

„Satisfaction Indicators and Assessment of the Concept of the Single Methodical Environment“

Executive Summary

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1. Executive summary

The “**Satisfaction Indicators and Assessment of the Concept of the Single Methodical Environment**” Project was drawn up based on the call for proposals by the Ministry of Regional Development (MRD) of the Czech Republic. The supplier of this contract was HOPE GROUP s.r.o.

The objective of this contract was to **determine the current values of three specific result indicators** for the Operational Programme Technical Assistance (OP TA) for 2015 according to the methodology set in baseline research in 2014. An additional objective of the contract was to **evaluate to what extent selected objectives of the Single Methodical Environment (SME) Concept** are being met – the first phase of this assessment. This concerns above all an evaluation based on real experience with implementation of the first calls of the 2014–2020 programming period. The assessment focused on the submission of an application for support. Its objective was to gather applicants’ reactions to the contents, set-up, timing and clarity of the calls for proposals and also to obtain feedback from employees of the implementation structure concerning the set rules of the SME. The Final Report was also divided in accordance with the abovementioned objectives.

The values of satisfaction indicators were obtained using an on-line survey, which took place in October and November 2015 and hence reflects the views of respondents at the start of implementation in the 2014-2020 programming period. The overall results must be interpreted in the context of the phase of implementation and the fact that most calls issued at the time were calls of the Operational Programme Enterprise, Innovation and Competitiveness (OP EIC). In this OP, applications for support in the previous period were administered in a different monitoring system, which meant major changes for applicants and staff. Four questionnaire surveys were conducted with the following actors: implementation structure employees – internal users of the system; applicants for support; members of working groups (not paid from the OP TA) and staff paid from the OP TA. Based on the surveys, individual variables (partial aspects of satisfaction) were determined which entered into the calculation of the indicator.

The questionnaire survey provided basic information about the extent to which the SME Concept is achieving its goals and became the basis for follow-up qualitative research in the form of individual interviews with applicants and group discussions with representatives of managing authorities (MA).

The chapters below represent the main conclusions of the individual parts of the research.

1.1.1. [Evaluation of Fulfilment of the OP TA Indicators](#)

The indicator “**Satisfaction of Relevant Players with Working Conditions in the Management of the Partnership Agreement/OP**” (82410) improved slightly compared to the baseline survey in 2014 (from 63 % to 65 %). Five percentage points (pp) are still required to achieve the target value. The value of the indicator “**Satisfaction of Employees of the Implementation Structure and Recipients and Applicants with the Information System**” (83420) fell significantly by 15 pp (from 64 % to 49 %). The fall is mostly due to a drop in the partial indicator measuring the satisfaction of employees of the implementation structure, which fell by 19 pp. An increase of 31 pp is needed to achieve the objective for 2023. The “**Satisfaction of Employees of the Implementation Structure with Personnel Policy and the Training System**” indicator (82110) also fell slightly compared to 2014 from 65% to 63%, due mostly to a fall in satisfaction with the remuneration system.

The evaluation of individual indicators is summarised for each indicator in Chapters 4.1.4, 4.2.4 and 4.3.4. This chapter presents a brief assessment (below) especially for individually assessed areas (areas of indicators).

Working Conditions

Satisfaction with the amount of available information and supporting documents, the working environment, working tools, guidelines, laws, rules, cooperation with partners and so on were addressed as part of the assessment of “working conditions”. Respondents were satisfied with the organisation of working groups, above all with the cooperation with partners. Members of working groups (WG) **positively assess the organisation of proceedings, the willingness of managing entities to communicate and the speed of the flow of information for WG activity**. Staff paid from the OP TA (who hold the role of WG sponsors/organisers), are **most satisfied** in cooperation with cooperating entities, **with the preparedness and expertise of partners**, and with the usefulness of their input and suggestions. There is room for improvement in both target groups in the set-up of formal working rules, which includes the rules for the operation of ESI funds and therefore most findings and recommendations presented with respect to the methodical environment (see below) can be applied.

There was a downward trend in the satisfaction of staff paid from OP TA with material working conditions (above all with regard to the availability and quality of tools and possible scope of choice which, for example, does not allow the purchase of quality or specialised equipment). There is also room for improvement in IT equipment for work.

