



**Independent Evaluation Service of the
Regional Operational Programme (ROP) Lazio
ESF 2014-2020**

CIG 8470818426 – CUP F89G20001250009

Executive Summary
Interim evaluation report on the implementation of the ROP
30 June 2022

Final version: 30 September 2022

The **purpose** of the interim evaluation report on the implementation of the Regional Operational Programme (ROP) Lazio ESF 2014-2020 is to **provide an accurate picture of the development of the implementation** in terms of financial resources used, outputs and results achieved, as well as to assess its the implementation process, the success factors and the weaknesses encountered, **according to both an operational and a strategic evaluation perspective**.

From the operational point of view, up to 31.12.2021 a total of 11,170 operations were selected, a significant number that acquires even greater importance if the diversified nature of the operations is considered. It is thanks to this diversification that the interventions implemented - or in the process of being implemented - enable to satisfactorily meet all the objectives of the strategy of the ROP ESF Lazio 2014-2020.

The total cost of the selected operations amounts to EUR 1,170,069,520, exceeding by about 30% the Fund's total resources, which correspond to EUR 902,534,714. This cost overrun is due to a revision of the Programme carried out in 2020 to deal the Covid-19 health emergency, which modified the allocation of resources across the Programme Axes¹². Some of the projects already financed on other Axes will be transferred to the Complementary Operational Programme (COP) after its activation and will allow to rebalance the value of the commitments with respect to that of the financial resources.

The **total value of the payments** (i.e., the value of the eligible expenditure declared by the beneficiaries) is equal to EUR 824,653,621 and, compared to the cost of the operations (commitments) shows a spending capacity of 70.5%, which is **consistent with the time progress of the Programme**. There are, however, differences between the various Axes: **for Axis II the ratio of payments to commitments is almost 89%, corresponding to more than 10 points above the Programme average**. For Axis I and III, payments correspond to about two-thirds of commitments, which is slightly below the average, while for Axis IV the spending capacity does not reach 29%.

Taken together, the projects launched involved **almost 167,000 people** and shows **an excellent capacity to involve the potential recipients of the interventions**. More than half of the participants (almost 90,000) are concentrated in the interventions activated on Axis I aimed at supporting the employment of jobless or inactive people (priority 8i) and of young people (priority 8ii). From the point of view of the employment condition, two thirds of the target groups involved are inactive persons, 27.6% are unemployed and the remaining 6.8% are persons who have a job, including self-employment. The breakdown of the data on recipients by gender shows that women account for 48.3% of the total recipients, thus indicating **a balanced distribution between males and females**.

As regards the **effectiveness of implementation**, from a financial point of view the performance of **Axes I and III** is particularly good, **with the certified expenditure reaching 73.8% and almost 96% of the respective targets**. On the other hand, the evolution of Axis II is slower, as its certified expenditure corresponds to 53% of the expected target and is therefore still far from the goal (in absolute terms, the expenditure totals about it is about EUR 300 million, compared to a target of 566 million). The situation of Axis IV appears to be more critical, since it has reached 22% of the target, which can be achieved only if certified expenditures will see a significant acceleration over the next two years.

With respect to the output indicators defined in the Performance Framework, the Programme shows a very positive performance. Only for two indicators (out of 16) the targets have not yet been achieved. These are, for Axis I, indicator CO01 - Unemployed,

¹ Approved with European Commission Decision C (2017) 6615 of 24.11.2020

² Resources were added to Axis II Social inclusion the expenses of the redundancy fund (in derogation) due to the Covid-19 emergency. Therefore the funds of the other Axes (excluding Technical Assistance) decreased but, due to the amounts already committed before the revision, they result currently over-booked.

including long-term unemployed and, for Axis II, indicator CV31 - Participants supported in combating or counteracting the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. These indicators nevertheless have high attainment rates, at 98.4% and 80.1% respectively, as shown in the table below.

	Indicator	Value achieved as at 31.12.2021	Target at 2023	% of attainment
Axis I	CO01 - Unemployed, including long-term unemployed	33.845	34.400	98,4%
	CO03 - Inactive	53.907	10.700	503,8%
Axis II	CV31 - Participants supported in combating or counteracting the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic	128.171	160.000	80,1%
Axis III	CO01 - Unemployed, including long-term unemployed	10.025	1.690	593,2%
	CO03 - Inactive	29.425	6.710	438,5%
Axis IV	CO22 - number of projects targeting public administrations or public services	25	8	312,5%

The horizontal principles of gender equality and equal opportunities for all (including non-discrimination) were taken into significant consideration in the definition of the Programme strategy and are effectively "put into practice" during its implementation.

