



'Implementation of a system for public policy development in the area of social inclusion'

**Case study of a Romanian ESF project under the
study 'Progress Assessment of the ESF Support to
Public Administration' (PAPA)**

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Contact: DG EMPL F1
E-mail: EMPL-F1-UNIT@ec.europa.eu

European Commission
B-1049 Brussels

Implemented by PPMI

PPMI Group
Gedimino av. 50
LT-01110 Vilnius, Lithuania
www.ppmi.lt

Contact:
Dr Vitalis Nakrošis, thematic expert (Programme Manager at PPMI)
vitalis@ppmi.lt

Case study written by country expert Dr Sorin Dan

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PROJECT BACKGROUND

Implementation of a system for public policy development in the area of social inclusion

Operational Programme	Operational Programme Administrative Capacity 2014-2020, Priority Axis 1: 'Efficient public administration and judicial system', Specific Objective 1.1: 'The development and use of common systems and standards in public administration which optimise decision-making processes oriented towards citizens and the business sector, according with the Public Administration Development Strategy 2014-2020'
Beneficiary organisation	Romanian Ministry of Labour and Social Justice (MLSJ)
Target groups	Romanian Ministry of Labour and Social Justice, local public administrations in all 41 counties and the city of Bucharest and in 3182 administrative-territorial units across Romania
Project duration	30/03/2016 – 29/03/2018
Budget	EUR 3,076,856.29 (ESF contribution EUR 2,586,027.31)
Project manager (email address)	Florin Dragomir, Expert, Romanian Ministry of Labour and Social Justice (florin.dragomir@mmuncii.gov.ro)
Partners	National Institute of Economic Research Costin C. Kirițescu (INCE), Romanian Academy
Project/ organisation website	http://www.mmuncii.ro/j33/index.php/ro/proiecte-programe/finalizate/fs-sipoca4 http://www.mmuncii.ro/j33/index.php/ro/proiecte-programe/5128 https://portalgis.servicii-sociale.gov.ro/arcgis/home/

This case study was produced during the project 'Progress Assessment of the ESF Support to Public Administration' project that was contracted by DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion of the European Commission. The purpose of this project was to present specific cases of ESF-funded public administration reform and capacity-building initiatives, as well as to show the role of ESF financial support to public administration for the purposes of accountability. This report recounts the story of the project '**Implementation of a system for public policy development in the area of social inclusion**'. This account discusses the context and purpose of the project; the characteristics of the team implementing it; the main challenges faced and the difficulties encountered during its implementation; key developments during the implementation process; the results and impacts achieved; as well as lessons learnt and the contribution of the ESF.

IMPLEMENTATION OF A SYSTEM FOR PUBLIC POLICY DEVELOPMENT IN THE AREA OF SOCIAL INCLUSION

Introduction: context and purpose of the project

Context of the project

Elena Dobre, the Director of the Social Service Policies Unit within the Romanian Ministry of Labour and Social Justice (MLSJ), and her team had long been aware of the challenges faced by social services in Romania. Despite significant progress in reducing poverty over the years, Romania continued to struggle with a high risk of social exclusion – in 2013, 40.4% of the Romanian population was exposed to such a risk. To address these challenges, in 2015 the Government of Romania approved the National Strategy for Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction 2015-2020¹. The key target of this strategy was a reduction of 580,000 in the number of persons at risk of poverty and social exclusion by 2020, compared to the level in 2008. These numbers were in line with both the European Union's Europe 2020 Strategy and the country's commitment to continue making substantial progress in reducing poverty and social exclusion.

After years of experience working on social policy and social services, Elena Dobre and her colleagues were well acquainted with the policy context and the gaps that needed to be addressed at both central and local government levels for the target to be achieved by 2020. Social policy needed to: i) be people-oriented; ii) address in a holistic manner multiple areas of intervention including employment, social transfers (financial support), social services, education, health, housing and public participation; iii) account for the geographical dimension of poverty and social exclusion; and iv) develop capacities at all levels.