Information System

Those responding to the questionnaire during the data collection period assessed the monitoring system very negatively. The value of the information system satisfaction indicator fell significantly (by 15 pp). This decline is for the most part caused by a drop in the satisfaction of employees within the implementation structure (77% of respondents expressed their dissatisfaction with the system).

The aspect of the system most negatively assessed by employees of the implementation structure was the orientation in the system. They also reported negative views of the speed of uploading and saving data. Their satisfaction with the information provided by technical support staff fell. Applicants who responded in the survey **gave the worst assessment for overall satisfaction with the system** (52% of applicants voiced dissatisfaction) and general satisfaction with the system’s working environment, i.e. the characteristics when respondents were asked to sum up their overall impression of the system. was also assessed negatively, as was the completeness of information contained directly in the system and overall satisfaction with user support. In all characteristics (except 4 variables) satisfaction fell compared to 2014. This could be caused by the fact that the system is new and there were great expectations placed on the system and the users need to grow accustomed to it, but above all because in the early stages the system did not work as needed (see below).

A closer evaluation is provided below (Part “Monitoring System”).

Personnel Policy and Training System

Satisfaction with the personnel policy and system of training for staff paid from the OP TA fell slightly, which is caused above all **by a significant fall in satisfaction with the remuneration system**. Respondents stated that they did not have sufficient information about the remuneration system, they consider the system to be unfair, not motivating and they considered the level of pay inadequate to the demands of the work (the remuneration does not reflect work performance).

By contrast, **there was a positive trend in variables (individual aspects of satisfaction) relating to the training system**. Respondents are satisfied with the training courses and their quality (92% of respondents are very or quite satisfied), the availability of courses and the ability to independently select from an offer of training courses is positively assessed. The results in the areas presented are the same across different work positions and institutions. Unlike the previous survey, satisfaction increased with the relevance of the offered courses (although some respondents lack courses for specific topics required for their work) and the time is positively assessed which is earmarked for training.

1.1.2. Assessment of the Single Methodical Environment Concept

Overall Set-Up of the Methodical Environment (SME)

The current set of rules at national level is perceived rather negatively by MA staff (59% of respondents are dissatisfied with the national-level rules for the operation of ESI funds). MA representatives basically agree with the idea of the SME. They are aware of the benefits of unifying the rules (e.g. specification of documentation, clear method of obtaining information, obligatory introduction of some steps/processes – e.g. the obligation to assess projects etc.; and the staff paid from OP TA add that thanks to the single system everything is easier to assure), nevertheless they are not satisfied with the development so far and with the present state of the single methodical environment. **MA representatives consider the SME to be too ambitious** and would welcome if it were streamlined and simplified with respect to the differences in individual OPs. Among the main stated disadvantages of the SME is the fact that **it does not take into account the specifics of individual programmes**, as well as the robustness of the system (which increases the administrative demands for the MA and for applicants – specifically the great number of guideline documents and their great scope) and the limited flexibility of such an environment. MA representatives would therefore welcome the concentration of the NCA on the areas where they need assistance and that are crucial and difficult (where common management makes sense such as public support, public procurement, integrated tools, monitoring) and no interference in the competences of the MA – for example in the assessment of project applications. De facto **they would welcome the streamlining of the SME, simplification and transfer of competences to the MA** (given that the MA is responsible for OP management); in accordance with respect for the difference of individual OPs.

MA representatives are aware of the fact that they were part of the SME process, but they do not feel they are co-authors or equal partners in the creation of the SME (partly because of the lack of time for comment proceedings, short time for comments, not earmarking or due to the impossibility of the MA to earmark sufficient personnel capacity, etc.).

MA representatives point out the lack of clarity and mutual contradictions between guideline documents and frequent changes of guidelines complicating the implementation of the OP (in this

respect they would welcome the creation of a system of updating guideline documents and follow up in their work from them so there are no changes in the guideline documents e.g. in the course of calls); they ascribe the delay in the launch of programmes to the SME as everything needs to be approved by the NCA.

Monitoring System

The idea of unifying the information systems into a single monitoring system (and its benefit to the MA and the applicant) is regarded with mixed feelings – most respondents consider the unification of processes into a single system to be quite beneficial or very beneficial to applicants / beneficiaries. However, individual comments reveal strong arguments on the side of the advocates of a single system as well as on the side of its opponents. Among the advantages is the unification of information in one place in a comprehensive, clear and comparable manner, more accurate monitoring of financial drawdown and reducing the demands on the knowledge of more systems. However there are also negative aspects – respondents who are MA representatives and staff paid from OP TA point out the technical problems, system errors, user-unfriendliness, increased administrative burden for the MA, limited flexibility of the single system, etc.