With particular regard to gender equality, in addition to the activities financed through priority 8iv, which is specifically dedicated to this aspect, the interventions in support of women were financed under the various priority Axes. These ranged from actions to support the employment of women with minor children, to projects for the empowerment and autonomy of women victims of violence, to interventions in support of reconciliation. Equal opportunities for all were instead supported through a variety of projects, particularly under Axis II, which concern actions of a broader scope but which include, among their recipients, specific categories of disadvantaged persons (transiting migrants, persons with disabilities, prisoners at the end of their sentences, young people in an economically and socially disadvantaged condition, etc.).

The programme also contributes indirectly to **sustainable development**, through the interventions financed under Axis III, relating to Supplementary Actions for the Development and Qualification of Higher Technical Institutes (ITS). Furthermore, again under Axis III, as part of the intervention to strengthen research in region Lazio, which provides incentives for innovation doctorates for enterprises, some projects explicitly aimed at acquiring or increasing *green* skills were financed. The theme of sustainability also appears in some projects on life-long training.

As regards the implementation process of the Regional Operational Programme (ROP) Lazio ESF 2014-2020, the **organisational structure**, the **governance system for the management of the Programme** and the related **system of rules** (Management and Control System - Si.Ge.Co, Procedures Manual, etc.) proved, on the whole, to be **adequate to the programming and implementation requirements** of the projects financed.

In particular, the Management and Control System - Si.Ge.Co complies with the general principles listed in Article 72 of Regulation (EC) 1303/2006 and is characterised by a high degree of flexibility, which allowed the use of constantly updated tools that are more responsive to the actual needs. In this sense, the changes in the System made over the last two years to deal with the negative effects of the Covid-19 pandemic are particularly significant. Especially in terms of first-level controls, the measures introduced following the health emergency enabled to experiment, with good results, simplifications that proved to be extremely useful in a perspective of greater efficiency of the system. It would therefore be **desirable to maintain, in the future, the simplifications activated in response to the Covid-19 pandemic**, also

with reference to the ESF+ programming, so as to capitalise on the experience gained in the phases of the health emergency, also in terms of new methods of work within the public administration and for the benefit of the beneficiaries.

Also the new **Management and Monitoring System (SiGeM)** of the ROP Lazio ESF 2014-2020, introduced in the current programming period, proved to be an effective tool for managing processes which, thanks to the elimination of the transmission of paper documents to and from the Region, enabled to reduce the time required to manage each phase of the activities related to the public Notices and, more generally, allowed a greater transparency on the implementation of the projects and on the operational processes. Overall, despite all the difficulties deriving from the complexity of the system, the SiGeM, although perfectible with some further evolutionary development of the platform, seems **capable of effectively supporting the implementation of the Programme**. The general structure of the system still appears valid in the perspective of the 2021-2027 programming period, net of some modifications that will predictably be necessary in light of the changes introduced by the new Regulation.

The **Programme strategy**, as initially conceived and in its current amended version following the reprogramming of November 2020, appears **overall coherent with the old and new needs**, thanks to: a strong focus on interventions aimed at supporting the employability and employment of the citizens of region Lazio, a variety of interventions specifically addressed to young people and their reactivation, and a specific attention paid to supporting female employment. Also important is the support of self-entrepreneurship, through forms of microcredit (*Fondo Futuro*) or non-repayable contributions (as in the case of the Notice *Impresa Formativa*).

Central, in the perspective of tackling old and new frailties, is also the great attention given to supporting socio-occupational integration and, more generally, the well-being of disadvantaged persons, in a logic of active inclusion and equal opportunities for all (with particular attention to persons with disabilities, migrants, the prison population, women victims of violence).

Also of fundamental importance are the initiatives financed under Axis III aimed at increasing the participation of adults in lifelong learning (which still represents an element of weakness at the regional level), combating early school leaving, and supporting enrolment in higher education.

