

**Evaluation of the impact of the implementation of the horizontal principle "Equal opportunities" in the 2014-2020 EU funds planning period**

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**SUMMARY**

The aim of the study is to evaluate the impact of the European Union (EU) Structural Funds in the 2014-2020 planning period on the achievement of the goals of the horizontal principle "Equal opportunities” (hereinafter - HP EQ). The total period included in the evaluation is from 2014 to the first half of 2022. This is an optimal period of time to assess whether gender equality is taken into account and promoted throughout the preparation and implementation of the Growth and Jobs Operational Program, including monitoring, reporting and evaluation, and to assess the impact of gender mainstreaming during nine years, as well as whether the measures taken are adequate to prevent any discrimination due to gender, race or ethnic origin, faith or belief, age, disability or sexual orientation throughout the preparation and implementation of the operational program (2014-2020).

The evaluation includes an analysis of 223 European Social Fund (hereinafter - ESF) and 1,240 European Regional Development Fund (hereinafter - ERDF) and Cohesion Fund (hereinafter - CF) projects. A random analysis of the training materials created within the projects was carried out regarding the existence of stereotypes or discriminatory content, expert interviews were conducted by interviewing the corresponding specific support objectives (hereinafter - SSO) project managers or representatives of the project implementers, line ministries and the Central Finance and Contracts Agency (hereinafter - CFCA) representatives (a total of 41 experts were interviewed).

**Total of 666,190 participants** participated in ESF co-financed projects. The participants have participated in 15 SSO and 19 specific support objective measures (hereinafter - SSOM) projects. Approximately one-fifth (21.6%) of all ESF project participants of the considered period have been provided by 9.1.1.2 SSOM "Activation measures for long-term unemployed". Also, comparatively more participants till August 31, 2022, have been registered for 7.1.1. SSO "To improve the qualification and skills responding to the labor market needs", 9.2.4.2. SSOM "Local measures to promote public health" and 8.4.1. SSO "To develop professional competencies of employees" projects.

The gender distribution of project participants shows that 66.2% (or 441,336 persons) of ESF project participants are women and 33.8% (or 224,851 persons) are men. Compared to the average indicators of the national population, women are represented by 12.6% more among ESF project participants (on average, the proportion of women in the country is 53.6%, men - 46.4%). By percentage women are represented the most in 8.3.1. SSO "To develop competency-based general education curriculum" (95.1%), 8.3.2. SSO "To increase support for general education institutions to develop students’ individual competences” (94.3%) and 9.2.6. SSO "To improve qualification of health care and health care support personnel" (93.3%). On the other hand, comparing the data at the SSO level regarding the proportion of male participants in ESF projects, it should be concluded that, in percentage terms, the largest number of men participated in 9.1.2. SSO " Integration of former prisoners into society and labor market" (86.5%) (by 4.7% less than the proportion of male prisoners - 91.2% in 2021), 8.5.1. SSO "To increase number of qualified VET students through participation in work-based learning and practice in enterprise" (60.4%) and 9.2.2. SSO "To increase the availability of social services at home equivalent to the high-quality services of institutional care and availability of services close to family environment for children and people with disabilities" (58.7%).

According to the age distribution of project participants, the largest number of ESF project participants is in the age group from 55 to 59 years, a total of 85,431 participants or 12.8%. The data show a tendency that the proportion of male project participants decreases with increasing age – in age groups up to 20 years, the number of males among project participants exceeds the number of females, but in age groups after 20 years, the number and proportion of women increases. Receivers of funding explain this fact with men's low motivation, as well as the difficulty of involving men in projects, especially public health promotion projects, due to stereotypes about the roles of women and men and behaviors related to taking care of one's health and lifestyle. According to the data, regionally the place of residence of ESF project participants is most often indicated in the Latgale region – 190,015 participants or 28.5% of all participants. In terms of the number of participants, the second most represented region is the Riga region, where 130,009 participants indicated their place of residence (19.5%). It is followed by Pierīga statistical region (92,411 participants or 13.9%), Kurzeme region (88,004 participants or 13.2%), Zemgale region (80,529 participants or 12.1%) and Vidzeme region (79,852 participants or 12, 0%). A total of 14.7% or 97,891 ESF participants were identified as persons with disabilities, of whom 58,554 or 59.8% are women, and 39,337 or 40.2% are men. 131,639 ESF project participants or 19.8% are identified as belonging to the group of migrants, participants with foreign origins and ethnic minorities.

The share of representatives of the Roma nationality in the total number of participants is 0.4%, or 2,723 participants (2.1% of those participants who are identified as migrants, participants of foreign origin, minorities), and in general, more than half of all Roma population of our country have participated in ESF projects. Of all participants of the Roma nationality, there are 1,566 or 57.5% women and 1,157 or 42.5% men.