Satisfaction with the system

The structured assessment of the **satisfaction of both groups of respondents of the questionnaire (applicants and internal system users) directly with the system is low and fell in almost all aspects** (from 64 to 49%). The fall in the value of the information system indicator is mostly caused by the fall in the satisfaction of the implementation structure employees (internal users; 77% of respondents voiced their dissatisfaction with the system).

The aspect of the system assessed most negatively by respondents who are implementation structure employees was the overall satisfaction with the monitoring system and "getting around in the system". They also negatively assessed the speed of the uploading and saving of data and information provided by technical support staff (above all the usefulness of the information provided). The largest fall in satisfaction compared to the previous survey was with the system's technical support.

The applicants among the respondents provided gave their most negative responses regarding their overall satisfaction with the system (52% of applicants stated that they were dissatisfied), **overall satisfaction with the system's working environment¹, "getting around in the system"**, completeness of information contained directly in the system and overall satisfaction with user support. These were also the areas where satisfaction declined the most. The only (slight) rise was recorded in the "impact of planned system outages on work" and "speed of displaying, uploading and saving data" variables. Here, internal users' assessment differed the most from external users': 72% of dissatisfied internal users as opposed to 34% of applicants. In interviews conducted with applicants/consultants **the monitoring system was almost always considered the biggest obstacle/hindrance to the actual submission of applications for support**. The system's user friendliness is assessed as being very low. Applicants mentioned specific shortcomings of the system which cause user discomfort (e.g. a small field for inputting information; missing boxes for inputting

¹ The "Overall Satisfaction" variables were stated in the questionnaire always at the end of the section of questions concerning the given topic and represented a summarised evaluation of the topic whose parts were addressed in questions earlier. In some cases the partial parts of the topics were assessed more positively than the summarised assessment of the whole.

required information; missing Help function in the system, or the incomprehensibility of the existing Help tool; long uploading and saving times of the application; impossibility of seeing all the fields for filling in information or respondents specifically stated an “absurd system of filling in information from below”, etc.)

Comparison with previously used systems

When making a comparison with previous systems it must be taken into account that a system is being compared which is new, having been established now, with systems developed during the entire past programming period of 2007–2013 and a slight decline in values could therefore be expected.

When comparing the MS2014+ working environment with the system from the 2007–2013 period, most applicants who responded reacted negatively (72% of respondents), i.e. indicating that the **MS2014+ working environment is worse than in the systems used in the 2007–2013 period**. There is criticism of user discomfort, lack of intuitiveness, illogical data input, slowness of the system, discrepancies between manuals and the monitoring system, etc. The follow-up research shows that work with the monitoring system is generally assessed more negatively by users who submitted an application in the E-Account and Benefit systems in the previous programming period. In contrast, those respondents who were applicants/representatives of advisory agencies who used the Benefit system consider the system comparable in terms of structure.

Internal users when comparing work in the system state that **at the time of data collection (Q3 2015) important functions do not work in the new system which worked in the older one** (automatic controls, sum totals, filter, evaluations, etc.) and some new functions do not work (e.g. the “dispatch messaging” system) and inversely, the system contains some unnecessary functions. The system is seen as slower, with more difficult administration (complicated cooperation with the applicant, not adapted to applicants, the application often “crashes”, requires too much “clicking”), opening attachments is impractical and contains too many levels. Orientation in the system is assessed very negatively by implementation structure employees, as is the degree of difficulty in creating reports and working with these reports (request for simplifying the generation of reports and unifying the format of reports, improving the intuitiveness of tools and removing unnecessary functions). According to internal users, at the time of data collection, connections with registries are missing or do not work (also half of the implementation structure employees do not know that the system is connected to registries). Users noticed only small positive shifts compared to the previous period (according to some internal users it is more clear and more flexible), however internal users generally had far greater expectations of the new – advanced – system than was the reality at the time of data collection..

In terms of the monitoring system, MA representatives more positively regard the improvement of the approach of the Monitoring System Administration Department (MSAD). By contrast, they regard as highly problematic the non-compliance between the wording (requirements) of guideline documents and reality in MS2014+, which makes work on the preparation of calls and communication with applicants more difficult. Another area of significant dissatisfaction by the MA is the system’s instability.

