

## A PROSPECTIVE EVALUATION ON THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF EU-FINANCED PROJECTS. ROMANIAN STUDY CASE.

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### **Abstract**

Dealing with unexpected was one of the biggest challenges in the past year for governments and companies in all arias. As part of this response, authorities sprang into action to help protect citizens from this health threat while continuing to deliver services in communities. The project management needed to be constantly adapted and the managers had to make decisions under uncertainties. This paper presents the context of COVID-19 and an evaluation proposal for the situations encountered and the measures taken by the managers in projects financed under the European Union Operational Programme Human Capital. Taking the responsibility for others people lives, especially for those in need increases the pressure in time of crisis. Managing an unprecedented situation was not easy for the Romanian government, there were several decisions made for OP Human Capital projects. My focus will be to design an evaluation to measure the impact of Romanian government responses in the process of decision making at projects level (management) and especially for target groups, how the managers managed the projects based on the received directives in order to minimize the risks and damages.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 crisis; European funds; evaluation; project management, challenging management, public institutions

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 was one that took us all by surprise. It was the year in which our lives changed radically and in which trying to adapt to the new conditions was and still is a challenge. Each field has undergone transformations and digitalization has been one of the saving solutions of the moment. The transition from physical (offline) to online activities for some people was easy and natural, while others had a slower and more difficult transition and some people could not have it at all.

In times like this the presence (intervention) of national and/or local authorities is essential. It is their responsibility to see the bigger picture, to call for action, to make integrated decisions that will assure people's health and safety but also they will keep receiving the community services that they need and deserve. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 crisis took the governments by surprise and Romania was one of the ones unprepared for this kind of event. The inability to see the bigger picture will cost a lot not only in the short term but also in middle and long term. Can we afford this kind of costs? How costs will be measured? Who will actually pay for it?

When most activities are cancelled or partially interrupted and postponed, you may be wondering what happens to people whose lives are interconnected and depend on other people's work. How they manage to survive? At the same time, we must turn our attention to those who have assumed the responsibility to intervene with concrete measures to improve living conditions for those in critical economic and social situations. What role does each key player (actor) play? What was the authorities' response to the challenges posed by the pandemic? Was their involvement necessary? To what extent? What was the impact of the measures taken by them during that period? The lack of quick and efficient response of authorities was the tip of the iceberg for those who are working or are just simply target group in Operational Programme Human Capital 2014-2020. Looking back, it seems that some challenges from 2007-2013 in accessing non-reimbursable funds are still found today: the difficulty of coordinating measures between the different structures involved in

management in the structural instruments; improper working procedures; the pressure to launch calls for proposals, due to the need to respect the “n + 2” rule (Marinaş, Cercel 2011, 72-73).

For a better understanding of the programme, I will give a short description of what is it, objectives, priorities and structure. The Romanian Operational Programme (OP) "Human Capital" for the implementation of the ESF in the period 2014-2020 outlines the priorities and objectives helping Romanians, including youngsters, find a job, improve their education and skills, reducing poverty and social exclusion, supporting better social services and labour market institutions. Specific attention is given to youth, Roma and rural population. The programme has seven priorities: priorities 1 and 2 - Youth Guarantee in Romania; priority 3 - access to employment; priority 4 - social inclusion and to fight poverty; priority 5 - local development under the responsibilities of the communities; priority 6 - education and skills; priority 7 - technical assistance (European Commission n.d).

Regardless of the type of decision or when it is made, the impact will be felt for the first time on human resources. In projects human resource is as important as the funds and the way you manage it can ensure your success or may lead to your failure. That is why project managers need clear and firm decisions from authorities because they had to manage in the same time the people who are working in the projects and people who are beneficiaries in the projects. It is difficult to assume such responsibility and to identify and implement the right solutions in order to save the project and to achieve the targets.

### 1.1. The objective of the evaluation

The main objective of the evaluation is to measure the impact of authorities' decisions in projects implemented with European funds under the Operational Programme Human Capital 2014-2020 based on the theory-based programme evaluative approach, using the following OECD evaluation criteria: impact, relevance, efficiency and effectiveness (OECD 2021, 18). Using these criteria may

give us an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of the projects and how they may be improved or are a lesson to learn for all of us in project management.

The impact assessment is focusing on the more complex, higher-level effects (positive or negative, intended or unintended). The impact evaluation provides a holistic frame of the intervention consequences on longer term and their potential to generate a significant change for the direct beneficiaries and not only.

The relevance analysis verifies the extent to which the intervention's objectives and design respond to beneficiaries and continue to do so if circumstances change. In crisis time is very important and every single decision have to be made in order to meet the needs of beneficiaries. For example, how long and how many times managers can suspend a project? How long will take to process the request for suspension? In normal circumstances a request like this one will be processed in a month or so, but in this time of crisis the beneficiaries cannot afford to wait that long.