Persons who are in prison or participate in the project after imprisonment as a target group are represented in two SSO - 9.1.2. SSO "Integration of former prisoners into society and labor market" and 9.1.3. SSO "Strengthening of the efficiency of the Resocialization system". A total of 9,840 persons participated in the two mentioned SSO - 9.1.2. SSO 8,008 members and 9.1.3. SSO 1,832 members. By gender men predominate (86.5%) in 9.1.2. SSO, in which almost all project participants are persons who are in prison or participate in the project after imprisonment, while in 9.1.3. SSO most participants are women (63.7%).

It is concluded that the achieved values of HP EO indicators are mainly influenced by two factors. First, the values of HP EO indicators are provided after the fact, they can also be collected only at the end of the projects and have not yet been entered into the Cohesion Policy Management Information System (hereinafter referred to as CP MIS), so such data cannot be obtained in the evaluation. It should also be mentioned that some of the projects have not been completed, and the activities in which the implementation of HP EO is planned continue and data on the achievement of HP EO indicators are not available.

The most significant impact of HP EO can be observed regarding the provision of support in the field of employment - in almost all employment promotion and unemployment reduction projects, the planned values have been achieved and often exceeded. The same can be said about projects whose activities resulted in the development or improvement of educational programs, methodological tools, guidelines, teaching tools, incl. digital ones that integrate issues of equal opportunities (gender equality, disability, age, or ethnicity) – the planned indicator values were also exceeded in these projects.

It is concluded in the evaluation that the objectives of the EO horizontal policy set in the Partnership Agreement for the 2014-2020 planning period of EU funds are achieved in the implemented projects. Most often, project activities have contributed to the achievement of such goals as "By investing in the renovation of public buildings, ensure accessibility of the environment and information for persons with disabilities and functional impairments in all public buildings to be renovated", "By developing infrastructure in Natura 2000 territories, ensure accessibility of the environment and services for persons with disabilities and functional disabilities", "Ensure the accessibility of development centers of international, national and regional importance from the surrounding area, ensuring the accessibility of public transport for persons with disabilities and functional disabilities", as well as "As a result of the implementation of the action program, reduce obstacles to employment by providing support to persons in a disadvantaged situation in order to start working relationships or participate in activities that promote employment and independent living" and "Improving access to education for persons with disabilities, elderly persons, young people with low basic skills, representatives of ethnic minorities, as well as reducing gender segregation in the education sector".

Regarding the impact of the projects on the rest of the goals "To promote the increase of human resources to science and motivation for scientific activity, regardless of gender, race, ethnic origin, disability, etc. factors, thus promoting equal opportunities in the implementation of measures", "By investing in improvement of the availability of ICT and e-services, to ensure equal opportunities for all residents, including groups of persons in a disadvantaged situation (persons with disabilities, elderly people, representatives of ethnic minorities and other population groups exposed to the risks of social exclusion) to receive services and participate in the political, economic, social and cultural life of society" and "By investing in the promotion of the competitiveness of SME, promote the provision of the necessary conditions and equal opportunities for business start-up and development for all residents, including disadvantaged population groups, as well as ensure accessibility of infrastructure of cultural and creative industries for persons with disabilities and functional impairments", it cannot be concluded unequivocally whether the activities carried out within the project have contributed to the implementation of HP EO goals. A total of 123 projects apply to the mentioned goal, of which 79 or 64% still continue at the time of the evaluation. Accordingly, the achieved performance indicators are not available for these projects, which would allow a correct assessment of the impact of these projects on the achievement of HP goals. However, the achieved indicators in those projects that were completed at the time of the evaluation both with regard to the objects in which access to the environment and information have been ensured as a result of ERDF/CF investments, as well as with regard to the number of entrepreneurs who received support (board members women/men), as well as with regard to the number of public services where information has been adapted to specific user groups (for persons with visual, hearing and mental disabilities) needs and the number of projects in which compliance with the principles of gender equality, disability, age and ethnicity has been ensured as a result of ESF/ERDF/CF investments, shows a tendency that the activities carried out in the projects contribute to the achievement of HP's goals.

Specific actions to promote gender equality were most often implemented in health promotion projects. These projects provide measures aimed at reducing the differences in the life expectancy of women and men, for example, measures to change the prevailing stereotypes and ideas in society about the roles of women and men and their corresponding behavior in terms of taking care of their health and lifestyle, especially singling out men as a specific target groups, as well as specific measures to improve the health of one or the other gender, addressing the target audience of men and women separately.

