

ANALYSIS OF OPTA PROJECT RESULTS, NAMELY WITH REGARDS TO THE ACHIEVEMENT OF SELECTED OBJECTIVES SET FOR EACH OF OPTA PRIORITY AXES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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Date: November 2015

Starting points and methodology

The evaluation "*Analysis of OPTA project results, namely with regards to the achievement of selected objectives set for each of OPTA priority axes*" was developed by SPF Group in September - November 2015 for the Managing authority of the Operational Programme Technical Assistance (hereinafter OPTA). The Contracting authority formulated its requirements in 10 evaluation questions, and the author grouped them into three evaluation tasks by their orientation: Evaluation task A Analysis of achievement of OPTA objectives - analysis at OPTA (programme) level; Evaluation task B - Analysis of indicators setup - comparison of monitoring indicators for OPTA 2007-2013 and OPTA 2014-2020; and Evaluation task C Analysis of OPTA projects - in particular their results related to the intervention objectives, risks, usability for the programming period 2014 - 2020, and quality of implementation.

Wide range of methods was used for the necessary analysis, and where possible - or allowed by the tight project schedule - triangulation of methods was applied in order to provide actual image of the analysed reality. The key methods were desk research, quantitative and qualitative analysis, comparative analysis, focus group, in-depth interviews, intervention logic analysis / reconstruction of change theory, multi-criteria analysis and statistical analysis. It is proper to stress here that the Contracting authority in its questions related both the progress at programme level and project results explicitly to the achievement of objectives of individual interventions or the whole OPTA, financial and thematic, which was decisive from the viewpoint of evaluation approach. However, this request and some partial findings have led the author to a more thorough review of these objectives, to which the results and progress were to be related. It has been found out that one of the typical features of this operational programme that can also explain some conclusions is remarkable **dynamic of OPTA objectives both at the operational programme and project levels**. The operational programme's development was rather interesting from the viewpoint of allocation of individual priority axes, while individual projects were considerably changing both their planned eligible expenditure and monitoring indicator values.

Four revisions were made through OPTA 2007-2013, leading to changes in allocation, resulting in reduction of total allocation. With the exception of priority axis 2, where the allocation remained the same, there was gradual reduction made with other priority axes as a result of slow drawing, subsequent transfer of resources to another OP, or failure to comply with n+3 / n+2 rule. **Overall OPTA 2007-2013 allocation was reduced by more than 40 percent, while the most visible reduction was made in priority axis 4 - by almost 80 percent.** The allocation in priority axes 1 and 3 was reduced by 40.18 percent and 35.73 percent, respectively.

Initial plans for projects from the viewpoint of financial and thematic objectives were compared, and monitored with annual frequency all the way to the reference date, i.e. 17 August 2015. This analysis has showed clearly that the amount of eligible expenditure of analysed project groups was changing in time. On average 27 percent of the planned eligible expenditure is saved already at the stage of the decision to grant aid, while the results of multi-criteria analysis of completed projects simultaneously confirms that average 18 percent of the updated budgets are not used. This means that average 40 percent of eligible expenditure within OPTA originally planned in project budgets was not used.

The analysis showed that unused resources are higher with projects initiated at the beginning of the programming period, which is very likely related to the long project schedules set in the first years of OPTA. According to the information collected via guided interviews it was difficult for the beneficiaries to correctly predict their expenditure for so long periods ahead. This conclusion also corresponds to the results of statistical verification of project length influence on the quality of implementation.



Main findings

As the Evaluation task C analyses in detail, as of the reference date total 118 projects were completed, their share in OPTA allocation being 56.9%. Higher level of drawing was found in the priority axes 2 and 3, while in priority axis 2 the entire allocation can be used, or there can even be over commitment. On the contrary effects of lower volume of certified resources due to suspended payments from the EC in 2014 are still visible. Priority axis 3 will probably exceed the level of 90 percent by the end of programme implementation. The priority axes 1 and 4 are on the brink of critically below-average drawing, and their allocation will remain considerably under-executed.

