

"Evaluation of absorption capacity of OPTA"

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Version 1.1

5 April 2018



EVROPSKÁ UNIE
Fond soudržnosti
Operační program Technická pomoc



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1. Introduction

This document presents the executive summary of the Final Evaluation Report, which was created as part of **Evaluation of absorption capacity of OPTA**. The main objective of the report is to provide the contracting authority with information on the overall approach to the evaluation, and on the final outputs, results of the analyses and investigations, and also on the conclusions and recommendations. This evaluation was carried out in the period from 5 December 2017 to 5 April 2018 by the evaluation team of HaskoningDHV Czech Republic, spol. s r.o.

2. A brief summary of the contract

The evaluation was focused on two interrelated evaluation tasks. The first aimed to evaluate the absorption to date and was associated with a medium-term absorption prognosis. The second task was to bring a pipeline of projects that could possibly be funded from OPTA, while also to bring arguments for partners (and the management of OPTA and MoRD) why it is possible and sensible to extend the range of beneficiaries of this programme.

Specifically, the aim of this evaluation under the first evaluation task was to get an idea about the absorption problems in OPTA. It was also possible, by answering the set evaluation questions, to verify the capacity of beneficiaries and the ability of beneficiaries to allocate funds from the OPTA.

In the second evaluation task, we identified through desk research and using semi-structured interviews conducted with representatives of foreign managing authorities responsible for technical assistance, what goals their operational programmes on technical assistance have, who their beneficiaries are, what calls they publish and also what projects and activities they specifically support.

At the same time, projects implemented in other Member States were presented, as part of the second evaluation task, to Czech beneficiaries of technical assistance who were asked whether they would be prepared to implement any of similarly focused projects still under OPTA.

The design for the first and second theme of the evaluation was prepared with respect to the individual evaluation questions set by the contracting authority. The methodical approach to the evaluation was detailed in the Input Report and therefore the Final Report only summarizes the most important aspects of that approach. The main methods of data collection for this evaluation were desk research and semi-structured interviews conducted with representatives of OPTA MA and with representatives of selected foreign MAs and selected beneficiaries of the Czech OPTA.

Using desk research, we analysed the available information on technical assistance programmes in selected EU states and communicated (by email, phone) with representatives of OPTAs in Poland, Romania and Slovakia to obtain the necessary information on implemented projects. Information on



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technical assistance in Bulgaria and Portugal was obtained only through desk research. A use was made also of information obtained from the OPTA MA on the basis of a letter sent to managing authorities by the Czech OPTA MA.

Projects implemented under technical assistance in other EU states were presented at group semi-structured interviews conducted with beneficiaries of technical assistance on 27.03. and 29.03.2018. The first interview was conducted with representatives of ITI, NN of LAGs and regional permanent conferences, the second interview with representatives of MoRD-NCA, AA, PCA, and MoRD Dept. of Publicity and Administrative Capacity of the NSRF. Both interviews were also attended by representatives of OPTA MA.

In the course of the work on the contract, the supplier continuously communicated with the contracting authority, especially through a contact person.

The main output of the contract is the Final Report, which contains all the findings, results and recommendations of the evaluation team formulated with respect to all of the above objectives of the contract. Summarized main findings and recommendations are presented below.

3. Main conclusions and recommendations

The summarised conclusions of the evaluation correspond to the wording of the answers to the set evaluation questions.