The effectiveness analysis helps to understand the extent to which the intervention has achieved its objectives and its results. Basically, using the effectiveness lens can assist evaluators, program managers or officers and others in developing (or evaluating) clear objectives. Likewise, effectiveness can be useful for evaluators in identifying whether achievement of results (or lack thereof) is due to shortcomings in the intervention's implementation or its design (OECD 2021, 52-54). For example, the authorities have made several decisions regarding the way project managers should respond to COVID-19 crisis in their projects or at least this was the intension. Did the authorities manage to do this? The results can be seen in the decisions that project managers took for each project individually.

The efficiency analysis helps to understand how resources are being used, ensuring that projects are well conducted. In the same time, it is a good was to hold people in charge to account for how they have taken decisions and managed risks. For example, Romanian Ministry of European Funds through Authority of Management gave certain directives but the important part is with whom they were implemented because even before COVID-19 crisis the bureaucratic mechanism was facing a lack of human resources. It is interesting

to see if at the administration made some changes regarding this HR shortage. Did the administration a reorganization of the HR teams in order to be a real support for project managers in their way to implement correctly the projects? Did the Authority of Management hired more specialised or support personnel? How much of the work of the authorities can be automated and how much it needs expert specialized people?

## 1.2. The use of the evaluation

The evaluation of the impact of authorities' decisions for projects implemented with European funds under the Operational Programme Human Capital 2014-2020 is not an easy one and you may wonder why is necessary and how can be used in the short, mid or long term. To have a better understanding of the situation I have to mention the fact that not all the projects are in the same stage of implementation and every decision has to meet the needs of every project but in the same time to have a general character.

For projects in the early stages of implementation the results of this evaluation can change the implementation course: to rethink the way the activities will be implemented (switching to online), rethink the budget on certain activities (moving money from a type of expenditure to another – for example moving money from the costs of renting a room for trainings to online training course platforms).

For projects in the advanced stage of implementation the results of this evaluation can change the implementation timesheet: suspension of the project for a period of several months for a reorganization of activities and resources without changing the overall period of time for implementation.

For projects in the final stage of implementation the results of this evaluation it is necessary because in order to ensure the success of the project it is possible to need new decisions from AM regarding the timesheet of the project. When the project is in a final stage there are usually some delays of the activities and everyone is working under pressure in order to achieve the indicators established in the beginning. Therefore, it is necessary to determine if the delays

registered now are because of the bad management before COVID-19 crisis or after. Is it necessary for AM to approve project extensions for more than 6 months according to the rules in force? There is a budgetary impact? If so, what is it? How can a project support financially 6 more months without asking for more money? Will human resources volunteer? What about other costs?

In the mid and long term, the results of this evaluation will help to shape/adapt the future programmes: the budget, the activities, the flexibility of terms and conditions, target groups etc. Another aspect that can be improved in the future is the dimension of administrative mechanism of human resources (there were enough people to help in real time the beneficiaries?; How well prepared were they in order to verify the documents and offer the right guidance for project managers? How useful are the current procedures?).

In the same time, let's not forget that in the context of the pandemic and the restriction of human contact, people feel even more the need to interact, to consult, to change opinions. Is there also risk aversion, in such a turbulent period, how willing are the authorities to make risky decisions? Probably quite a bit, they are more cautious, they will probably be more tempted to go to known procedures and less to look for new ones, if they are urgently needed. Moreover, it seems like performance management and indicators will probably be rethought because it is a period in which everyone exceeds their job description and has new tasks maybe even voluntarily and the authorities need to find proper solution in order to keep a high and efficient level of work.

### 1.3. Project management in European Funds

Nowadays everyone is speaking about European funds and shows a real interest because, at this moment, it is one of the best ways to access money in order to make changes in the community. As good and easy as it seems the reality shows us the contrary especially when you do not know exactly what you have to do and how to do it. At this point the development of skills in project management has an important role to play. How do we define it and what is it exactly? *„Project management is designed to provide sustained, intensified and integrated*

*management of complex ventures. It involves: (a) the focus of a substantial portion of total organisational resources on a specific objective; (b) highly interdependent specialized activities; and (c) relatively severe constraints with respect to cost, delivery, and performance of the end product (Butter 1973, 85)".*

When it comes to good practice there are many examples of project management with EU funds. In the same time every project has its own particularities such as the dimension of the target group or the region where it is implemented but the challenge for the authorities is to use the same approach when similar problems appear.

