Evaluation of the Implementation of the Partnership Principle

10 JULY 2017

EVALUATION REPORT SUMMARY
1. SCOPE AND AIM OF EVALUATION

**Aim of the evaluation**—To determine the relevance, efficiency, and benefit of implementing the partnership principle in the use of European Union (EU) structural funds in 2014–2020. Three **objectives** were achieved to reach this aim:

- **Objective 1.** To evaluate the partnership provisions in the national legislation for the 2014–2020 EU structural funds implementation and other documents (strategies, guidelines) along with the factors influencing partnership.
- **Objective 2.** To evaluate the implementation of the partnership principle in the planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the Operational Programme (OP).
- **Objective 3.** To evaluate partners’ capacities and measures to enhance it.

Each objective was captured by particular questions in the evaluation, which were sought to be answered by the evaluators to achieve the objectives. The evaluation was carried out following the criteria of **relevance, sufficiency, and efficiency.**

**Subject of the evaluation**—The Managing Authority’s, intermediate institutions’, and other public institutions’ cooperation with and inclusion of partners in the use of EU funds in the 2014–2020 period.

The Managing Authority’s and intermediate institutions’ cooperation with economic and social partners, non-governmental organisations and other institutions representing civil society during the planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation stages of the 2014–2020 OP (**horizontal partnership**) was the most extensively analysed subject of the research. Partner participation in the implementation of projects financed by EU funds was also evaluated. Particular attention was paid to the implementation of multi-level governance in the 2014–2020 period by analysing national-level public sector institutions’ cooperation with regional or local government institutions (**vertical partnership**).

2. THEORETICAL BASIS OF EVALUATION

**Partnership**—Inclusion of competent regional, local, municipal, and other public institutions; economic and social partners; and institutions representing civil society, including environmental protection partners, non-governmental organisations and institutions responsible for promoting gender equality and non-discrimination, in the management process of EU funds: OP planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.

To ensure high-quality implementation of the partnership principle, it is important to ensure compliance with the principles of **openness, inclusion, transparency, efficiency, and mutual responsibility.** The actual implementation of these principles depends on various factors, which can be divided into the following groups ¹:

a) **proper partner selection**, b) **effective partner inclusion**, and c) **feedback and evaluation**.

Properly selecting and including partners, asserting their influence on final decision making, and providing feedback to partners are essential for the successful implementation of the partnership principle.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that this partnership-implementation process and the actors participating in it do not operate in a vacuum. According to the results of the various research on partnership implementation,

developing the partnership process also depends on public institutions’ motives, partners’ motivations and capacities, and compatibility between partners’ capacities and public institutions’ actual needs.

Figure 1. Constituent parts of the theoretical model for evaluating partnership in the management of EU funds

Source: compiled by BGI Consulting based on the analysis of the scientific literature

Characteristics and combinations of characteristics of the aforementioned partnership-process stages tend to reveal certain styles of partnerships that different public institutions apply. According to various research on cooperation between public institutions and partners, in most cases, particular cooperation practices can be classified based on their specific attributes. Evaluation was based on the classification provided by J. E. Innes and D. E. Booher, which distinguishes four styles of partner inclusion in decision making: a) technical bureaucratic, b) political influence, c) social movement, and d) collaboration. Academic research and proposed classifications by S. R. Arnstein, A. Fung, C. Oliver, and other authors were also employed to explain the peculiarities of each partnership style and to determine the attributes specific to the particular partnership stages.

PAV. 2. MODELS OF COOPERATION BETWEEN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS AND PARTNERS ALONG WITH SOME CHARACTERISTICS REFLECTING THE TYPICAL PARTNERSHIP PROCESS

Source: compiled by BGI Consulting based on the analysis of the scientific literature

3. EVALUATION METHODS

A wide range of qualitative and quantitative methods were applied in the evaluation, and both primary and secondary sources were analysed. Analysis of primary sources included review of relevant documents and data from the EU Structural Assistance Computer-Based Information Management and Monitoring System (CBIMMS), publicly available tables of responses to partners’ remarks on descriptions of project financing conditions, protocols of the EU Structural Assistance 2014–2020 Commission’s meetings and Monitoring Committee’s 2014–2020 meetings, analysis of the scope of partners’ participation in the project implementation and additional potential of their more active inclusion. Analysis of secondary sources included review of previous evaluations of the partnership principle implementation in Lithuania and abroad as well as other relevant research and publications.
Another important method that provided a lot of primary material for the evaluation was internet-based questionnaire-type surveys of partnership stakeholders. Through six simultaneous surveys, representatives of public sector institutions responsible for the partnership-process in OP planning, implementation and evaluation stages, members of the Monitoring Committee representing public sector institutions, representatives of Regional Development Councils’ secretariats, and representatives of partner organisations were surveyed. In total, 189 respondents completed the internet-based questionnaires.

