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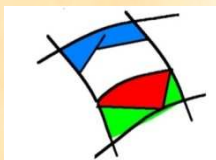
AN EVALUATION STUDY CO-FINANCED BY THE EUROPEAN UNION RESOURCES WITHIN THE
FRAMEWORK OF THE EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND

An analysis of the ability of subjects acting in rural areas to absorb EU funds within the range of local bottom-up initiatives within the framework of HROP

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Executive Summary

The main goal of the present study was to determine the ability of the subjects acting at rural areas to absorb the ESF (European Social Fund) resources from Measures 6.3, 7.3 and 9.5 HROP (Human Resources Operational Program) regarding bottom-up local initiatives in the Kujawy-Pomerania Province.

Major Conclusions:

- 1) It has shown that in the Kujawy-Pomerania province, there exist areas in which there are active and effective institutions (the districts of Chełmno and Golub-Dobrzyn) as well as, at the opposite pole, districts of low activity and effectiveness with regard to the number of the Beneficiaries that take advantage of the resources from Measures 6.3, 7.3 and 9.5 HROP (the districts of Aleksandrów, Brodnica, Rypin, Sępólno, Tuchola, Włocławek, Żnin).
- 2) Within the Kujawy-Pomerania Province, it is the Local Activity Groups that are one of the strongest Beneficiaries. Being involved as actors in local initiatives, they have been given priority. Strong Beneficiaries are also economic subjects which constitute a relatively small Beneficiaries' group, but are characterized by a high 'success rate' in the number of applications for resources.
- 3) Beneficiaries actively search for information pertaining to HROP 2007-2013, the basic source of knowledge being the Internet. However, the Beneficiaries remain passive when facing the situations in which they identify gaps and lack of cohesion in the competition documents. This can have its source in insufficient expertise in dealing with the competition documentation and too literal treatment of the competition guidelines.
- 4) The Beneficiaries are not acquainted with the term *empowerment*, and they are not able to define it, although it is one of the significant elements of the approach to generating projects regarding bottom-up local initiatives. Yet the Beneficiaries have been searching intuitively for methods of activation of local communities, diagnosing their needs and consulting with them the scope of their projects.
- 5) In the process of submitting project proposals by the Beneficiaries, the 'success rate' (i.e. the relative number of applications submitted to those evaluated approvingly) has been due not only to the activity of the Beneficiaries themselves and their willingness to submit project proposals, but also to the procedures used for evaluation of project proposals submitted for individual competitions by individual Intermediary Body (IB) and Intermediary Body 2 (IB2), with varied approaches to the projects being evaluated.

For details cf.
pp. 9-14 of
the Final
Report

For details cf.
pp. 16-34 of
the final
Report

One should also note a successive increase, from competition to competition, of the number of the beneficiaries who submit project proposals and those whose proposals have been evaluated approvingly. This which should be evaluated very favourably.

- 6) The study has shown that every tenth Beneficiary will be resistant to encouragement to apply effectively for HROP resources. It can be assumed that the range of their interest does not comprise initiatives of this type and promotional activities directed towards them will remain ineffective, despite the resources engaged.
- 7) The study has also shown that the *empowerment* rule at the studied area is scarcely implemented. The lack of interest of the local society is not a hindrance for active applicants. Yet the conviction that the members of the community are unwilling to engage in bottom-up initiatives can be the reason why some potential Beneficiaries have not decided to submit a proposal within the framework of the competitions for Measures 6.3, 7.3 and 9.5.
- 8) According to the Beneficiaries, it is high complexity of the competition procedures, as well as excessive competition documentation that are obstacles in the application process. The main source of errors in project proposals is the applicants' insufficient knowledge of the procedure, which follows partly from the fact that this documentation is very often altered and it consists of a large number of elements that do not constitute a coherent whole.
- 9) The Beneficiaries take decisions concerning resource applications submitted to individual competitions for specific activities on the basis of information about available allocation of resources and about the system of formal evaluation of the applications. The larger the allocation, and the less restrictive method of project evaluation, the more popular a given competition.
- 10) The study has shown that the internal features of the organisation, its structure and organization culture exert significant influence upon the effectiveness of applying for resources within the bottom-up initiatives. The size and experience of the organization, its ability to perform long-term planning, employees' competences and their number, their orientation on the cooperation with the environment are the key factors influencing the activeness of organizations and the effectiveness of their activities.
- 11) The absorption capability of subjects depends not only on themselves, but also on the conditions in which they are to act. This ability depends on the subject's experience (including cooperation with local environments and the knowledge of their needs), stability of human resources, existence of persons or units responsible for the acquisition of financial resources needed for their activities, the structure and organizational and legal status of the institution, the possession of alternative sources of

