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EVALUATION OF THE QUALITY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF TRAININGS FINANCED BY THE EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Considering that the main issue addressed by the European Social Fund (ESF) is the shortage of human capital or its unequal distribution in a society, the largest share of ESF financial support within the 2014-2020 Operational Programme (OP) is allocated to the financing of training activities. However, the main challenge lies in ensuring the quality and effectiveness of training activities financed by the ESF in order to bring the largest possible benefits to society and contribute towards attaining OP objectives. **The goal** of this evaluation is to improve the implementation of OP measures which include training, by assessing the relevance, quality, effectiveness and potential impact of training activities financed by the ESF.

Aiming to address the **depth and scope challenges of evaluation**, the evaluation focuses on the following priority axes (further – priorities) and target groups/ areas:

- #7: Promoting quality employment and participation in the labour market (the unemployed and people at risk of unemployment).
- #8: Promoting social inclusion and combating poverty (social skills, social responsibility and social dialogue training of societal, business and NGO representatives).
- #9: Educating society and strengthening the potential of human resources (education system staff).
- #10: Society-oriented smart public administration and #11: Technical assistance for the administration of the Operational Programme (public servants).

The evaluation mainly focuses on non-formal training (i.e. the development of general and personal skills, non-formal vocational training) since this type of training activities receive the largest share of ESF investments and its relevance, effectiveness, quality and impact raise many questions. The evaluation also covers formal continuing vocational education and training and short-term (usually up to 40 hours) trainings. Less attention is given to university studies, initial vocational education and training, informal and accidental learning activities.

Training activities were evaluated based on: (1) expert assessment of the need for training and the sufficiency of activities that are an alternative to trainings, (2) assessment of the effectiveness of public investments in training, (3) Kirkpatrick's theoretical training evaluation model that allows for the assessment of training activities at the reaction, learning, behaviour and results levels, (4) conditions determining training success. Conventional and new methods of data collection (incl. interviews, surveys, focus groups, data mining, statistical data collection) and data analysis (incl. case studies, real-life monitoring of projects, cost-effectiveness analysis, statistical analysis) were used in the evaluation.

The evaluation has aimed to answer the following seven key questions with regard to the quality and effectiveness of trainings financed by the ESF:

- 1. Is the training foreseen in OP measures a relevant activity to achieve the defined specific objectives and aims?** The relevance of trainings provided in the 9th, 10th and 11th OP priorities is relatively high, whereas that of the 7th and 8th priorities is low. Problems addressed by the 7th and 8th priorities are usually complex and cannot be solved merely through training; to solve them, training needs to be combined with alternative activities (e.g., promoting entrepreneurship, work-based learning) that receive insufficient attention at the moment. In most cases, training activities promote investment additionality, however in almost all of the examined cases, there is the risk of deadweight loss – 36% - 52% of survey respondents (depending on the target group) indicated that they would have paid for the training even without ESF funds.
- 2. Are training activities implemented according to the needs of target groups?** Training activities organised within the 8th, 9th, 10th and 11th priority projects face small challenges, whereas in the case of the 7th priority, challenges are bigger and include, for example, a

significant shortage of counselling and vocational guidance services, frequently ill-chosen training type and lack of general or basic skills training. The main challenge that was identified in the case of all of the target groups was that representatives of the target groups do not always demonstrate a need for improving their competences. Mandatory learning is not necessarily bad (e.g., teachers must constantly improve their pedagogical knowledge). However, usually, before the start of training activities very little is done to identify the participants' needs and promote the benefits of training to them.