To deepen the understanding of the data collected from the surveys and to interpret it better, 21 semi-structured interviews with 19 respondents were carried out. Interviews with both representatives of public sector institutions responsible for managing EU funds (especially for partnership-coordination in the Monitoring Committee and OP planning) and representatives of various partner organisations were carried out.

The evaluation also analysed other EU member states’ experience. Seven case studies were carried out, and nine examples of best practices in Lithuania were examined in more detail.

To deepen the understanding of the data collected using other methods, verify the conclusions of the evaluation, and ensure that the wide range of stakeholders are included in the evaluation process, three focus group discussions with socio-economic partners, public institutions and civil society organisations were organised. In total, 23 representatives of partner organisations and public sector institutions participated in the focus group discussions.

4. MAIN RESULTS OF EVALUATION

The evaluation revealed that the partnership in the management of 2014–2020 EU funds assistance is in a transitional stage between the technical-bureaucratic and collaborative partnership styles.

One finding pointing to the partnership process’s transition from formal technical-bureaucratic necessity toward the collaborative style is additional partner consultation by all the line ministries on the administered priorities and measures for at least some cases. This finding shows that public sector institutions are not limiting their partnership practices to the mandatory requirements established in national- and EU-level legislation.

Economic and social partners, organisations representing civil society (horizontal partnership), as well as regional and local government institutions (vertical partnership) are extensively involved in the management processes of the 2014–2020 OP. Partners are involved in all stages of the 2014–2020 OP implementation.

Partners participate in the management and implementation of the 2014–2020 OP both by providing remarks in a written form and by participating in meetings with representatives of public sector institutions. Written consultation procedures dominate in the OP measure planning stage, whereas meetings are more common in the OP planning stage. Live partner participation is also mandatory for Monitoring Committee activities. Up to this date, the least partner communication has taken place in the OP evaluation stage. This, however, is mostly due to the relatively early phase of the 2014–2020 OP implementation: most ministries have not yet commissioned any evaluations, so there are no evaluation processes in which partners could be involved.

Public sector partners—Regional Development Councils and municipalities—are also involved in OP measure planning activities. However, closer cooperation with these partners is limited to the preparation of regional planning measures and integrated territorial development programmes.

Closer cooperation with partners is constantly and actively promoted by the Managing Authority. Line ministries are also motivated to involve partners more extensively by the possibility of receiving additional knowledge and insights related to attaining planned objectives as well as by the desire to ensure the smooth
implementation of the measures beforehand. The aforementioned motives of public sector institutions indicate that by involving partners, they are eager to ensure the effectiveness and stability of OP implementation, which in turn affects their behaviour when implementing partnership processes.

Increased attention to the partnership and its promotion is also demonstrated by changes in the partnership regulations, new methodological documents, as well as public sector institutions’ relatively good understanding of the partnership’s added value. All of it lays the foundations for the implementation of the collaborative partnership. Practical implementation of the partnership process, however, still lacks certain qualities to be able to conclude that the processes for using EU funds is based on equal cooperation with partner organisations.

The main characteristics of the collaborative partnership are deliberate and transparent partner selection, active partner involvement in discussions on relevant issues, the provision of feedback to partners, and significant partner influence on the decisions made by the public sector institutions. These characteristics are inherent to certain processes of particular ministries. However, a systematic and consistent approach to partner involvement is still lacking, which limits the possibility of closer cooperation and hinders the implementation of the partnership principles established in the Partnership Guidelines all of which shows that the partnership practices seem to remain in the technical-bureaucratic style.

