

Evaluation of platform for preparation of calls

Executive summary

Purpose and subject of evaluation

The objective of this evaluation is to **survey the ways of implementation of platforms for preparation of ESI calls for proposals in the Czech Republic between 2014 and 2020. It assesses their actual operation and identifies strengths and weaknesses in how the partnership principle has been put into practice.**

For the purposes of this evaluation, a platform for preparing calls for proposals means any working or expert group where a call for proposal is discussed and planned. These platforms are established by managing authorities; they take on various forms and titles, e.g. planning committees, working teams, programme partnerships, working groups under a monitoring committee, etc. From the methodological point of view, platforms for preparing calls for proposals are a new element of implementation for the 2014-2020 period (they were not compulsory in the previous period); their essential contours are generally based on the principle of partnership in the implementation of ESI funds; in practical terms, the obligation to establish these platforms is set down in the methodological guidelines as a part of the Unified Methodological Environment.

This is the first evaluation of this tool for putting the partnership principle into practice. The aim of the evaluation is to provide information for the managing authorities (MAs) and the Ministry of Regional Development – National Coordination Authority (MRD-NCA) that will facilitate further development in the fulfilment of the partnership principle. The key evaluation question is: **To what extent has the partnership principle been put to practice through the platforms for preparing calls for proposals?**

The evaluation concentrates on finding optimal conditions for the implementation of the partnership principle through platforms for preparing calls for proposals, and on identifying potential barriers in the implementation of this principle. The aim is not to conduct a detailed analysis of functional and non-functional elements of each operational programme (OP), but to examine the various purposes of platforms for preparing calls for proposals and the various ways in which they have been approached.

This evaluation was initiated by the management of the MRD-NCA. However in terms of its scope, the evaluation follows the Evaluation Plan of the Partnership Agreement as a part of Evaluation of the Achievement of Objectives of the Concept of Unified Methodological Environment (UME). It evaluates call preparing platforms as one of the tools of the UME Concept. The evaluation was conducted by the MRD-NCA Evaluation Unit from June to December 2016.

Methodology

The evaluation was conducted using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. The following methods were used to gather data and materials:

- desk research of background documents (minutes of meetings, methodological documentation, EC documents, etc.);
- interviews and a focus group with representatives of MRD-NCA;
- in-depth and semi-structured interviews with representatives of MAs;
- focus groups with partners;

- a questionnaire survey among partners and MAs.

Main conclusions

Compared to the previous period, partner cooperation has improved, partially due to the platforms for preparation of calls for proposals.

Partners and MAs are inclined to think that the principle of partnership is being put into practice more successfully than in the previous period. Not only has cooperation between MAs and partners improved, but also the process of preparation of calls for proposals is more transparent than in the previous period.

It seems that managing authorities see an improvement in cooperation (compared to the previous period) in more positive light than partners. Improvement in cooperation is manifested in greater involvement of partners in the process of preparing calls for proposals and most noticeably in greater transparency of these negotiations. While 65% of MA respondents agree with this statement, among partners, only 45% of respondents agree. Partners with over 5 year experience in ESIF feel more positive. Also, a greater number of partners with long experience in ESIF agree that cooperation has improved because of the call preparing platforms.

The platforms contribute to better design of calls for proposals and enable open discussions. Partners can influence the final shape of the call.

Partners and MAs both believe that the platforms contribute to the calls being better designed. Partners also agree that the platforms allow open discussion, they can even influence the final shape of a call. Neither partners, nor MAs agree with the statement that platforms are only a formality.

In addition to platforms established within the obligation of creating a Unified Methodology Environment, MAs also use other platforms and bilateral negotiations.

MAs discuss the preparation of calls with partners using several channels. They use the platforms for preparation of calls as defined by UME. However, they also use other, usually less formal and smaller working groups and ad-hoc negotiation groups.

The evaluation shows that all MAs communicate with partners in some way – whether using the platforms established within UME or other platforms, work groups or bilateral negotiations.

Platforms differ according to their purpose. Larger platforms provide transparency and lower the risk of hidden influence on MAs. However, for the actual preparation of a call, small groups are more effective.

The needs and specifics of individual MAs vary. While for one OP, a key purpose of communication with partners might be gathering of information from the field, for another, it might be the need to ensure transparency of the consultation process within the preparation of calls. These varied needs may be fulfilled by various forms of platforms set up for different purposes.

Platforms can also be divided according to the number of their members to small and large platforms. Small platforms typically provide greater opportunity for discussion, the atmosphere is more congenial and usually they are less formal. This is why they are usually set up where MAs need to communicate with experts and gather information from the field. On the contrary, large platforms provide transparency of call preparation, as they allow a great number of partners to express their opinion on the call. Both types of platforms have their advantages and disadvantages. Due to a limited number of members, small platforms are seen as less transparent, yet the large ones often do not allow expert in-detail discussion.

