

## Aspects Regarding The Implementation Status of Social Projects at Regional Level

Mari-Isabella Stan

„Ovidius” University of Constanta, Faculty of Law and Administrative Sciences, Romania

[stanisabella@yahoo.com](mailto:stanisabella@yahoo.com)

Simona-Elena Cojocaru

Independent researcher

[cojocaru.simonna@gmail.com](mailto:cojocaru.simonna@gmail.com)

### Abstract

*In order to reduce the economic and social development gaps between the Member States, structural funds are allocated in the European Union, which are non-reimbursable financing instruments, being a main source of funding, which helps reduce the disparities between the Member States through the development of sustainable projects. This paper focuses on the case of Romania and it aims to examine the implementation status of the social projects contracted at regional level through the Human Capital Operational Programme of the European Social Fund for the 2014-2020 period. As regards Romania, the implementation of these projects leads to the development of communities and vulnerable groups in each development region. An extremely important role in the implementation of projects is played by local and regional authorities that must support local sustainability by stimulating investments, creating jobs, and improving infrastructure.*

**Key words:** structural funds, social projects, development regions, Romania

**J.E.L. classification:** B55, F66, I18, I38.

### 1. Introduction

European non-reimbursable or structural funds, which are non-reimbursable financing instruments, are allocated at the European Union (EU) level in order to reduce economic and social development gaps between the Member States. These are a main source of funding which helps reduce the disparities between the Member States through the development of sustainable projects.

At EU level, for the 2014-2020 programming period, the regulation of the Structural and Investment Funds (ESI Funds) aims to establish a clear connection with the *Europe 2020 Strategy* (European Commission, 2010, p. 3), so as to boost smart, sustainable and inclusive growth in the EU (European Commission, 2015, p. 8).

As regards Romania, the implementation of structural funds has been a basic instrument in terms of economic recovery so as to reach the level of the other European economies (Gelămancă and Zai, 2013, p. 77), with ESI funds being the main source of funding of the Operational Programmes whose main objective is the implementation of the Economic and Social Cohesion Policy at national level (Ministry of European Investment and Projects).

Recent studies on the impact of the structural and cohesion funds on the Member States have revealed that these are a cornerstone of EU regional cohesion policy (Scotti, Flori, and Pammolli, 2022, p. 1), with European Social Fund (ESF) being one of the two most important funds of the Cohesion Policy promoting and supporting the local development of all the Union’s territories (Giua, Hoxhaj, and Pierucci, 2022, p. 533).

This paper focuses on the case of Romania and it aims to examine the implementation status of social projects contracted at regional level through the Human Capital Operational Programme of the European Social Fund for the 2014-2020 period.

## 2. Literature review

The absorption of EU funds refers to the extent to which the Member States of the European Union use the funds allocated by the EU for various projects and activities representing an opportunity to support economic and social growth and to reduce development gaps (Stan and Cojocaru, 2022, p. 467). This process implies funding the projects and their implementation, which means committing the necessary resources and managing them. The absorption of EU funds can be assessed via several indicators, including the degree of absorption of funds, the level of efficiency of the spending and the degree of achievement of the objectives. These indicators are essential when assessing the performance of programmes and projects financed from EU funds.

The European Social Fund (ESF) aims to reduce the disparities in terms of living standards and of prosperity in the regions and Member States of the EU in order to make it easier to get a job (or to get a better one), to integrate disadvantaged people into society and to ensure a fair life for all (fi-compass, 2015, p. 2). ESF promotes high levels of employment and of job quality; improved access to the labour market; geographical and occupational mobility of the workers; adaptation of the workers to the changes in industry and to changes in the production systems which are necessary for sustainable developments; a high level of education and training for all; transition from education to employment for young people; combating poverty; social inclusion; gender equality, non-discrimination and equal opportunities; implementation of reforms, in particular in the fields of employment, education, training and social policies (European Commission, 2015, p. 219).

The European Social Fund, being one of the oldest structural instruments of the European Union, must be implemented through projects, by public and private entities (Dănescu and Dogar, 2012, p. 901), by investing in people and their skills - employed and unemployed, young and old.