When partnership processes are initiated, both a clear understanding of who can be considered an eligible partner as well as appropriate partner-selection procedures are lacking. Lack of the deliberate and transparent partner-selection procedures results in frequent involvement of subjects who do not comply with the partner definition but are able to exercise their rights, hinders the implementation of the principle of openness, and impedes balanced stakeholder representation. Usually the ministries initiating the partnership process provide only the initial potential partner list, meaning that they identify partners familiar from previous partnership activities, contact umbrella organisations for partner recommendations for certain public policy areas, search for potential partners via publicly available sources, and involve partner organisations that contact the ministries on their own. However, the ministries do not perform additional verification of whether all the involved organisations comply with the partner definition or whether all relevant public policy areas and all relevant society groups are covered, and they do not ensure they select the most suitable partners for certain partnership activities. This type of partner selection allows for a broad range of partner organisations to participate in the partnership process. Failing to carry out secondary selection procedures (i.e., verification) for the involved organisations, however, sometimes results in the equal involvement of organisations that cannot be considered partners, leading to unbalanced representation of various stakeholder groups. The OP measure planning stage is especially dominated by partners with explicit interest in the implementation of certain measures while common public interest is only weakly represented. In order to involve only eligible partner organisations in the partnership processes, in all instances, deliberate and transparent partner selection must be carried out, ensuring that only organisations that are the most representative, are acting on behalf of a certain society group or the common public but not personal interests, are operating in a relevant public policy sector, and are nationally or regionally acknowledged are involved as partners.

Even though implementation of the principle of inclusion has been formally enacted (partners are involved in all stages of OP implementation), its practical realisation is limited by belated and sporadic partner involvement. Partners are often involved only in the late stages of the public policy process, not during investment planning or the early development of measures but only during discussions on particular intervention implementation details (e.g., during discussions on project-selection criteria (PSC) or on descriptions of project financing conditions (DPFC)). In some instances, partners are involved in the early stages of the public policy process (e.g., planning of sectoral strategic documents); however, consistent involvement of the same group of partners throughout the whole process is not ensured. Belated and sporadic partner involvement often results in partner organisations performing the role of “spectators” or “spectators with the possibility of expressing an opinion,” allowing them to merely receive and comment on information given by the ministries rather than allowing them to participate in partnership activities as equal members of consultations or discussions. This type

The situation burdens the partnership process: partners who did not participate in the early stages of investment planning often have difficulties quickly understanding the peculiarities of the questions being discussed, and some partner organisations who do not have enough experience participating in the partnership processes also have difficulties understanding the logic behind EU funds management in the short period of time set aside for the consultations. As a result, these partners’ remarks are less valuable to the public sector institutions, and the partnership is not used to its full potential. Moreover, partner organisations involved in later investment-planning stages usually have remarks not only regarding the topics being discussed but also regarding the decisions made earlier that cannot be amended at the given point of time, which reduces partners’ influence and leads to conflicts between the ministries and partner organisations. To improve the implementation of the principle of partner involvement, partner organisations should become involved during the earliest stages of the investment planning processes—namely, when drafting sectoral strategic documents or developing OP priorities and measures. It is also important to consistently involve a group of specific sector-relevant partners in all stages of the EU funds assistance management and all stages of the intervention planning from early development of investment priorities and measures to PSC and DPFC drafting and project selection.

Sporadic involvement of arbitrary partner organisations also hinders the implementation of the principle of effectiveness. To ensure the effectiveness of the partnership processes in the use of EU funds, partner involvement should be timely, and partners should be involved within their limits of competence and only in discussions on the main aspects of intervention planning.

The basic principle of transparency is ensured; partners are relatively well informed about the actions of the ministries, and information on new published documents is provided publicly. The information provided to partners during the OP measure planning, however, is often limited. For example, partners are provided with information on one measure only but do not have access to information on the overall intervention logic of a particular ministry’s administered measures or on the wider context of the aims of interventions and planned activities. The implementation of the principle of transparency also requires that the transparency of cooperation with certain partners is ensured, which is currently not the case as information on which partners are involved in partnership activities or provide written remarks is publicly declared only when partners are involved in formal working groups or provide written remarks on PSC and DPFC projects. Thus, to fully implement the principle of transparency the list of partners involved in partnership activities during the planning of a particular measure should be publicised by, for example, publishing it online (on the website esinvesticijos.lt) next to the description of each measure.