Partners and MAs alike consider both the small platforms, which include only experts, and the larger ones, which include a great number of actors, important. At the same time, MAs and partners both find small platforms more beneficial.

Over half of the members of call preparing platforms are government officials. Partners and MAs both agree that the opinion of MAs should be decisive at platforms.

In focus groups, partners frequently described platforms with a majority of government officials as problematic. From the point of view of partners, majority representation of government officials allows the MA to approve anything they wish, whether the experts agree or not. Partners believe this is the case even when this majority of government officials includes those that are not involved in the implementation system. On the other hand, the questionnaire survey showed that partners are aware that the opinion of MAs should be decisive at platforms, as these authorities are responsible for the programme's implementation. One possible interpretation is that partners understand that MAs decide some matters on their own, yet they would like the platform's decisions to reflect the opinions and experiences of external partners.

Recommendations based on the evaluation

Recommendations for NCAs

- Allow MAs to retain the platforms “outside UME” as a tool for gathering information from the field, support MAs in these activities.
- Do not increase regulation of UME platforms, but recommend principles suitable for correct functioning of platforms.
- Retain the obligation of “UME-based platforms” in methodological guidelines. These platforms ensure that partners can provide comments at a relevant forum, and in doing so encourage a more transparent process of call preparation. Nevertheless, we recommend not to increase regulations for these platforms within UME in the future.
- For 2021+ period planning, we further recommend to consider whether this process (platforms for preparation of calls for proposals) could be, in some cases, replaced by another process, that would provide transparency and access of relevant partners to call proposals, and at the same time, limit administrative burden arising from the process to MAs and partners alike. Colleagues in Hungary can serve us as inspiration. Their consultation process on proposals for calls is done online. A draft call is published on a website of a MA, giving the public an opportunity to comment on the call. The system shows clearly who raised a comment and how it was dealt with. This would eliminate the need to establish platforms, as partners would be able to express their opinions on the call online. Nevertheless, it is necessary to evaluate this tool before it is launched or to find more information about whether and in what way it has been proven successful in another country.
- Consider the option of reimbursing (still in this programme period) partners' costs relating to the strengthening of the partnership principle.
- We recommend that planning for the 2021+ period start from the acknowledgement that that in the ESIF environment, there are already many cases of effective cooperation between MAs and partners, and that methodological guidelines be based on these principles. This process could be facilitated by ongoing identification and promotion of good practice among MAs and continuous gathering of feedback on the functioning of methodological tools associated with the principle of partnership, both from MAs and partners.

- Use evaluation as a tool of learning for these purposes. Subsequently, incorporate the relevant findings into guidelines.

Recommendations for MAs

- Continue gathering information from experts and in the field, using suitable communication tools (bilateral negotiations, informal platforms and other work groups), according to the specifications of the given OP.
- Consider the option of reimbursing (still in this programme period) partners' costs relating to the strengthening of the partnership principle.
- Use MA's human resources policy to minimize staff turnover; take into account the contribution of experienced staff to the partnership principle. For example, put experienced staff in roles where they are responsible for the preparation of calls and gathering information from the field. Put new employees in positions in which they can get well acquainted with functioning of the given MA or the ESIF implementation system, etc.
- Consider whether the introduction of more timely consultations for draft calls and their key propositions might be beneficial for the cooperation between MAs and partners. At this stage, it would not be necessary for all categories of partners to be present; only the group of selected best experts is needed.
- Consider adjusting the ratio of state officials to external partners so that government officials are not in a majority (at least where possible). Consider whether to use other communication channels and groups than the platforms for preparing calls when consulting policy officials who are subject-matter experts. Involve subject-matter experts as guests or associates who can help MAs with argumentation, but have no vote.
- Establish platforms in such a way that will make it clear to partners what is being decided and when. Avoid creating a complicated tiered system that might be confusing for partners. In any case, explain well to partners how the system works, what matters are being decided and where, why is the given system used. Further, if possible, recommend partners to nominate one representative for all levels of platforms within the given MA.
- Organise platform meetings on time, so that pressure is not put on partners to approve the call. Allow sufficient time for discussions. In addition, present calls at platforms in a phase when they can still be adjusted. Leave the approval by higher authorities (e.g. the monitoring committee, deputy minister, minister) for later, after the approval/recommendations from the platform.
- Within the consultation process, explain clearly why a comment was rejected, and ideally, support the explanation supported with relevant studies and facts. When a matter has been discussed, for example with EC, and it really is not practicable, explain the matter to partners clearly and in detail.
- Further, we recommend MAs to provide sufficient time for comments, so that those partners who have to distribute comments within their organizations have enough time to discuss the materials.