Thus, through the Operational Programmes, projects are funded with a view to reducing the disparities between the European regions and countries so as to raise the living standards of the communities. The aim of implementing these projects with non-reimbursable sums is to ensure for the European citizens the right to reasonable living conditions and to bring all regions to the same level of social and economic development, reducing the disparities that have arisen over time. The programmes can be seen as complex systems which are materialized through projects (Stan, 2013, p. 19), with a correspondence between the project and the programme, each implemented project contributing to a greater or lesser extent to the achievement of one or more objectives and indicators defined at the operational programme's level.

Over time, various economic and social problems have been identified in Romania, which have been more or less solved, depending on their characteristic manifestations. These issues include social exclusion, poverty, high unemployment, migration, marginalized communities, disadvantaged communities in rural areas, etc. In order to mitigate the effects of these social problems, non-reimbursable funding is granted from the European Social Fund through the Operational Programmes to eligible entities so as to eliminate these major discrepancies.

In this regard, for the 2007-2013 programming period, the Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development (POSDRU), approved by the European Commission, defined European Social Fund's intervention in Romania as having the objective of developing human capital and increasing competitiveness. By 31 December 2014, 3,767 funding contracts were concluded with the beneficiaries, with a total eligible amount of approx. 4.67 billion euro, of which approx. 4.21 billion euro represented EU's contribution and payments were made for a total amount of 2.26 billion euro, of which 1.63 billion euro represented the amount reimbursed from the ESF and the state budget (AM POSDRU, 2015).

For the 2014-2021 programming period, the Human Capital Operational Programme (POCU) set out the investment priorities, the specific objectives and actions undertaken by Romania in the field of human resources, thus continuing the investments made through the European Social Fund in the 2007-2013 period, while also contributing to achieving the objective of reducing the economic and social development disparities between Romania and the EU Member States. This programme allocated funds to the social field for combating poverty, education and prevention of school drop-out, development at the level of discriminated or marginalized communities (e.g., Roma), provision/creation of jobs especially for young people, programmes implemented in the field of healthcare or screening for diseases, combating social exclusion and poverty, etc. From the European

Social Fund, for the 2014-2020 period, the amount allocated was €4.37 billion and €732 million from the state budget. The total amount allocated to Romania for Priority Axis 4: Social inclusion and combating poverty was €1,047,023,965 for the less developed regions, of which €65,852,595 represents performance reserve; €63,168,893 for the Bucharest-Ilfov Region, of which €4,118,209 - performance reserve (Ministry of European Investment and Projects).

At the end of the 2014-2020 programming period, the European Social Fund+ (ESF+) was launched, which together with the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) would finance in Romania the same investment priorities regarding social inclusion of vulnerable people and poverty reduction at regional and national level.

In the 2021-2027 programming period, the Operational Programme Inclusion and Social Dignity (POIDS) comes with a set of integrated measures that support the implementation of national and local strategies so as to contribute directly to supporting the process of poverty reduction and to supporting vulnerable groups in overcoming social exclusion. The overall objective of the programme is to support the social inclusion of people belonging to vulnerable groups, especially those at high risk, including by reducing the rural-urban poverty and social exclusion gap and increasing access to quality services for vulnerable people (Ministry of European Investment and Projects).

Social problems at local and regional level are solved with the participation of public and private actors, including civil society (Aivaz *et al*, 2021, p. 156; Stan *et al*, 2021a, p. 137; Stan *et al*, 2021b, p. 629). Thus, eligible entities which can access non-reimbursable European funds are local public authorities and their associations, educational institutions, research institutes, public institutions, national companies, trading companies, NGOs.

In this context, local and regional authorities have a key role to play in supporting local and responsible sustainability - "sustainable communities". (Petrișor, 2017, p. 144) by stimulating investment, creating jobs and improving infrastructure (Aivaz, 2021a, p. 8; Aivaz, 2021b, p. 17). This will help reduce social and economic vulnerability, although sometimes local actors have found ways to operate under the umbrella of global sustainability in an unsustainable local way (Petrișor, Susa and Petrișor, 2020, p. 167).