Table 1: Overview of the main conclusions of the evaluation

Evaluation question	The main conclusion formulated in relation to the wording of the evaluation question
<p>EQ 1.1 What are the problems slowing down absorption against the expectations when planning the OPTA for the 2014 - 2021 period?</p>	<p>Contrary to expectations in the planning and preparation of OPTA, there is a risk of underspending the planned expenditure especially in Priority Axis 2, where the financing of MS2014+ operation and development was suspended by the European Commission in connection with the ongoing police investigation. OPTA spending is slowed due to public contracts, the tendering procedures of especially larger public contracts are disproportionately long (with respect to the procedures and processes laid down by law or procedures set up in the institutions of OPTA beneficiaries) and often cannot do without complications (e.g. appeals of participants, objections, procedural errors). There is then a risk</p>



Evaluation question	The main conclusion formulated in relation to the wording of the evaluation question
	of insufficient time for using the allocated funds effectively for the planned purposes.
EQ 1.2 Would the existing beneficiaries be inclined to take on any of the reserve activities/ projects obtained under the second evaluation task (see evaluation question 2.1)?	The existing beneficiaries are inclined to implement some proposed activities/ projects that have been identified under EQ 2.2.
EQ 1.3 What measures should the Managing Authority adopt in order to prevent potential risks diminishing the absorption capacity of the operational programme?	Since the OPTA MA has already established a relatively sophisticated system of risk management, including risks related to absorption capacity, there is no need for further action in this area by the OPTA MA. It is only appropriate to continue in using the risk management system in place.
EQ 2.1 What projects/ activities, to what beneficiaries, under what calls, to achieve what specific objectives are paid in selected EU countries from OPTA, or from sources of bodies performing an equivalent function as the OPTA in the Czech Republic?	<p>In selected EU Member States (Bulgaria, Poland, Portugal, Romania and Slovakia), the OPTAs fund, in vast majority, similar activities as the OPTA in the Czech Republic. The surveyed countries except Bulgaria implement an independent OPTA. Priority axes and specific objectives (number and content) are defined differently in different countries, the overall material content and scope of supported activities is, nevertheless, largely similar in all OPTAs. Specific objectives can be generally divided into: support of horizontal structures responsible for coordination, management, control and implementation of ESIF; ensuring the functioning and operation of information systems; increasing the potential of beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries of ESIF; raising public awareness of ESIF.</p> <p>In some States, OPTAs pay beneficiaries and activities that are not a direct part of the cohesion policy, but may significantly affect it, e.g. statistical offices, competition authorities, some ministries in cross-cutting horizontal themes (IT, EIA), specific institutions linked to a certain topic, institutions</p>



Evaluation question	The main conclusion formulated in relation to the wording of the evaluation question
	<p>having links to the regional and local levels. There are more differences in the beneficiaries defined for OPTA support in the individual surveyed countries, both in relation to the implementation structure that is set up in the particular State, and in relation to activities that are funded from the OPTA.</p>
<p>EQ 2.2 Which reserve projects/ activities, acquired through the previous analysis, can be meaningfully integrated among the projects/ activities of OPTA in the Czech Republic? Which organizations could be meaningfully added to the list of OPTA beneficiaries?</p>	<p>In relation to the existing structure of OPTA beneficiaries, it would be appropriate to extend the activities of the implementation structure in the territories and to increase the staff capacity accordingly. It would be suitable to expand the group of beneficiaries/ the implementation structure still in this programming period e.g. with the Czech Statistical Office, or the Office for the Protection of Competition. For the next period, to consider a possible extension to other entities in connection to the envisaged activities (e.g. supervisors of ex-ante conditionalities, umbrella NGOs) which will be implemented and ensured by the OPTA.</p> <p>In the implementation of the current OPTA, it would be useful particularly to expand the activities that support beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries at all levels of the programme implementation structure. Based on suggestions from selected EU countries, it would be appropriate to support cooperation between institutions in addressing specific issues in the territory/ region, for example by supporting the coordination of activities among stakeholders, practical assistance with the preparation and implementation of smaller projects, legal advice in public procurement, facilitating activities with the public, etc. It would also be suitable to support pilot</p>