Submission of Applications for Support

According to the questionnaire, most applicants responding (57%) believe that the **administrative demands of submitting applications for support have increased compared to the previous period**. In some cases applicants assess the current resulting form of the single application for support as unnecessary, dysfunctional – e.g. for the OP TA (questions whether applicant is a large enterprise, etc.), for projects to rescue fish (gender questions) or feasibility studies for non-income-generating projects – in the public interest. **The electronic submission of applications for support is mostly regarded positively**, as beneficial for the overall simplification of the preparation. **But there are complaints about the electronic signature**. The key problem was setting up an electronic signature at Česká pošta (Czech Post Office) and when installing on a computer (in some cases respondents had to request help from IT support to install it). Given that respondents had bad experience of dealing with the electronic signature, they often complained of the fact that it works only in the Explorer browser; they mentioned further technical complications (e.g. the need to install the Silverlight application, problems with insertion/uploading the signature, small and easy to overlook icon), or stated that it was not completely clear what needed to be signed.

In terms of the process of submitting applications for support, respondents assessed the time provided for preparing the application (between issuing the call and the date for submitting the application) as sufficient. **Of course, objections appeared about issuing several calls in one day** (the case of the EIC OP), with which respondents associate the problems of the system (overload, error messages, failures, logout of users, deletion of already entered data, etc.). Applicants experienced further problems when the **system was not open when a call was issued** and they had to wait for the system to be opened up to users before being able to submit applications for support. Another mentioned problem was that draft calls appeared very different from the finally announced calls and that the **rules/manuals changed during the preparation of applications for support**, which complicated the process of preparing projects (e.g. a request for submitting an itemised budget while the manual was published long after the announcement of the call, problems caused by the update of assessment criteria, etc.). Generally applicants would have greatly **welcomed if they had had all the rules and information together at the start of the call and these would not have had to be changed further**. An extreme case of an unclear interpretation of a term is the condition of the call of the EIC OP “Technology I” that the applicant’s firm may not have a history older than 3 years. Applicants only retroactively found out after submitting the application for support (based on the interpretation of the Ministry of Industry and Trade) that the age of 3 years does not apply to the firm making the application, but to the business history of all executives/members of the firm so that many of the applicants were damaged and disqualified from the assessment.

MA representatives who responded in the survey were relatively sensitive to the increase in requirements directed at applicants when applicants must often do things which were not necessary earlier but which they must do now as part of unifying procedures (e.g. obligatory CBA for projects not generating income, description of the team in EIC OP projects, etc.). Uniform rules and applications for support for investment and non-investment projects and for various types of projects (e.g. technical assistance, big transport projects, soft projects in the social area, projects not generating income in the living environment) cannot be functional without increasing demands on these applicants. In this respect applicants and MA representatives who responded were in agreement.

Communication between Applicants and the MA/IB

When submitting applications for support and when addressing possible problems, **applicants most often refer to the intermediary body or the issuer of the call**. The interviews indicate that **applicants in most cases know who to refer to in case of problems**. Applicants are mostly satisfied with the intelligibility of general information relevant to a call, but they are dissatisfied with specific information provided by contact persons concerning conditions, interpretation of rules and above all work in the system from (communication is made more difficult for example because the issuer of the call cannot view applications under preparation). **60% of respondents are satisfied with user support**, which is probably affected by the respondents' perception that support staff were difficult (even impossible) to reach, or even the staff could not help and passed on any query so finding a solution took a long time. If applicants obtain the required information for addressing a problem related to IS KP14+ work, this **87% of them found it useful**. In the opinion of the MA representatives communication takes place in the same way as before, new rules were studied by them and the relevant staff was trained to use them. To make it easier to solve problems some MAs have created a question database (FAQ), others have just started working on them.

A further communication channel – and area of significant dissatisfaction – is the **dispatch messaging system which was criticised by applicants and MA representatives**. Applicants stated that at the time of data collection there was no way to select who the dispatch is to be sent to; sending dispatches is very unclear in the case of more projects (they are not displayed according to individual OPs and ministries, there is no notification); email or phone notifications of received dispatches do not work, etc. Another problem is the high frequency of unnecessary dispatches (dispatches are often sent intended for someone else), with which MA representatives also agree. They state that the dispatch system does not work according to their needs; it is unclear which dispatches are generated by the system and which staff must write themselves; it is easy to incorrectly set the recipient to whom a dispatch is to be sent (it can easily happen that a dispatch is delivered to all).