### 3. Research methodology

The aim of this paper is to examine the implementation status of social projects contracted at regional level through the Human Capital Operational Programme, within the European Social Fund, for the 2014-2020 period, Priority Axis 4 - Social inclusion and combating poverty. The interventions supported under this investment priority aim to achieve four specific objectives, namely: reducing the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion from the marginalized communities with a Roma minority population; reducing the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion from marginalized (non-Roma) communities; improving the digital literacy of people from disadvantaged communities (e-inclusion); reducing the number of people from vulnerable groups who have overcome vulnerable situations through the provision of appropriate social/medical/socio-occupational/training services, etc. which meet specific needs with a view to socio-occupational integration (Ministry of European Investment and Projects).

The research at regional level considers the 8 Development Regions of Romania through which the absorption of European funds is facilitated (Stan, 2014, p. 42), namely: *North-East Development Region* (Bacău, Botoșani, Iași, Neamț, Suceava and Vaslui counties), *South-East Development Region* (Brăila, Buzău, Constanța, Galați, Vrancea and Tulcea counties), *South-Muntenia Development Region* (Argeș, Călărași, Dâmbovița, Giurgiu, Ialomița, Prahova and Teleorman counties), *South-West Oltenia Development Region* (Dolj, Gorj, Mehedinți, Olt and Valcea counties), *West Development Region* (Arad, Caraș-Severin, Hunedoara and Timiș counties), *North-West Development Region* (Bihor, Bistrița-Năsăud, Cluj, Sălaj, Satu Mare and Maramureș counties), *Centre Development Region* (Alba, Brașov, Covasna, Harghita, Mureș and Sibiu counties) and *Bucharest-Ilfov Development Region* (Bucharest municipality and Ilfov County).

This research used data provided by the Ministry of European Investment and Projects and the database "List of contracted POCU projects by region of implementation, as of 28 February 2022". The database examined in this research includes the list of contracted projects by region, county and

locality, by type of contracting beneficiaries, etc. The implementation status of social projects at both national and regional level was assessed and measured through the following aspects: the absorption rate of the allocated budget, the degree of achievement of general and specific objectives, the co-financing rate and the actual implementation status as evidenced by the number of finished/unfinished projects.

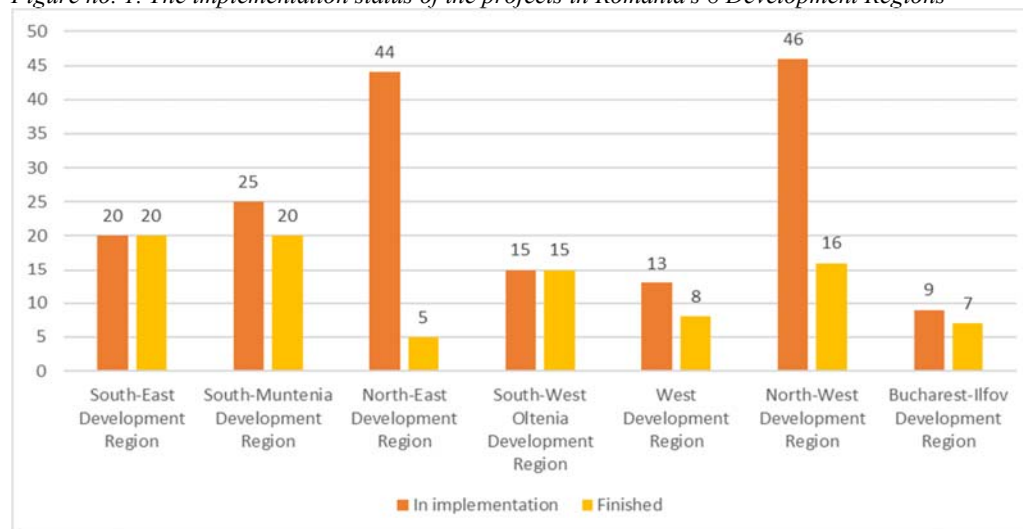
#### 4. Findings

In the 2014-2020 programming period, for the Human Capital Operational Programme, financed from the European Social Fund, a total of 2,543 beneficiaries from all counties of the country contracted eligible projects (Ministry of European Investment and Projects), in general, the results being related to social inclusion and combating discrimination, substantial reduction of the percentage of poverty which is very high among marginalized communities in Romania, in particular targeting young people, children, Roma persons, or other disadvantaged communities (Pârnu and Niță, 2020, p. 63).