Evaluation question	The main conclusion formulated in relation to the wording of the evaluation question
	<p>projects in the territories, such as "smart cities", "smart region".</p> <p>Furthermore, it would also be appropriate to facilitate participation in training activities for other groups that are not currently involved in training - e.g. project managers, all ITI employees, tax authority and General Financial Directorate employees. It is also important at all levels of the implementation structure to enhance personnel resources in particular in the area of public procurement.</p>
<p>EQ 2.3 What are the trends in the planning of OPTA functions in selected EU countries for the next programming period?</p>	<p>Based on information from Poland, Romania and Slovakia we can say that all these countries envisage maintaining a separate OPTA in the next programming period. Below are suggestions and proposals identified in those countries for the next programming period.</p> <p>The approach and trends for the next period in technical assistance presented by the Polish OPTA MA can be regarded as innovative. In their opinion, technical assistance should be a simple and flexible tool, able to adapt to the constantly changing circumstances, it is no longer sufficient to support only the basic functions. The scope should be extended with respect to all entities involved in the implementation of cohesion policy. It is important that the system of support includes institutions that are not part of the management system but have an impact on the implementation of cohesion policy. Technical assistance resources can be used to test innovative solutions - pilot projects. There should be a gradual strategic shift to activities, which generally bring more added value to cohesion policy, such as capacity building, communication or experience sharing. In order to reduce excessive procedural complications,</p>



Evaluation question	The main conclusion formulated in relation to the wording of the evaluation question
	<p>technical assistance should focus on beneficiaries so as to ensure the preparation of innovative and well-designed projects that would match the existing strategies and needs.</p> <p>The OPTA MA representative from Slovakia said that for the implementation of technical assistance in the new period it would be appropriate to simplify the entire process - the simplification can be done through exemptions as opposed to thematic OPs. Perhaps it would also be good to define financial limits for projects on specific activities, and below those limits public procurement would not have to be carried out.</p> <p>An important experience gained in technical assistance in Romania may be the necessity to allocate an appropriate number of employees so as to effectively plan and implement technical assistance funds with regard to the fact that TA is managed and implemented according to the same rules as the other types of projects and some technical assistance projects are time consuming.</p>

Below is a summary of the main recommendations arisen from this evaluation.

Table 2: Summary of recommendations from the evaluation

Recommendation	Owner of the recommendation	Degree of significance of the recommendation	Recommended deadline for implementing the recommendation
Ensuring an internal discussion on setting the internal rules for implementation of selected types of OPTA projects - specifically in the area of limits on refreshment, limits on accommodation in the Czech Republic and in	OPTA MA	high	within 2 months



Recommendation	Owner of the recommendation	Degree of significance of the recommendation	Recommended deadline for implementing the recommendation
the EU, establishing rules for the paid working time of jobs in projects of regional partners etc.			
<p>Drawing up an analysis of OPTA specifics in the context of requirements arising from the single methodological environment (SME).</p> <p>Initiating a discussion with MoRD-NCA regarding the possibility to view OPTA within the SME as a unique service-oriented programme which would not necessarily have to comply with all the rules laid down for the other types of programmes.</p>	OPTA MA, MoRD-NCA	high	within 6 months
Ensuring an internal discussion on the upcoming project drafts at the level of OPTA MA and beneficiaries.	OPTA MA	high	Continuously during the preparation of project proposals
Maintaining the established system of risk management of the OPTA MA.	OPTA MA	medium	Continuously
Consider including among the beneficiaries also institutions that are not directly involved in cohesion policy, but may significantly influence it, i.e. e.g. the Czech Statistical Office, the Office for Protection of Competition etc.	OPTA MA, MoRD-NCA	high	within 2 months
Starting a discussion on expanding the activities of OPTA in support of beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries (e.g. to enlarge the group of trainees - to enable participation in training activities also for employees (e.g. project managers, ITI employees) who are not included in it now,	OPTA MA, NCA	high	within 2 months



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Recommendation	Owner of the recommendation	Degree of significance of the recommendation	Recommended deadline for implementing the recommendation
to support pilot projects (see experience from Poland) or to promote cooperation among institutions in addressing specific issues in the territory/ region/ town - also see the experience of Poland).			