Call for Proposals (Preparation, Clarity of the Documents)

82% of implementation structure employees assessed the preparation of calls as quite to very demanding. MA representatives mentioned that at the start the system was a major problem for them (e.g. discrepancies between the test and live version of MS2014+ for example in functionality, numbering of calls, etc.; the form of calls did not contain all the data and modules which were required for announcing the call (e.g. assessment/Strategic Realisation Plan (SRP)/all to the monitoring committees); parameterisation of calls which MAs perceive as dysfunctional, etc., but they do agree that the situation is improving as time goes on. Another one of the negative aspects mentioned is the SRP – MAs regard it unequivocally very negatively and consider it an unclear, unnecessarily complicated document without a clear purpose. In contrast, MA representatives regard the schedule of calls as useful (although most of them had used it in some form earlier), even though they consider the current degree of requirements/detail to be unnecessary and demanding (problem for example with synergic calls).

Applicants who responded in the survey consider calls to be intelligible. Above all respondents who already have some experience of guideline documents for funds or other forms of subsidies can find their way through the text of the call. Likewise applicants assess as intelligible the call documents (almost 90%). They state that in most cases there is no problem with understanding the objective of the call. **However, problems appear in the clarity of further guidelines and in supplying supplementary documents** (e.g. information about required supplements differs across documents

and it was therefore unclear which list of supplements is final). Manuals for applicants are assessed as being transparent, but the preparation of applications for support is complicated by their frequent changes and by the inconsistencies of individual instructions. Sometimes there is even a change of conditions or their interpretation only after the closing of the submission window for applications, which applicants consider totally unacceptable.

1.1.3. Recommendations

The specific recommendations which arose from the results of the conducted surveys are presented in Chapter 6.2. Most often, recommendations apply to the monitoring system where they are directed above all at **improving the function of the system**, i.e. ensuring full functionality of the system for announcing calls, preventing system failures or deletion of entered data, speeding up the system, simplifying registration in the system or ensuring the functioning of the system in various browsers. Further recommendations are directed at **simplifying work in the system** (to minimise unnecessary and repetitive data input) and its **greater adjustment to the needs of users**, for example enlarging the field for the description of some assessed items. Recommendations also apply to **simplifying user orientation in the system**, i.e. so that the Help tool is added to the system and that all input fields are displayed to applicants, so obligatory fields are present and (not just) in this context that **information in guideline documents is unified with the reality in the system**. Among further recommendations applying to the monitoring system is the improvement of user support, improvement of communication between the players (MSAD, MA) or improvement of the quality of the Initial training for MS2014+ including increasing the expertise of instructors.

In the area of the set-up of the single methodical environment it is recommended to **stipulate clear rules and dates for updating the SME and modifications of guideline documents**, so that MA staff can follow on from this in their activities. A further recommendation is **to sufficiently apply a partnership approach** when communicating with MA representatives and to organise stocktake meetings with partners for clarifying mutual needs and ideas for the functioning of the SME. For example, in terms of processing the application for support the recommendation is to **reflect the specifics of individual operational programmes** (strengthen the autonomy of MAs in determining items that are obligatory and reflect said projects) and also clearly stipulate which parts of the application need to be signed electronically. In the case of guideline documents of the MRD-NCA it is recommended above all to pass on to authors of guideline documents the assessments and specific suggestions for incorporation into documents gathered as part of the surveys and in case of **MA guideline documents (calls, manuals) to ensure consistency of contents** between these documents. Further recommendations are directed towards improving communication (between MSAD, MA/project managers and applicants).

In the area of working conditions for the management of the PA/OPs recommendations apply above all to allowing a broader choice of better quality working tools, ensuring more flexible supplies of working tools and increasing the quality of IT equipment. In terms of personnel policy it is recommended to make the remuneration system clearer, above all in the area of individual pay conditions. There is also a need to improve internal communication (e.g. to inform employees better; ensure room for internal exchange of experience; communicate vision and strategy better across individual sections/departments). The recommendation for the training system is to expand or adjust the offer of courses in terms of the needs of staff and continually assess these needs.