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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE EVALUATION

of e-Cohesion in 2014-2020

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1. CONTEXT AND SCOPE

Digitalisation was one of the simplification measures reinforced in the EU Regulations governing cohesion policy investments in the 2014-2020 programming period. As such, electronic data exchange systems between beneficiaries and programme authorities, or 'e-Cohesion systems', were created or further developed and subsequently used during the implementation of the programmes.

The European Commission's Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy prepared a staff working document to report on the results of the evaluation of e-Cohesion systems in the 2014-2020 programming period. The evaluation was conducted by an external contractor between November 2020 and May 2022 and the final report was published in June 2022.

The evaluation of e-Cohesion in the 2014-2020 programming period sought to: (a) collect and provide up-to-date information on the implementation and performance of e-Cohesion systems in the Member States; (b) identify good practices and the challenges of the e-Cohesion systems; (c) assess whether the desired policy objectives were achieved; (d) identify possible features for further improving the performance of the e-Cohesion systems in the 2021-2027 programming period.

The evaluation examined 302 programmes funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the Cohesion Fund (CF) in the 2014-2020 programming period, for which 108 e-Cohesion systems were mapped and analysed. The evaluation methodology included documentary research, large-scale surveys addressed to all users of e-Cohesion systems, case studies, interviews and a webinar. Six evaluation criteria were addressed, covering the five Better Regulation criteria (effectiveness, efficiency, coherence, relevance and EU added value) and the user-friendliness of the systems.

2. FINDINGS

The main objective of introducing e-Cohesion systems in the 2014-2020 programming period was to simplify and streamline the implementation of cohesion policy programmes by reducing the administrative burden for beneficiaries and authorities. The evaluation found that this objective had been met, as both beneficiaries and programme authorities consistently reported that the introduction of e-Cohesion systems had simplified the exchange of information between them and reduced the administrative burden in implementing ERDF and CF projects and programmes.

Effectiveness

Most of the systems had integrated the expected modules and features, in particular ensuring the availability of all previously processed data and documents, interactive forms and/or forms prefilled by the system and online status tracking. The e-Cohesion systems were used extensively for: (1) submitting and managing payment claims and (2)

reporting on progress. The systems also played an important role in communication between beneficiaries and programme authorities in relation to these two processes. Alternative means of communication between beneficiaries and programme authorities, such as email, were still used in certain instances, mostly for the exchange of information relating to audit verifications. In this respect, the evaluation found that a possible reason for the use of alternative means of communication, despite the availability of an e-Cohesion system, may be the absence of an e-signature feature embedded in the system.

Efficiency

The evaluation found that the introduction of e-Cohesion systems led to faster and more economical information exchange. Beneficiaries reported that the introduction of the e-Cohesion systems resulted in faster handling of payment requests and progress reporting.

Coherence

The evaluation found that all targeted categories of programme authorities (managing authorities, intermediate bodies, certifying authorities and audit authorities) had access to and were able to use the systems. The evaluation also found that the e-Cohesion systems were more likely to be connected to the central monitoring system than to other national registries, databases or other European systems (such as the System for Fund Management in the European Union - SFC)[1]. The interoperability of e-Cohesion systems with external registers or databases at the national level is one feature considered useful both by both programme authorities and beneficiaries, but is not yet widely developed. A possible explanation for the limited uptake of interconnectivity with other national registers and databases could be a lack of harmonisation and integration of the definitions of common concepts (for example, different terminology used in European and national legislation) and protocols (for example, different sets of rules and guidelines for communicating data) between the programme and the national systems.

Relevance

e-Cohesion systems were widely used by programme authorities and beneficiaries alike. The evaluation showed that systems are used most extensively by representatives of managing authorities and certifying authorities, and least used by representatives of audit authorities. This can be explained by the use of alternative means of communication (i.e. emails) identified in some instances for the audit verification process. Embedding an e-signature feature in e-Cohesion systems could be a useful way of reducing the use of alternative means of communication for audit verification purposes.

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[1] SFC is the electronic data exchange system for all official exchanges between the Member State and the Commission.

EU added value

The evaluation found that the regulatory requirement to introduce e-Cohesion systems triggered both the deployment of new systems and the integration of the required functionalities and processes into existing ones. Constructive dialogue between the European Commission and the programme authorities throughout the preparation and implementation of the 2014-2020 programming period contributed to this positive outcome.

User-friendliness

The evaluation found that e-Cohesion systems are user-friendly. The helpdesk functionalities and the gathering of user feedback and its incorporation into further system development were singled out by users as important features in this respect. Future developments in areas such as response time, system stability, the user interface, as well as the production of tutorials, guides or other user documentation, could further improve the user-friendliness of the systems.

The evaluation found that e-Cohesion systems contributed to the EU's digital progress by simplifying the exchange of information and reducing administrative burden. The evaluation also found that further simplification and reduction of the administrative burden could be achieved with additional developments targeting the interoperability between e-Cohesion systems and national databases and systems. Furthermore, the integration of other processes and features (such as e-signature) into the existing systems could further incentivise beneficiaries to harness these simplification measures.