At the basis of the "topicality" of the ROP Lazio ESF 2014-2020 there is also the **Programme's good capacity to respond to the evolution of the regional context**, which can be seen, on the one hand, in the new "Covid interventions" planned following the reprogramming at the end of 2020, and, on the other hand, in the ability to offer, throughout the entire programming period, timely responses to individual situations of need and/or emergency, also thanks to an organisational machine that appears to have proved effective.

The outputs of the Programme, which already showed a significant potential contribution to the Europe 2020 Strategy thanks to the selected investment priorities, seem to have also **effectively contributed to the Europe 2020 Goals**. Although at the regional level none of the targets set at the EU level have yet been achieved, the targets set at the national level for education and training (reduction of school drop-out rates and more young people with tertiary education), as well as investments in research and development, have already been reached. The achievement of the national targets on employment and social inclusion is also not too far off, although the pandemic seems to have had a negative impact on the actual probabilities of achieving them in the short term, due to the progressive worsening of poverty and exclusion situations, the worsening of inequalities, and the effects on the regional labour market, in particular on some target groups (women, young people, the less educated and the self-employed), on some sectors (in the first place HORECA and non-food commerce) and on some types of enterprises (smaller companies, operating in the service sector and with a lower degree of digitalisation).

Regarding the Programme's main strengths and weaknesses, the evaluation showed how the ROP Lazio ESF 2014-2020, from the point of view of the outputs, was able to efficiently use the available resources to achieve the objectives set. However, for an assessment of the results obtained in the medium-long term, it will be necessary to wait for the results of the placement surveys currently being launched, which will allow to verify the actual contribution of the Programme to the inclusion of the recipients of the interventions in the labour market or, in the case of disadvantaged persons, to their reactivation.

The evaluation also highlighted, among the **strengths of the Programme**, the fact that most of the interventions implemented were defined within a broader programming context, represented by the "Unified Framework for the Programming of Development Resources 2014-2020" (*Quadro unitario della programmazione delle risorse destinate allo sviluppo 2014-2020*), which identified a total of 45 projects (the 'Pivot Actions') for development, work and social cohesion of region Lazio. The projects are grouped into seven strategic areas, some of which (specifically "Right to study, training and employment" and "Choices for a more united society") are fully consistent with the mission of the European Social Fund. This **convergence of resources from different sources on actions deemed strategic for the regional development makes it easier to "create critical mass" and facilitates the integration of the actions with other Funds, mainly ERDF**.

A further strength of the Programme can be identified in the **attention paid to ensuring stability over time**, through multi-year Notices or through the **continuity of initiatives** in the medium-long term in order to capitalise on the results achieved and, at the same time, in **the ability** to modify and strengthen the tools over time, by introducing functional innovations **to make the tools more adequate and responsive to the needs**, based on the experience gained, in a logic of continuous learning (as happened, for example, in project "*Generazioni*").

The ROP Lazio ESF 2014-2020 also shows a **good capacity to innovate and experiment**, which can be seen a number of successful initiatives covering all the priority Axes. This is the case, for example, of the programme of interventions aimed at university students and graduates "*Torno subito*" (I'll be right back) funded under Axis III, and the actions under Axis Employment aimed at creating opportunities to meet, socialise, exchange and incubate new ideas (through the initiatives of the network "*Porta Futuro*" and the Culture, Social and Work Hub within Plan "*Generazioni 2*"). Besides, in the context of social inclusion, it is worth mentioning the experiments that involved migrants transiting through the region, the networks for the development of social agriculture for the socio-occupational integration of disadvantaged persons, and the interventions aimed at the inclusion in the school and training systems of pupils with disabilities or disadvantaged.

Among the **weaknesses**, it seems to be the case to point out some problems encountered during the implementation of the Programme which, net of the economic difficulties related to the pandemic period, are essentially attributable to three different dimensions: i) **criticalities on the procedural and implementation side**: in some cases the mechanisms and procedures provided for by the Notices turned out to be excessively complex, as happened in the case of the training and empowerment projects addressed to the prison population and in the *RIESCO* call for tender, an initiative aimed at reactivating young NEETs and strengthening their employment opportunities through training courses, orientation, opportunities, and cultural activities through the "*RIESCO Card*", a rechargeable payment card characterised by very complex payment mechanisms; ii) **low participation of final recipients**: despite positive feedbacks from the regional productive system on the importance of the interventions, some Notices were not sufficiently attractive and recorded much lower numbers of applications than expected as, for example, in the cases of the Notices "*Voucher per l'acquisto di percorsi formativi per il settore dell'autotrasporto*" (Voucher for the purchase of training courses for the road transport sector) and "*Food delivery: formazione e sicurezza per i lavoratori della GIG economy*" (Food delivery: Training and safety for workers in the GIG economy); iii) **weakness of the supply system** especially with regard to those educational institutions that were the beneficiaries of many projects financed by the Programme, due to a high mobility of school