In general, ESF projects in the field of education provide integration of students with special needs in the training in working environment, including the provision of personal support (e.g. ergotherapy, assistant, sign language interpreter, special transport), as well as in some projects specific services are provided for persons with disabilities during training (psychologist, ergo therapist, sign language interpreter and assistant services, provision of specialized transport, adaptation of workplaces for persons with disabilities, flexible training forms, etc.). However, often the project participants cannot use the support provided by the project, for example the services of an assistant or support person, because they are already paid for by the state or such support is provided by family members. Thus, a situation arises when the project provides activities for the provision of HP EO, however, the project participants cannot use them due to the financing model of the project activities.

Among projects it differs how individual support is provided, especially for those in the risk of poverty, needy and underprivileged, older persons, asylum seekers, refugees and representatives of the Roma population (for example, repetition, explanation, adjusting the rhythm of training to individual abilities, language learning etc.). For example, projects in the field of employment promotion do not practice an individual approach, as support such as training is provided in groups. On the other hand, in 9.1.4. SSO projects activities are focused on providing individual support (individual assessment, individual plan, consultations of social workers, career counselors, etc.) to various target groups. In addition, the information obtained during the evaluation shows that the project implementers' understanding of individual support for project participants often differs from the Ministries of Welfare vision (repetition, explanation, adjusting the rhythm of training to individual abilities, language learning, looking after children, etc.) and does not always include specific actions aimed at achievement of the objectives of HP EO.

According to the evaluation data, projects in the field of health promotion and disease prevention are specifically aimed at ensuring that all Latvian residents, especially and including the poor, low-income, seniors, children, and those living in remote regions, receive health promotion services, and this is basically the primary target audience of all project activities. Representatives of beneficiaries of funding in municipalities indicated that support for the implementation of preventive and compensatory measures for children and young people at risk of poverty, poor and low-income children and young people is provided in 3/4 of the surveyed municipalities.

Beneficiaries of funding do not see problems in the implementation of HP EO, however, sometimes difficulties arise due to insufficiently explained regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers and in case of contradictions between HP guidelines and other regulations, which create opportunities for different interpretations of the requirements. For example, it is not uncommon when Ministry of Welfare, based on the conducted project surveys and looking at the accessibility of the service or facility created within the project, informs the CFCA about possible inconsistencies in the projects, however, during inspections, the CFCA admits that there are no violations.

The information obtained during the evaluation shows that during the preparation and implementation of projects, consultations with HP EO field experts rarely take place. If they happen, then with representatives of Ministry of Welfare and CFCA or NGOs representing the interests of people with disabilities, but consultations with organizations and experts in other areas of discrimination (gender equality, ethnic minorities, etc.) do not take place.

The representatives of the ministries and CFCA express words of appreciation to the Ministry of Welfare as a coordinating institution of the horizontal principle, indicating the possibility to always receive support and consultations, as well as pointing to the clear guidelines. If the representatives of the ministries are informed about the guidelines and are satisfied with them, then the project implementers may not be informed about them, or they consider them complicated. Therefore, in the next planning period, it is necessary to develop simpler guidelines and promote them more to project implementers.

The evaluation found the following main challenges in the implementation, coordination, and evaluation of HP EO:

* project implementers have a narrowed understanding of the essence of HP, in most cases referring to HP as equal treatment rather than equal opportunities, believing that not limiting the participation of a target group in the project is compliance with HP EO. The principle of equal treatment is often used as an argument for observing HP in the implementation of projects, even though it does not promote the opportunities of all population groups to participate in the project and receive services and other benefits;
* project implementers do not consider HP EO as a priority and do not appreciate its importance, focusing mainly on direct project activities aimed at achieving the main goals of the project. Accordingly, formal definition of HP EO indicators in the project and also formal implementation of these indicators can be observed;
* project implementers do not see the connection between compliance with the HP EO required in the projects and the manifestations of the HP EO in the state policy. It is considered that the country does not comply with HP EO, and this does not motivate the implementation of HP in project activities;
* the inability to promote equal opportunities does not always stem from the attitude of the project implementer towards the topic of equality (the attitude can be positive and there is also an understanding of various problems related to inequality), but mainly from ignorance of what the promotion of equal opportunities could mean for a specific project. Project implementers lack specific knowledge of how to act and what actions can be taken in promoting HP EO;
* project implementers consult with NGO representatives on the planning and implementation of HP EO activities, however, due to the lack of relevant regulation, problem situations often arise when consultations are provided by an NGO that formally represents the interests of a certain target group, but whose expertise is questionable;
* during project submissions and the implementation of the projects themselves, consultations with HP EO experts are held only in rare cases. As experts, representatives of Ministry of Welfare and CFCA, as well as NGOs representing the interests of people with disabilities, are mentioned as experts, but the project implementers have no information about experts on issues of gender equality or non-discrimination of senior citizens and ethnic minorities;
* despite the fact that the project implementers highly appreciate the efforts of Ministry of Welfare as the HP EO coordinating institution in consulting and providing support, the project implementers expect a greater activity of the Ministry of Welfare in explaining and popularizing the goals of HP EO in society;
* although since the 2019 evaluation "Mid-term evaluation of the impact of the implementation of the horizontal principle "Equal opportunities" in the 2014-2020 EU funds planning period” (hereinafter referred to as the "Mid-term evaluation") has slightly improved, the population over the age of 60 as the target group is still a proportionally under-reached subgroup of the population, especially in relation to the male population;
* taking into account that the coordination of HP EO refers to several large areas of responsibility - gender equality, disability, aging and ethnicity, the capacity of some employees who coordinate the integration of equal opportunities at the national level within the measures and activities co-financed by EU funds, to provide consultative support on a national scale is rated as low. In addition, already the Mid-term evaluation concluded there is insufficient provision of financial resources for the Ministry of Welfare as a coordinating institution for providing informational support in the regions and it was identified as a problem.