- 3. Are training activities of high quality?** Due to the abstract nature of the term "quality" and the tendency to interpret it broadly, evaluation of the training quality, compared to other questions, is slightly more based on the opinions of evaluators as well as those of the participants and project coordinators. At first glance, it seems that the absolute majority of training participants are satisfied with the quality of the trainings. However, after evaluating the concept in depth, a number of cracks emerge: very little attention is given to adjusting the training content and methods to the needs of the participants; training quality is usually not maximised due to a poor learning culture (training is often understood as a one-off leisure activity paying very little attention to the importance of the acquired knowledge and skills) and insufficient use of innovative teaching methods. Training financed under the 7th and 8th priorities face more serious challenges (in addition to the already mentioned issues, other issues include insufficient quality programmes, unqualified lecturers and training providers).
- 4. Is the implementation of training activities effective?** The effectiveness of training implementation is relatively low in the case of all priorities and thus it remains one of the greatest challenges concerning training activities. Funds allocated for training are not used effectively and the main challenge in this area is that some activities are not performed in reality (although they should be according to the project application). Serious challenges related to the prolonging of training programmes were not identified. It is likely that if certain types of expenditures were scaled down (e.g., expenditures for travelling, rent or food), the training results would not be lower. According to the cost-effectiveness analysis of investments allocated to older and unqualified unemployed, the effectiveness of alternative activities (e.g., work-based learning, employment subsidies) was slightly higher than that of vocational education and training. As for the other target groups, the effectiveness of training could often be enhanced by promoting an application of the acquired competences.
- 5. Are the quality criteria and control measures used in trainings relevant and sufficient?** Overall, the applied criteria and control measures are not relevant and sufficient in all evaluated priorities: there are quite a number of cases when the quality of training is not evaluated according to objective criteria; training resources and the implementation process is often assessed in a very unsystematic way; systems allowing to check whether participants acquired new knowledge and skills are very rare (except for formal training); training quality is not evaluated based on its actual results (e.g. whether the acquired competences are applied in real-life or benefits created for individuals, companies and society); comparisons of the quality of different training programmes and providers are very rare; inspections do not focus on the most risky projects; there is a lack of measures aimed at combating violations related to the misuse of funds allocated for training activities.
- 6. Is the monitoring system relevant for measuring results and the impact of training?** The relevance of the monitoring system is relatively low in the case of all evaluated priorities: indicators allow for the measurement of mid-term and long-term impact, however learning (what competencies were acquired?) and behaviour (whether the acquired competences are applied in real-life?) levels are rarely measured; the quality of most indicators, based on S.M.A.R.T. criteria is relatively high and the most problematic

aspects include concreteness and the achievability of indicators (especially in the case of the 7th priority).

- 7. Did training activities contribute (or are likely to contribute) to the attainment of OP objectives?** The probability that training activities will have a positive impact is high, however, it is also likely that this impact will be much weaker than expected. This is due to a number of reasons including the following: during training very little attention is given to promoting the application of competences acquired during training, the quantity of training activities most often outweighs their quality, and training is insufficiently coordinated with other additional, alternative activities, especially when trying to solve complex individual problems such as long-term unemployment.

Suggestions and recommendations (or their groups), aimed at improving the implementation of OP measures that include training:

1. Address complex problems by combining training with other, alternative activities and applying a case management methodology;
2. Reduce the risk of deadweight costs while financing training;
3. Increase the motivation of training participants as well as employees at institutions that act as intermediaries in training services provision or control these services;
4. Include the low qualified employed as an additional target group in the future ESF financing period and crystallise corresponding specific groups and their training needs;
5. Adopt innovative training methods;
6. Draft good practice guides for the organisation of training and public procurement of training services and provide relevant ongoing consultations to project managers. Create a solution that allows to compare quality of non-formal adult education programmes and their providers. No longer allow public procurement of training services based on the lowest price criterion;
7. Develop solutions to increase the effectiveness of training implementation process: Utilise an economy of scale principle in training delivery; improve methodology for calculating yearly rates of training services; map projects, including training activities, in a user-friendly form;
8. Improve quality criteria and control measures used in trainings: Change strategy on how to control projects including training activities; create relevant incentives to improve the quality of training in the planning documents; carry out a feasibility study on how to increase the effectiveness of the control system of training activities in terms of its cost-benefit ratio;
9. Improve the training monitoring system: Prioritise results instead of a process; more effectively monitor changes at the learning and behaviour levels; and improve monitoring indicators and their use;
10. Improve the quality and effectiveness of public policy institutions' personnel management policies;
11. Develop solutions on how to acquire relevant monitoring data from companies and other project managers as well as public institutions, and improve regulation of how personal data is transferred.