A first indicator investigated is the *implementation status* of the contracted and implemented projects at the level of each development region.

Figure no. 1 graphically shows the status of all regions' contracted POCU projects which are being implemented or finished/completed. At the moment of data collection, out of the 172 projects with a status of "in implementation", 136 had an average completion date of July 2023. Thus, it can be seen that in none of the development regions is the number of finished projects higher than the number of those still in progress, indicating the fact that delays in their completion have occurred and the deadline has been exceeded.

Figure no. 1. The implementation status of the projects in Romania's 8 Development Regions



Source: Author's own processing

In the year 2022, 198 projects were being implemented with the deadline being the end of the year. Moreover, the total number of finished projects is 91, with an average completion deadline of June 2021.

As can be seen from the graph, the North-West Region occupies the first place with the most social projects in the implementation stage, followed by the North-East Region. The regions with the most projects completed by 2021 are the South-East Region and the South-Muntenia Region. The regions with the fewest projects completed by 28 February 2022 are North-East, West and Bucharest Ilfov. At national level, there are major differences between the Bucharest-Ilfov area and the other development regions, even if some of them, namely those in the West of the country, are slightly more dynamic.

The projects financed from the Human Capital Operational Programme, Priority Axis 4 - Social inclusion and combating poverty, for the 2014-2020 programming period, take into account the following specific objectives (Ministry of European Funds, 2015):

- ✓ Specific Objective 1: Decreasing the percentage of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion from marginalized communities with a Roma minority population (minimum 10% of the total population at community level) at risk of poverty and social exclusion, through the implementation of special and adapted to the needs measures;
- ✓ Specific Objective 2: Significantly reducing the number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion from marginalized (non-Roma) communities, by implementing integrated and specific measures;
- ✓ Specific Objective 4: Decreasing the number of people belonging to vulnerable communities through the provision of social / healthcare / socio-occupational / training services adapted to the specific needs;
- ✓ Specific Objective 9: Increasing the number of people benefiting from healthcare programmes and services aimed at prevention, early detection (screening), early diagnosis and treatment of major diseases; IP (iv) Increasing access to accessible, sustainable and high quality services, including healthcare and social services of general interest;
- ✓ Specific Objective 15: Decreasing the number of elderly and disabled people placed in residential institutions through the provision of community-based social and healthcare services, including long-term services; IP (iv) increasing access to accessible, sustainable and high-quality services, including healthcare and social services of general interest;
- ✓ Specific objective 16: Strengthening the capacity of social economy enterprises to operate in a self-sustainable manner; IP (v) promoting social entrepreneurship and occupational integration in social enterprises and promoting social economy and solidarity so as to facilitate access to employment;
- ✓ Specific Objective 18: Integrated Specific Objective 4.12, 4.13, 4.14; IP (iv) increasing access to accessible, sustainable and high quality services, including healthcare and social services of general interest.

The development of the regions varies according to factors such as the degree of industrialization, the level of education, the level of healthcare and infrastructure, the standard of living, the access to resources and availability of resources. These factors can create gaps between the regions in terms of their level of development.