staff (in particular directors of general and administrative services and managers) which hinders the capitalisation of knowledge and skills necessary for the management of projects financed with Community resources.

In view of the approaching closure of the 2014-2020 programming period and the start of the subsequent ESF+ programming phase, it therefore seems appropriate to share some **reflections gained following the difficulties encountered and the lessons learned in recent years**.

In the first place, it seems to be the right time to **"put into operation" the many experiments carried out, with a view to systemising them and, where useful, modelling the experiences made**. These types of interventions - more innovative and more successful - could, therefore, be usefully included in the next ESF + programming.

Secondly, **in order to ensure an adequate participation of the final recipients** in the planned interventions, on the one hand it seems essential to keep, also in the future, the **dialogue with the socio-economic and institutional partners**, functional to the precise identification of the needs of the territory. During the current programming period this dialogue proved to be important both in the initial planning stage and in the subsequent implementation stage, especially for the definition of policies to combat the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and in the case of particularly innovative Notices. On the other hand, it also seems useful to provide, for all planned activities, **adequate communication and information activities for the final recipients** and, at the same time, to activate **awareness-raising initiatives** on the territory, **involving the main stakeholders** of the sectors subject to intervention. In addition, in the case of new Notices and/or Notices with a limited potential pool of users (as is the case for Notices that specifically target a single professional profile), it seems useful to introduce, as a standard practice and before to the publication of the Notices, the organisation of meetings with trade unions and training institutions (in case the latter are the potential beneficiaries), so as to ensure the greatest possible response from the final recipients. Finally, if the limited participation of the potential recipients derived from a problem "of a cultural nature", such as an idea of the professional profiles no longer in line with the evolution of the profiles themselves, it would be advisable to promote the activation/reactivation of a dialogue between enterprises and education/training institutions, which could help reduce stereotypes and facilitate the matching between labour supply and demand.

In the perspective, desirable, of **reducing as much as possible the delays and difficulties linked to the weakness of part of the supply system**, it seems appropriate to continue and strengthen the strategy of coaching, assisting, and tutoring those beneficiaries that show greater difficulties in implementing the projects. In particular, as regards the **projects with schools**, which are of great interest in terms of the contents conveyed and the numbers achieved (and which could therefore be usefully re-proposed in the next programming period), but at the same time see greater difficulties in terms of management due to a typology of beneficiaries less familiar with the technicalities and constraints of structural funds, it could be useful to think about a support activity in collaboration with the Regional School Office, possibly formalised through protocols between Region Lazio and the Office. In addition, starting from a precise mapping of the current involvement of schools in the region, it could be convenient to assess the possibility of increasing the pool of schools potentially interested, through promotional activities carried out in collaboration with the Regional School Office and/or supporting the creation of networks between schools already involved and "new" schools, possibly introducing reward mechanisms in the Notices.

Projects aimed at combating drop-out and at supporting the socialisation and reactivation of young people are also important in a logic of prevention of the **NEET** phenomenon, to which it seems appropriate to continue to pay specific attention in the next programming period. In this context, a sort of road map could be envisaged, starting from a clear identification of the target (who are the NEETs in region Lazio and how to reach them), passing through a necessary phase of re-motivating these young people (maybe through festivals, motivational workshops,

etc.), to arrive, in a second phase, to a personalized path of active inclusion. This path might also include a voucher or a contribution which, however, should not be directly available to the final recipient but should be used within a tailored project shared with the institution of reference.

Finally, in order to **limit criticalities of procedural nature during implementation**, as already occurred in the case of project *RIESCO*, we mention the need to envisage a preliminary feasibility check of the new mechanisms, to allow the identification of possible critical points before the publication of the Notices.