sources of co-financing usually come from public and private funds, regional and local administration, donations (primarily from members) and, in some cases, from the State. In some cases, EU co-financing is also used. Moreover, while the EU co-financing requirement can represent an incentive for attracting other types of funding, these other types of funding are still often insufficient.

5. FUNDING

With regard to Spain, as showed in the following graph, EU funding lines seem to be mostly in line with the needs, approach and objectives of the social services.

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

77 Responses
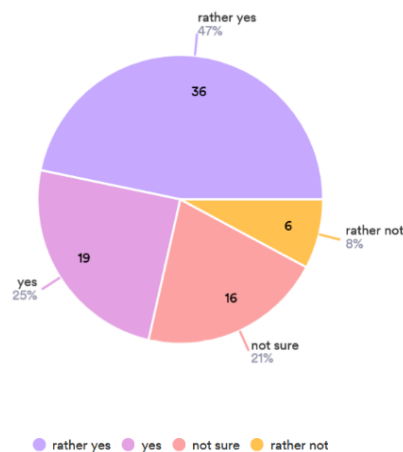
However, there are several problems related to EU funds that have been stressed by the different survey participants. More specifically, it was noted that:

- the continuity of the projects is not always guaranteed;

- not all social actions are fundable as funds are very focused on access to employment, although the employment issues for marginalised groups should be addressed from a more holistic or broad perspective, beyond the issue of labour inclusion;

- finding partners for projects and writing project proposals in English can sometimes be challenging;

- Lack of adaptation to the territorial reality (and, therefore, of financing) ;

- Lack of calls for proposals to finance interventions for direct care (such as support to promote independent living, inclusive leisure, social-healthcare support or cognitive accessibility).

6. COLLABORATION WITH MANAGING AUTHORITIES

Half of the respondents (29% rather yes and 21% yes) affirmed that their relevant Managing Authority communicates sufficiently during the project writing, implementation and reporting phases of the project and is able to provide relevant information and support when necessary. 28% disagreed, and 10% did not express any opinion on this matter. The survey also shows that 68% of respondents never encountered a situation where the European funding provider (Managing Authority) changed the requirements or rules during the project implementation. However, when this did happen for 12 % of the respondents, survey participants highlighted among the major problems they had to face the following ones:

- change in the application form to be filled, in the rules for attaching documentation and justifications, as well as in the date for submission

- change in budget

- change in the eligibility of costs: at first staff costs of administrative employees were considered as direct cost, and this changed to indirect costs

- extension of the timeframe at the start of the project, which forced the organisation to reformulate the contract hours of the staff who were going to run the project

- changes in communication material during the project

- modification of the data collection method at the end of the project, which meant that some indicators could not be collected

- change in the rules for the application of the economic modules in the simplified cost regime during the implementation of the project, when some operations had already been fully implemented

Another element to consider as regards to the effective communication and collaboration between Managing Authorities and social services providers organisations was the setting up and management of the audit controls. As the graph below shows, survey participants had different experiences when it comes to this aspect.

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

71 Responses
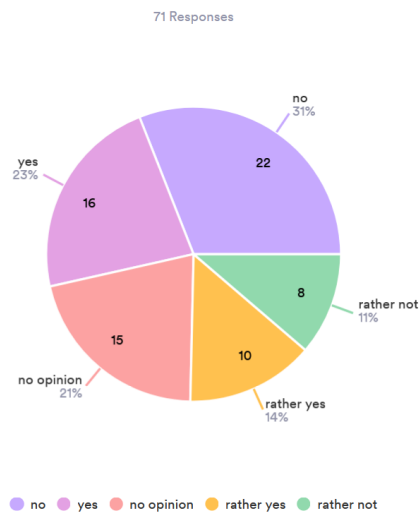
Among those who experienced an audit, some of the respondents indicated to be quite satisfied with the process, although some organisations stressed the little notice given prior to the assessment. Others pointed out the excessive rigidity in the control and in the requirements to be met. Moreover, some respondents indicated that there was not adequate understanding of the programmes by the auditors. Those who indicated to have been through several audits by different auditing bodies pointed out the use of different and contradictory criteria in the controls.