financing and an active efficient Leader (in Partnerships). The environment conditions that exert influence upon the absorption capability of the subject concern first of all the HROP records, competition rules, criteria of evaluation, and the competence of the assessors evaluating project proposals, as well as the schedule of adjudicating the competitions. The effectiveness of the subjects that are institutionally weaker can be improved by better management, good knowledge of local needs and engaging people who make it up, as well as by creating appropriate external conditions. It could rely on simplification and limpid formulation of regulations, fast professional evaluation of project proposals (“understanding” rather than being directed formalistically), allocation of parts of resources in the competition for financing the projects that have passed positively through the appeal process.

12) Proficient use of the project language requires extensive experience. An inexperienced applicant would face serious barriers such as frequent changes of guidelines, problems with fitting local needs to the competition conditions, difficulties with maintaining the logic of the intervention, with compiling the budget, filling in the descriptive part of the application or with collecting appropriate documentation. These problems are beyond the applicant’s control and are topped by his/her fear of committing an error, which often leads to the eventual rejection of the proposal. When preparing their offer, institutions which aim at supporting the applicants should remember also about such future Beneficiaries who, standing at the beginning of their road to gaining resources, lack not only necessary knowledge, but also have to overcome their fears.

13) In the bottom-up initiatives, local Leaders play an exceptionally significant role, especially for identification of the needs of the local environments, as well as for the subsequent realization of the project. The study has shown that those applicants who have direct contact with the Leaders are able to better identify the needs of the final Beneficiaries, and thus apply for resources more effectively. The role of local Leaders is the more important, the more difficult it is to reach the final Beneficiaries. Leaders, then, are not only sources of information about such Beneficiaries, but they also help to find Beneficiaries, and encourage them to participate in the projects.

14) Building partnership is a process that requires confidence, awareness of common goals and priorities, good information flow between Partners, and an active Leader, accepted by the Partners. Independently of the manner of shaping the Partnership (bottom-up or top-down), Partnership contributes to activation of local environments by strengthening common potential of organizations that make up the Partnership, acquisition of external knowledge, and sharing mutual experience.

For details cf.
pp. 51-70 of
the Final
Report

15) Large organizations that have gathered experience in applying for resources and in project realization do not need support, as their personnel is perfectly acquainted with HROP and the competition conditions. From the point of view of organizations supporting future Beneficiaries, it is best to support those organizations whose unimpressive experience does not allow to apply effectively for financial support and to realize projects. There is hope that these organizations, having acquired appropriate assistance, will quickly reach a state at which they will be able to apply effectively for competitions. However, one should not forget about the smallest and the least experienced organizations that often have good ideas but are lost in the face of problems they find too difficult to cope with. Actions directed towards them are, on the one hand, very simple, and, on the other hand, requiring substantial engagement of efforts and resources. Yet it is justified to undertake such efforts in order to prevent petrification of the existing composition of Beneficiaries.