Limited impact of partner organisations on the decisions made by public sector institutions impedes the realization of the mutual responsibility principle. Partners’ potential influence on the content of the documents being discussed is limited due to the aforementioned sporadic involvement of partners. The impact of partners is also reduced by the fact that when partners are involved in meetings with representatives of public sector institutions adequate feedback is rarely ensured (unlike the practices adopted during written consultations). During meetings with partners, the majority of ministries do not record partner remarks or suggestions in writing and do not give public feedback on which remarks and suggestions were accepted and incorporated in the text of discussed documents. On the one hand, this practice prevents public sector institutions from fully accounting for partner suggestions and comments because the lack of written documentation hinders them from reconsidering such remarks after the meeting. On the other hand, lack of adequate feedback reduces partners’ motivation to participate in the partnership process as after providing comments and suggestions, they can see that some of them were not incorporated into the discussed document, but they are not aware of the reasons behind this rejection. Furthermore, lack of adequate feedback also reduces the transparency of the partnership process as neither partner organisations participating in the partnership process nor other stakeholders can trace which comments and suggestions from which partner organisations were included and how the final decision or the final version of the document was made. To improve the implementation of the mutual responsibility principal, adequate partner feedback should be given not only during written consultations but also during meetings with partners. During the meetings with partners, partner feedback
can be ensured by preparing and publicising tables of responses to all partner remarks or full meeting protocols, preparing and publicising a summary of the main decisions made during the meeting along with a list of participants, or by sending an amended version of the document to all partners who participated in the meeting before making it public.

The implementation of the mutual responsibility principle is also hindered by partner organisations’ lack of resources and capacity to participate in EU funds management activities and their relative inactivity. These limitations are first of all caused by the general government management culture in which the voice of partner organisations is generally weak. The vast majority of partner organisations’ (especially non-government organizations’ (NGOs)) resources are invested in their primary activities (e.g., provision of services to certain society groups). When participating in public policy planning and implementation processes, they tend to concentrate their resources on representing the interests of members of their organisation and thus participate more actively in the planning and implementation of OP measures in which partners or their represented organisations could potentially be project promoters. Lack of financial, time, and human resources significantly limits partners’ ability to represent the interests of broader society. Even though this lack of partner resource is a systemic national-level problem that requires long-term solutions, certain solutions can also be found in the EU funds management system. To strengthen partner organisations involved in the EU funds management, measure or measures in which partners could participate in the project contest and receive funding for strengthening their administrative capacities should be launched. It would also be beneficial to involve partners in conferences and various events organised for public sector employees focusing on new trends and new amendments as well as EU and national regulations in particular public policy areas. Joint participation of partners and public sector employees in gaining new knowledge would help to form a common understanding of and viewpoint on certain issues.

The need to promote the participation of non-governmental sector organisations in public affairs by giving them more responsibilities is established in Lithuanian Progress Strategy 2030 and other national strategic documents. Despite these objectives, however, the contribution of the planned OP measures to strengthening the non-governmental sector up to date is relatively low. Even though national legislation emphasizes the need to transition from institutional to community-based public services as well as other objectives related to the more active involvement of non-governmental organisations in public service delivery, the tendency to retain the status quo is dominant, meaning that thus far, most of the planned measures are aimed at maintaining the activities of government-financed public institutions. To promote participation of partner organisations in the implementation of measures funded by EU funds, it would be beneficial in the DPFC of measures aiming to promote the transition from institutional to community-based services but where eligible applicants are public sector institutions to establish a requirement mandating the involvement of partner organisations. Partner organisations to be involved in the implementation of projects should be selected before submitting the project application carrying out transparent, public, objective criteria based selection. It is also important to consider the potential of partner organisations to implement projects when planning each of the measures. Having identified measures that could be successfully implemented by NGOs those organisations must be specified as eligible applicants in the DPFC.

Despite the issues discussed above, certain ministries’ particular practices indicate the growing attention paid to partnership processes, and these practices could be adopted by other public sector institutions as well. The Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania, for example, employs transparent and deliberate partner-selection procedures (covering not only primary but also secondary partner selection [verification]) based on internally approved selection criteria. The Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania involves partners in partnership activities from the earliest stages of public policy intervention planning—namely, upon drafting sectoral strategic documents—and ensures consistent partner participation during all stages of OP measure development. The Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Lithuania provides additional

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information to partners regarding its activities and, in this way, promotes more active partner participation. The Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Lithuania demonstrates that partners are able to implement projects in various spheres and that consistent analysis of partners’ ability to participate in project implementation enables public sector institutions to determine when project implementation can be passed on to partner organisations. Active dissemination of these best practices and gradual establishment of these practices as norms for all public sector institutions organising partnership activities would improve the implementation of the partnership principle in the use of EU funds, and existing conditions for the full transition to the collaborative partnership style would be strengthened.