Another finding that emerged from the analysis is that the majority of the survey respondents believe that the rules set out for public procurement in EU projects are well set. Generally, most of the social services think that national rules are stricter than the EU ones. More specifically, they indicated that rules are excessively rigid, inflexible and sometimes unclear, a factor that does not allow milestones to be set - for instance economic milestones - or valuable projects to be financed and developed. Some of the main problems mentioned by respondents were the following:
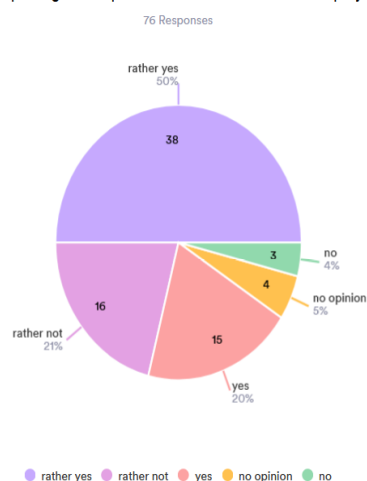
- the concurrence of operators from outside the local reality and the project development environment can generate problems of understanding and execution of the projects. Proximity should be prioritised in the contracting rules.

- rules limit temporary employment as they promote the stabilisation of staff. Furthermore, authorisations are required to increase staff expenditure, with organisations being subject to budgetary stability and financial sustainability.

- rules make it difficult to obtain suppliers for the provision of certain services or limit the contracting of the best ones.

One of the survey participants also highlighted is that the Spanish legislation is not clear whether social entities are subject to State public procurement rules. This is particularly problematic when it comes to major contracts that would entail a public tendering process.

7. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROJECT

For the majority of survey participants (70%), setting-up a professional team that can guarantee the implementation of a project seems to be quite easy. This finding is however contradictory to a previous one stating that ""When applying for EU funds, social service providers do not always have the capacity to build up a team that is experienced enough and that has the capacity to ensure the smooth and correct implementation of a project." (page 6). One can assume that a difference should be made between the ease in setting up an internal team with general project skills and the difficulty in bringing together more specific and different expertise.

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

76 Responses

rather yes
50%
38

no
3
4%

no opinion
4
5%

yes
15
20%

rather not
16
21%

● rather yes ● rather not ● yes ● no opinion ● no

When asked how they build up their project team, as explained earlier, most respondents indicated that they usually rely on their own staff. Only when needed, they

recruit external personnel with the specific expertise required to carry out the tasks foreseen by the relevant project (6% of respondents indicated they hire external consultants to develop a project application). Despite this, it is true that several survey participants indicated that, sometimes, it can be difficult to have a staff that is specialised enough to guarantee a successful implementation of a project, as already mentioned previously in the analysis. This is why, in some cases, members of the staff already contracted by an organisation are relocated for a specific project depending on their competences and skills. Furthermore, an element that has been highlighted by the majority of respondents is that financially it is not possible to pay the professionals hired above the salary established in the collective bargaining agreement. In some cases, competent staff will move to public administrations or companies as the working conditions are better. Lastly, the fact that rules do not allow charging sick leave, paid leave according to the collective agreement or days off for personal matters, greatly penalises the economic sustainability of certain projects.

8. EVALUATION

In response to the question: "What are the biggest challenges for you when writing the project progress reports?", many respondents mentioned the heavy reporting requirements in general, and how time consuming this is. Specifically, the following challenges were pointed out:

- Quantity of control documents and forms to fill out.

- Excessive emphasis on microdata and micromanagement.

- Economic justification requirements in Spain; e.g. they require stamps on invoice receipts which increases bureaucracy and the consumption of paper.

Another challenge that was mentioned is adequately capturing the evolution of the project, as there is not always a monitoring template available. Furthermore, respondents said it is often difficult to understand what is being requested exactly in terms of reporting. Some respondents also indicated problems related to indicators:

- Reporting on indicators which are hard to adjust to the reality of the people served by the social service.

- Defining and meeting the defined objectives and their indicators, although this varies a lot from one project to another. Meeting the indicators is not only dependent on having a good project and a good team, but sometimes also on external factors. For example, quantitative assessment for projects in rural areas

in most cases is too demanding for the reality of this area. It is proposed to give more importance to qualitative assessment.

When it comes to how much time it takes between submitting the project progress report and receiving reimbursement money, the answers of the respondents differed greatly. Some respondents answered that this period would be a few weeks or a month, many said it would take more or less 2/3 months, but there were also respondents who said it would take half a year, a year, or even more than a year. No matter how long they wait, the waiting is uncertain and variable. It can cause cash flow tensions, as those organisations have to advance many of the costs. Some even said this is a reason for them not to apply for EU funding anymore. One respondent also pointed out a good practice: "we have worked with Next Generation Funds and the first payment was made in advance, something that is very useful in order to address the initial deployment and may be a good practice to assess for other calls."