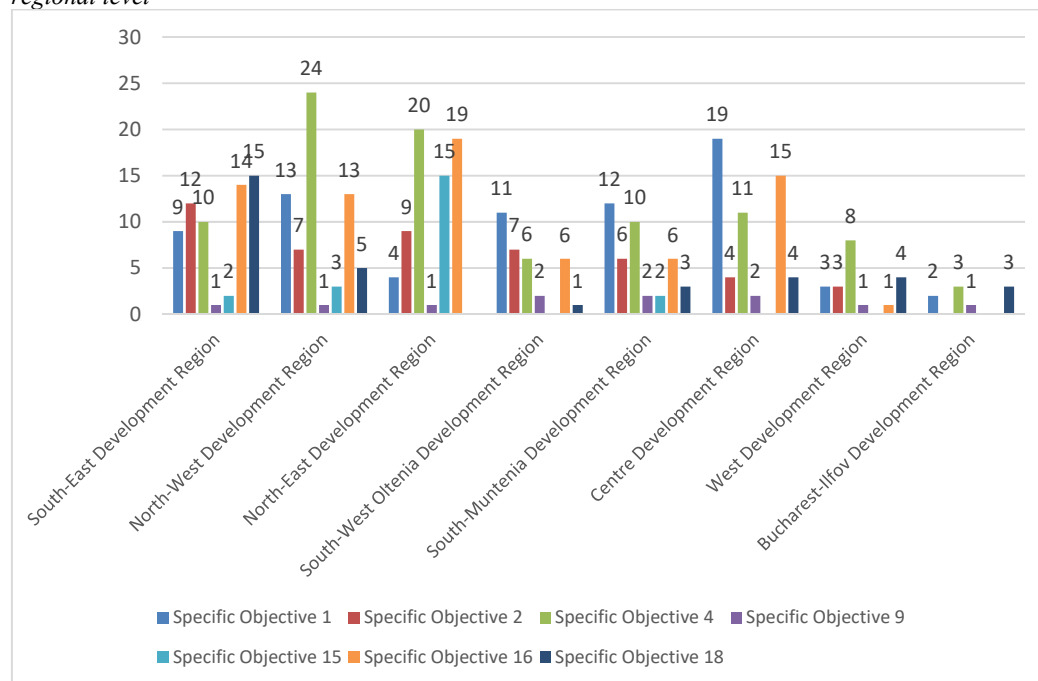
Tackling social issues at regional level requires a holistic approach to the development factors, the defining components of social development being education, healthcare, consumption, and social interaction, which are strongly structured at local level (Sandu, 2011, p. 3).

Thus, *the number of contracted projects* is a general indicator which aims to analyze the situation of the contracted projects at national and regional level.

Figure no. 2 indicates the fact that most projects were implemented under Specific Objective 4. Thus, 94 projects were aimed at providing health services - improving access to quality health services and adequate healthcare for people belonging to vulnerable groups (provision of quality healthcare, medicines, medical advice and medical education); providing social services - offering social assistance and counselling for people belonging to vulnerable groups (financial assistance services, case assistance, assistance with food shopping and other necessities); provision of socio-occupational services – providing occupational support and assistance for people belonging to vulnerable groups (provision of occupational counselling, job search assistance, assistance in obtaining an income and career counselling); provision of vocational training programmes - provision of vocational training and skills enhancement programmes for people belonging to vulnerable groups (educational programmes, vocational training programmes and support programmes for improving employability skills).

Under Specific Objective 1, a total of 73 projects were also funded, which were aimed at creating employment opportunities, improving access to education and vocational training, developing social support and community development programmes and encouraging community participation in the decision-making processes for people at risk of poverty and social exclusion from marginalized communities with a Roma minority population at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

Figure no. 2. The number of projects contracted under each specific objective of Priority Axis 4 at regional level



Source: Author's own processing

For the 2014-2020 programming period, the total number of contracted projects was 355 at national level. Of these, 68 projects were contracted in the North-East Development Region, followed by the North-West Development Region, with 66 projects. The social problems in the North-East Development Region are the high level of poverty, in some areas almost half of the population is living below the poverty line, poor and underdeveloped infrastructure, which makes public services and access to education, healthcare, water and sanitation limited, internal and external migration, both of young people, who are leaving to be able to more easily find a job and of older people, who are moving to less poor areas, limited access to education and vocational training, which is reflected in the high level of unemployment in the area. In contrast, we find the Bucharest-Ilfov Development Region where very few projects have been implemented (9) compared to the other development regions.