Following recommendations are made to mitigate the challenges identified in the implementation of the HP EO:

* to continue to provide educational and informative support on the nature and manifestations of HP EO, paying special attention to the integration of the principles of equal opportunities into the content of all types of activities. Provide regular training (including for officials) on the integrated approach, attracting experts or lecturers from research or higher education institutions and ensuring an adequate budget. In order to promote the formation and strengthening of awareness, the training should be implemented in the form of cycles, repeating them for each group of participants and focusing on in-depth research of individual areas of HP EO, such as employment, education, entrepreneurship, reconciliation of work and family life, etc.;
* during EU funds 2021-2027 planning period increased attention should be paid and stimulation should be given to gender equality, inclusion and non-discrimination aspects of HP EO and these aspects should be included in ESF projects ;
* it is necessary to continue advisory support, informing potential beneficiaries of HP EO planned and achievable indicators. At the same time, it is necessary to evaluate the possibility of directly linking the assessment whether funds will be granted with the inclusion of HP EO indicators and inclusion of activities to achieve them into project application, thus making the funding allocation directly dependent on compliance with the HP EO;
* systematic and structural integration of HP EO in all levels of state and local government planning documents. Evaluate the possibility of implementing HP in laws as universal norms, instead of applying only to EU fund projects;
* it is necessary to organize and ensure good practice and experience exchange events among project implementers, as well as the availability of consultations with diversity management experts, such as NGOs, organizations of diversity management experts, incl. representatives of the Society Integration Foundation;
* develop methodical material (manual) with practical and simple examples of what project activities promote and can be implemented to promote HP EO;
* continue online consultations on HP EO planning and implementation issues for potential and existing grantees;
* in the HP guidelines and procurement documentation, determine qualification requirements for those NGOs whose recommendations in the field of HP EO planning and implementation are binding on project implementers;
* provide for the obligation of the recipient of funding to add documentation of consultations with experts in the field of HP EO to the project submission during the development of the project application. A list of experts can be added to the HP guidelines;
* develop a form for a complaint about violations of the principle of non-discrimination in projects financed by EU funds, in which it is possible to accurately record the identified inconsistencies and violations in the implementation of HP EO in projects;
* to take a proactive action in promoting HP EO, for example establishing a zero tolerance for environmental inaccessibility in any EU fund event, as well as considering the possibility of starting a gender mainstreaming approach in the budgeting of public institutions by attracting experts from countries where this approach is implemented at the government level (Iceland, Norway , Great Britain, France, etc.);
* to require project submitters to plan special measures for the activation of the target group over 60 years of age, especially men. Activation can take place, for example, by involving family doctors to inform and motivate representatives of the target group, as well as by creating health promotion points in municipal one-stop agencies, cultural and sports institutions;
* it is necessary to carry out systematic monitoring of the age and gender profile of the participants (monitoring of the increase in the number and proportions) in order to verify whether the implemented actions have had a positive effect on the increase in the participation of the elderly population, especially men;
* improve the existing website dedicated to HP EO by adding pages dedicated to each type of discrimination, which would publish relevant information on HP EO issues, legislation, instructions and educational and informational materials that would help potential project implementers to determine which activities promoting EO can be implemented in the project and which of the implemented activities will contribute to the promotion of HP EO;
* to strengthen the capacity of the Ministry of Welfare as the institution responsible for HP coordination by allocating adequate budget and human resources to increase the volume of activities aimed at promoting awareness of equal opportunities and non-discrimination both among the beneficiaries and the institutions that coordinate EU fund projects, as well as in the society in general, and also promote and support the observance of these principles in the development and implementation of projects.