16) In the Beneficiaries' potential and, as a consequence, in their absorption capabilities, there exist not only differences within individual groups of organizations, but also significant spatial differences. The strongest organizations can be found in the central parts of the province, while those weaker and less active in submitting applications (and less effective regarding the submission of good projects) are located at the Province's peripheries, especially in its south-eastern part. In the cases of developing Partnerships, we have to do with completely different phenomena. A number of institutions often treat entering project coalitions in an opportunistic way, looking for a financially and organizationally stronger Partner, and counting on additional strategic points for a Partnership application to a competition. On the other hand, a substantial number of projects is built in authentic Partnerships, respecting all possible positive rules.

17) There exist two methods of building Partnership: bottom-up, when the initiative of developing a project and Partnership originates at the side of the local institutions, and top-down, in which the leading role is played by an institution outside the local community (most often one of considerable organizational and institutional potential and experience). Partnerships have, first of all, a project character, one that is geared towards the completion of projects. A significant weakness of the system is to be found in the absence of considering partnerships in long-term, strategic terms.

18) The examined Beneficiaries frequently mentioned the areas in which what they needed most was support of institutions engaged in the implementation of HROP in the region. The difficulties confronted at the stage of project preparation that were most often indicated by the examined applicants were: short application deadlines, adjusting the Beneficiaries' needs to the projects' requirements, that is, translating the local needs

to the language of the project, and specifying the goals and outcomes of the project. Difficulties mentioned most often comprised problems with the application generator, ambiguous competition records, and difficulties with obtaining the required statistical data.

19) The most significant organizational and formal problems that are independent of the Beneficiaries, comprise delays in the evaluation of project proposals and in project evaluation, caused by insufficient human resources in IB and IB2, a very long waiting time for competition adjudication, excessive documentation.

For details cf.
pp. 73-83 of
the Final
Report

Recommendations following from the research

IB and IB2 activities should include further strengthening and taking advantage of the Beneficiaries' strong sides, as well as a reduction of threats that follow from the weak points of the implementation of HROP in the region. These institutions should successively assume an *aggressive* strategy, that is, take advantage of the chances that are appearing in the beneficiaries' environment. These actions should include:

- The creation of a 'good project ideas database' – not necessarily identical with the 'good practices' database concerning the projects being implemented;
- Spreading a promotional campaign which would promote the role of villages and self-organizing groups in rural areas (e.g. circles of rural housewives) in reaching the target groups by the Beneficiaries.
- Publishing a textbook on efficient project management.
- Organization of a common forum (a working group), IB and IBP2, RCESF and the Beneficiaries (who will have an open access) in order to identify the ways which would facilitate the development of experienced Partner institutions in the areas that are not active as far as submitting applications in the province's capital is concerned.
- Reformulating the descriptions in the project documentation so that it would be presented in limpid and transparent language, illustrated by examples that refer to the formulation of the particular goals, the project's products, the manner of calculating the indirect costs, creating a schedule, etc.
- Reformulating descriptions in brochures and the leaflets and concerning Activities 6.3, 7.3 and 9.5, so that the descriptions they contain would not be a calque of records in Detailed Description of Priorities (DDoP) HROP.
- Standardizing the ways in which project proposals are evaluated by all IB and IB2, with an indication of the need to its liberalization, with regard to the good practices employed by the IB at the Province Marshal's office.
- Standardizing procedures (especially those related to the temporal plane) of signing financial support agreements and introducing, within all institutions, the rule of one "project tutor", with regard to the good practices and solutions employed by IB2 at the Provincial Employment Office.
- Rephrasing the strategic criteria (an issue discussed in more detail in Recommendation No. 9, p. 93 of the Final Report).
- Harmonizing promotional goals with the competition schedules (in more detail discussed in Recommendation No. 7, p. 92 of the Final Report).

- Improvement of communication between RCESF and IB (discussed in more detail in Recommendation 7, p. 982 of the Final Report).
- Undertaking activities which aim at re-establishment of RCESF in Włocławek, or an own institution which would perform functions analogical to RCESF with regard to the Beneficiaries in south-eastern part of the Kujawy-Pomerania region.

For details cf.
pp. 87-94 of
the Final
Report