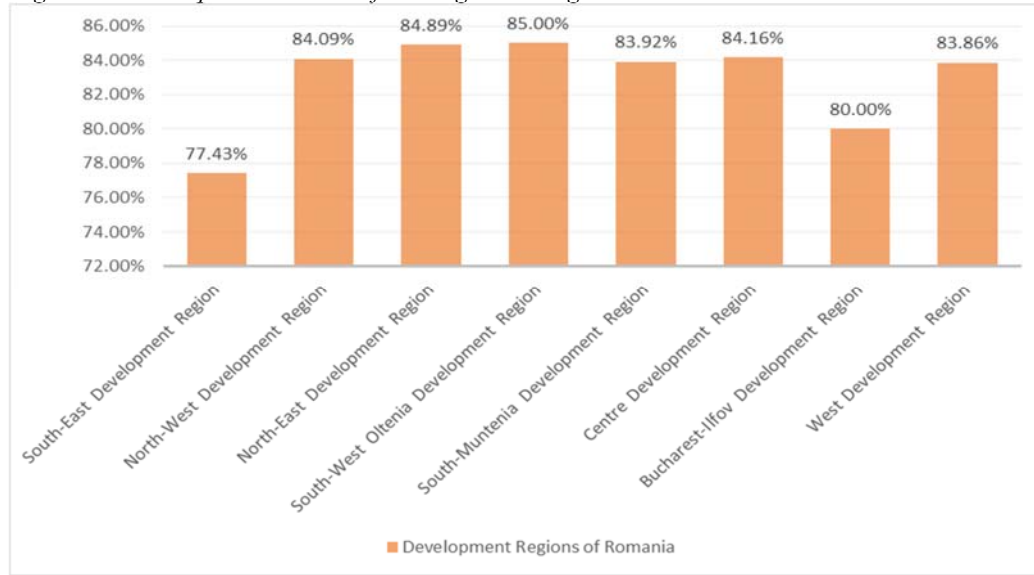
Of interest to macro-regional analyses is a country's absorption capacity, which is defined as its ability to spend the structural funds allocated to it effectively and efficiently.

In this respect, this research also took into account the EU *co-financing rate*, which represents the percentage financed from the total amount of eligible project expenditure.

Figure no. 3 shows the comparison between the 8 Development Regions of Romania in terms of the co-financing rate of the projects contracted from the POCU for priority axis 4.

It can be seen from the graphical representation that the South-East Region has the lowest co-financing rate, i.e., 77.43% of the total eligible expenditure of projects financed from the European Social Fund, the rest of the funds for the implementation of the projects being covered by the state budget and the beneficiary's own contribution. Thus, the South-East Region has received POCU funding from the European Social Fund (ESF) for projects which will contribute to improving qualifications, developing entrepreneurial skills and promoting social inclusion. Furthermore, research and development projects are funded to support the sustainable economic and social development of the region.

Figure no. 3. European Union’s co-financing rate at regional level



Source: Author’s own processing

On the other hand, the highest co-financing rate is in the South-West Oltenia region, at 85%. Social problems in the South-West Oltenia Region are: the underdeveloped infrastructure, poverty, low education level, economic underdevelopment and gender inequality. In decreasing order, the North-East Region comes next, which shows that this region is underdeveloped, as confirmed by the previous graphs.

## 5. Conclusions

Even though considerable efforts and progress have been made, regional disparities still exist in Romania and considerable funds still need to be invested in projects that would prove to be efficient and sustainable over time. These investment projects should be implemented both in the current and in the next programming period (2021-2027).

At present, public administration is facing many challenges arising from social, economic and political evolution trends. As regards the Romanian public administration, a solution for integrating or managing these challenges is the absorption of EU funds. From this point of view, harnessing the principles of the new public management can considerably increase the absorption of EU funds at national level, as governments are increasingly relying on various societal actors to tackle social challenges (Merlin-Brogniart *et al*, 2022, p. 1). The learning principle, learning from past experiences, the evaluation principle, the principle of applying learning to administrative practices are a few of the directions that underpin the improvement of administrative capacity.

In this context, public authorities have an extremely important role to play in implementing projects so as to increase access to social, educational and healthcare services for people at risk of poverty and social exclusion from marginalized communities, in order to stimulate the local economy and create winning opportunities for the citizens and businesses in their area, by increasing the degree of absorption of EU funds, which would also automatically lead to regional development (Buda, 2017, p. 6)

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