As I mentioned in the beginning of this paper the word that can perfectly describe the situation at this point is „uncertainty“. There are several authors which establish a classification for uncertainties in the project management process. One type identified is the environmental one that includes changes in the decision-making process at institutional level. A second kind is the individual one, meaning constraints such as: incomplete/ limited information, the capacity or the time to make a decision, the different approach of identifying and interpreting uncertainties from a person to another. Also, an uncertainty consists in complexity as the diversity of actors and stakeholders. An element related to the lack of certainty is the distortion of the information conducting to imperfect information, incomplete information or the misunderstanding of the relationship between cause and effect, the lack of knowledge, the lack of understanding, inability to estimate accurately. The last category is the temporal one, representing an uncertainty which changes constantly as project moves from a stage to another (Saunders, Gale, Sherry 2015, 468-469).

In the following evaluation the focus will be on: environmental, individual and informational level. *Environmental* because of all the decisions that have been made by the Romanian government (the national lockdown – 2 months, the state of emergency – on going), also the Ministry of European Funds issued several documents with recommendations for beneficiaries (all the recommendations made in documents as Instruction number 4, 5 and 7). *Individual* - both authorities and project managers had to make urgent decisions based on incomplete information or were not ready to make radical decisions in a very short time. *Informational* - the lack of communication, exchange of information,

between authorities and beneficiaries. How can you make the right decision if you miss the bigger picture? If you do not have the information need it? How can you expect an involvement of the authorities if their focus it is not on the beneficiaries and their problems?

## 2. EVALUATION DESIGN

Considering the complexity of The Romanian Operational Programme (OP) "Human Capital", I would propose an evaluation design that includes a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods. The triangulation of the data collected and analysed from the relevant documents, interviews and surveys will ensure in the end the rigor of the findings, conclusions and recommendations. Relevant documents in this case are the official ones released by the Ministry of European Funds (MEF), Authority of Management (AM), Romanian Government and documents released by Regional Intermediate Body (this is an operational structure for AM in each region - Romania has 8) offering guidance for beneficiaries. Another type of document that will be analysed will be the requests sent by the beneficiaries to the entities mentioned above and the responses received by them. The analysis of those documents will provide information about: the type of communication, the consistency of the messages, the degree of generality of the decisions and measures taken, the frequency with which a certain problem reported by the beneficiaries is encountered.

The interviews will be held both with the beneficiaries (project managers) and with representatives of the authorities (minister, the directors of Regional Intermediate Body, project officers, etc.) for a better understanding of the problems they were facing. Also, it is a good method to explore deeper the entire mechanism of: communication between institutions, institutions and beneficiaries - both ways; the process of making decisions and any other aspects that will be mentioned by participants and can be taken into consideration. The exploratory part is very important because creates the possibility to confirm or infirm some aspects that are considered important but in fact it is the opposite.



In the same time creates the opportunity to see and to analyse the problem from different angles and perspectives.

Their survey will be used to measure the perception of beneficiaries regarding the actions taken by the authorities. Did they feel helped? Did they manage the project easily after they received directives from authorities?

## 2.1. Evaluation questions, criteria and indicators

As I mentioned above in sub-chapter 1.2 *The objective of the evaluation*, there are 4 criteria that will be used in this evaluation: impact, relevance, effectiveness and efficiency. For each criterion will be formulated at least two evaluation questions. Also, for each evaluation question at least two indicators will be identified and for each indicator will establish the instrument which will be used for data collection.

Before formulating the evaluation questions, we must take into account that a correctly formulated question will be answered with "YES" or "NO".

| <b>Evaluation question</b>                                                                          | <b>Indicators</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | <b>Method/ instrument</b>                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Has the directives taken by authorities caused a change in the lives of the intended beneficiaries? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Total number of projects from OP Human Capital vs. number of projects who registered changes.</li> <li>• The number of days that a beneficiary must wait for the approval of an Additional Act or a request for suspension of the project before vs. after the intervention</li> </ul> | <i>Analysis of documents</i> (official/non-official reports from Ministry of European Funds and Regional Intermediate Body, Authority of Management)<br><br><i>Survey</i> with beneficiaries (project managers) |
| Did the intervention                                                                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The number of new</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | <i>Analysis of documents</i>                                                                                                                                                                                    |