Strategic objective 1 OPTA corresponding to priority axis 1, displays at the level of both recorded and anticipated values for most indicators markedly higher ratio of financial and thematic progress. At the level of achieved progress most indicators show critical values - risk of failure to achieve the objectives and major excess on the other hand. At the level of expected progress the indicators with critically exceeded values prevail. The expected development - despite the considerably below-average financial drawing - shows completion of most activities within the planned, or wider scope, i.e. successful achievement of the strategic objective 1. Strategic objective 2 OPTA corresponding to priority axis 2, displays at the level of both recorded and anticipated values for all indicators optimum or higher pace of thematic as compared to financial progress. The priority axis 2 also achieved the highest financial drawing, and it is the only one within OPTA to display the threat of over commitment. With regards to the completed and expected development, for most activities under the priority axis 2 within wider scope successful achievement of the strategic objective 2 can be assumed. Strategic objective 3 OPTA corresponding to priority axis 3, displays at the level of both recorded and anticipated values for the indicators the highest differences between thematic and financial progress. There are also the biggest differences between the achieved and planned objectives. Of all the 7 indicators 3 display critically low level, which should be according to expectations changed to optimum and higher by the end of the programme. Indicator *48 07 00 Number of created methodological and technical-information materials* will be virtually unachieved in the priority axis 3. Despite the problems with values for most of the indicators, and uneven financial execution of intervention areas within the priority axis 3 it can be expected that completion of the ongoing projects will confirm implementation of activities aiming at successful achievement of the strategic objective 3. Strategic objective 4 OPTA corresponding to priority axis 4 displays at the level of both recorded and anticipated values for the indicators critical exceeding. Only the indicator *48 07 00 Number of created methodological and technical-information materials* has not reached optimum achievement level. However, this level will be reached before the end of the programme. Also the priority axis 4 recorded highly uneven financial execution of the intervention areas, and remained under the programme's average. And yet there was achievement, or even marked exceeding of the objectives of most planned activities, and it can be concluded that the strategic objective 4 was successfully achieved. Global objective of OPTA displays relatively good level of achievement of strategic objectives from the viewpoint of financial and thematic progress.

Thematic completion of OPTA is closely related to the system of indicators, its setup, definitions and target values, or Evaluation task B. In general it is very difficult to define relevant indicators for this type of operational programme, or for this character of interventions. This conclusion has been confirmed by some respondents during the in-depth interviews. With OPTA 2007-2013 the economy, simplicity, and coherence to supported activities of the indicator system have been accentuated so far. In this respect the indicator system for OPTA 2014-2020 is undoubtedly larger, more complex and more relevant for the activities / projects to be supported during the programming period 2014-2020. Even though some indicators will be a burden for the MA, overall review has not confirmed excessive number of indicators. Monitoring of the indicators will be more difficult compared to the programming period 2007-2013, and some indicators could be reduced (e.g. 81101 Number of domestic or foreign business trips, or 80710 Completed operational programme), all in all the system

will enable the MA to better monitor and control the operational programme.

Both the completed analysis and in-depth interviews pointed out insufficient level of detail of definition of some indicators. For instance it was not always clear in the programming period 2007-2013 which meeting shall be included and which not. The beneficiaries have also often agreed they would welcome a more unambiguous methodology of target value planning, which is confirmed by the number of indicators where these values had to be markedly increased or decreased.

As part of the Evaluation task C each OPTA project was assessed from the viewpoint of quality of implementation, benefits, results and possible risks. The quality of implementation was set as evaluation of the projects based on multi-criteria analysis using partial criteria. One of those criteria was also usability in the programming period 2014-2020. Potentially risky factors were outlined on the basis of the author's experience and after consultations with the contracting authority, their possible major effects on the quality of implementation were reviewed. Contributions of projects to the achievement of objectives are understood as individual projects contributing to the financial and thematic objectives of the relevant intervention level. Evaluation of results was set as a comprehensive assessment based on the contributions and quality of implementation. This summary evaluation was made for groups of projects according to their thematic orientation, based on the prevailing activities assessed by the description and monitored indicators. Three time levels were always taken into account in the analysis (with regards to formulation of respective evaluation questions): currently implemented projects, projects completed in 2014, and projects completed throughout the period of OPTA implementation till 17 August 2015. The identified values for all the projects are quantified in relevant categories in the final report, or in the corresponding annexes.

Recommendations

Partial recommendations are mentioned in the corresponding chapters, summarised recommendations for the entire study are divided in four thematic categories:

OPTA management

- Improve the estimation of absorption capacity when planning the allocation for individual areas of intervention.
- Use the possibility of changed allocation according to the recorded results during the programming period, and better manage the allocation of individual areas of intervention - respond actively and in the event of failure allocate in the areas with higher absorption capacity.
- Spread the activities of the intervention areas to more projects, and eliminate the threat of failure to achieve the objectives in case of problems of some limited number of projects.

Project management

- Better manage the allocation of individual projects, and lead the applicants to more specific projects and their budgets.
- Request transparent and consistent records of the ineligible expenditure.
- Implement shorter projects, prevent "rolling" of the allocation in cases of long-term failure, always pushing it into the next stage.
- Better records and namely availability of information on the initial project settings.
- Eliminate the fragmented implementation of similar activities (e.g. publicity, training) by various entities (e.g. individual departments of the MRD), and put them under one umbrella of a single project.

Indicators

- Estimate the setup of target indicator values more precisely.

- Consider partial changes of the system of indicators.

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Procurement procedure

- Improve the preparation of procurement procedures and their support, including the internal processes, or arrange adequate support for the beneficiaries.