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| <p>caused higher-level effects (such as changes in norms or systems)?</p>              | <p>procedures proposed regarding and during the pandemic</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The number of new procedures proposed regarding and during the pandemic that arrived in the debate phase</li> <li>• The number of new procedures regarding and during the pandemic implemented</li> <li>• The number of changes made in the administrative HR scheme during the pandemic</li> <li>• The number of new hires in Regional Intermediate Body before vs. during the pandemic</li> </ul> | <p>(official/non-official reports from Ministry of European Funds and Regional Intermediate Body, Authority of Management)</p> <p><i>Interviews</i> with representatives from Ministry of European Funds and Regional Intermediate Body, Authority of Management</p> <p><i>Survey</i> with beneficiaries (project managers)</p> |
| <p>Were changes approved for the benefits of the target group during the pandemic?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The initial benefits of target groups from the projects vs. the benefits during the pandemic</li> <li>• The benefits proposed by managers during the pandemic vs. the benefits approved during the pandemic</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | <p><i>Interviews</i> with representatives from Ministry of European Funds and Regional Intermediate Body, Authority of Management and beneficiaries (project managers)</p>                                                                                                                                                      |

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| <p>Is the intervention leading to other changes, including “scalable” or “replicable” results?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The number of similar changes made in other Operational Programmes implemented in Romania during the pandemic</li> <li>• The number of particular decisions (at Regional Intermediate Body level) which have become a norm (at Authority of Management level) during the pandemic</li> </ul> | <p><i>Analysis of documents</i> (comparison of Instructions between Operational Programmes; comparison between instruction given from each Regional Intermediate Body and instruction/decisions took by Ministry of EU Funds and Authority of Management)</p> <p><i>Interviews</i> with representatives from Authority of Management and Regional Intermediate Body)</p> |
| <p>Has the pandemic affected the cost-effectiveness?</p>                                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The number of open calls during the pandemic</li> <li>• The number of calls on hold during the pandemic</li> <li>• The number of projects summited during the pandemic</li> <li>• The number of projects approved during the pandemic</li> <li>• The number of depleted</li> </ul>           | <p><i>Analysis of documents</i> (official reports from Ministry of European Funds and Regional Intermediate Body, Authority of Management)</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |

|                                                                                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                                                                                         | budges during the pandemic                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Is the intervention (Instructions from authorities) relevant in the context of COVID-19 pandemic?                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The number of projects that requested an extension, due to the pandemic, over the number of months initially established</li> <li>• The number of requests coming from the beneficiaries invoking the decisions taken by the authorities (Instruction 4, 5 and 7)</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                 | <p><i>Analysis of documents</i> (reports from every Regional Intermediate Body)</p> <p><i>Survey</i> with Regional Intermediate Body from all regions and Authority of Management</p> |
| Did the measures taken by the authorities impacted the projects differently depending on their stage of implementation? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The number of projects in the early stages of implementation that have required changes in activities due to the pandemic</li> <li>• The number of projects in advanced stages of implementation that have required changes in activities due to the pandemic</li> <li>• The number of projects in the last months of implementation that have required changes in activities due to the pandemic</li> </ul> | <p><i>Survey</i> with beneficiaries (project managers)</p> <p><i>Analysis of documents</i> (reports from every Regional Intermediate Body)</p>                                        |

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|----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The needs of target group are defined clear? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The relationship between the problems identified and the solutions proposed in the form of directives</li> </ul> | <i>Survey</i> with beneficiaries (project managers)<br><br><i>Interviews</i> with representatives from Authority of Management and Regional Intermediate Body) |
|----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

Identifying the right instruments is as important as finding the right criteria, formulating the evaluation questions and indicators. There is a fine line between using tools to obtain the information needed to carry out the evaluation and using a greater number of tools to achieve the same results.

Another aspect that has to be taken into consideration when data is collected: when you know you have enough information? The additional information collected requires additional effort on the part of the evaluators when verifying and interpreting it.

Evidence gathered needs to be valid and credible. You may wonder why has to be like this and in front of whom? Mostly, credibility is established in the eyes of stakeholders/beneficiaries, how they choose to see the information that was collected. They decide if it is believable, trustworthy or relevant or none of the above. Having credible evidence strengthens the evaluation results as well as the recommendations that follow from them. Although all types of data have limitations, it is possible to improve an evaluation's overall credibility (Milstein et al. 2010, 15). The more credible the information is, the more open stakeholders/beneficiaries will be when the recommendations will be presented and eventually implemented. Before implementing the recommendations each of them is analysed and can be accepted, rejected or adapted.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

Even if the model proposed for the evaluation of the impact of decisions/ instructions taken by the authorities for a better and adapted implementation of projects funded with European funds under The Romanian Operational Programme (OP) "Human Capital" during the COVID-19 crisis may seem complex, requiring a huge amount of resources as: financial, human and time, has the chance to make a change. The results of the evaluation can have an important real time contribution to the projects that are in the last phase in implementation. Also, can be a starting point for the next generation of programmes since none was launched. Whether we want to or not, unfortunately the pandemic will not end in the near future. The need for adaptation will be constant, and the results of the evaluation can be a point of reference on how the authorities will act.

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