With technical support from the World Bank, these principles were integrated into the National Strategy for Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction 2015-2020. However, developing and approving a strategy and a set of action plans only constituted a first step in the right direction – the crucial next step was to begin implementation and to develop projects that could effectively address the gaps identified across the entire country. The project team focused its attention on two of the strategy's action areas: the quality and availability of social services nationwide, and the existing information systems. Unlike social transfers (i.e. financial support), for which information was readily available, portraying a clear picture of their level and coverage, the situation in the case of social services was unclear and fragmented. This meant that social services lacked evidence, jeopardising policy effectiveness.

In Romania, more than 30% of rural areas and 10% of small towns lack social services. According to the proposed strategy, integrated social services that include not only financial support but also employment, education and health care are 'extremely rare'². Specialised services are fragmented and lack coordination – particularly those targeting adults, and especially in rural areas. The information systems required to support an accurate assessment of the existence of

¹ Government of Romania (2015), *The National Strategy for Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction 2015-2020*. Available at: http://www.mmssf.ro/j33/images/Documente/Familie/2016/StrategyVol1RO_web.pdf (accessed: 31/05/2019).

² Government of Romania (2015), *The National Strategy for Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction 2015-2020*, Section 2.3 Social Services, p. 49.

social services and the need for services across the country are outdated, and are rarely used to support decision making at either central or local government level³.

The team within the Social Service Policies Unit had previously worked on the accreditation (licensing) process for social service providers in Romania, in line with the existing legislation (Government Decision 1024/2004 concerning the implementation of Government Ordinance 68/2003 regarding social services and the accreditation of social service providers, and Law 197/2012 concerning the ensuring of quality in social services). The aim of the accreditation, which continues to this day, is to improve the quality of service provision by ensuring that providers meet a set of minimum requirements. However, the accreditation process was hindered by a lack of thorough and up-to-date coverage across the country in the existing information system and provider database – the National Registry of Social Service Providers. This had a bearing on evidence-based decision making, and has ultimately affected the effectiveness of social interventions.

Design and execution of the project

Purpose of the ESF-supported project

Determined to make a change to the status quo, the MLSJ developed a project idea that focused on mapping the need for social services nationwide, coupled with building the capacity of decision makers in central and local governments. Florin Dragomir, an expert at MLSJ, joined the project as project manager. Lacking the resources to carry out their idea, the team decided to apply for ESF funding through the Operational Programme Administrative Capacity 2014-2020. They targeted Priority Axis 1: 'Efficient public administration and judicial system', Specific Objective 1.1: 'The development and use of common systems and standards in public administration which optimise decision-making processes oriented towards citizens and the business sector, according with the Public Administration Development Strategy 2014-2020'.

The project leaders chose to partner with a team of social science and policy researchers from the Romanian Academy's National Institute of Economic Research 'Costin C. Kirițescu' (INCE), led by Luminița Chivu, with whom they had previously collaborated. In Elena Dobre's words, the project sought to 'provide an accurate picture of the existing social services in Romania, as well as the need for services throughout the entire country'. 'We know a lot about benefits, but we know very little about services,' Ms. Dobre continued, 'and this needs to be understood in parallel with the accreditation process for social service providers.' The purpose of the project was to create a set of strategic planning instruments: maps of infrastructure and social service provision, maps depicting the need for social services and related infrastructure, as well as methodologies to support decision making that takes into consideration the needs and interests of citizens⁴. The specific objectives of the project were: i) to ensure a coordinated and evidence-based approach to developing and implementing policies, programmes and interventions targeting the poor and vulnerable in disadvantaged and marginalised geographical areas; ii) to implement a decision-making system within the MLSJ and local governments based on empirical data collected via a rigorous scientific methodology; iii) to develop and use a set of standard planning instruments regarding local social service provision with the aim to increase service quality; and iv) to train 450 civil servants from the central and local administrations on citizen-

³ Idem.

⁴ *Implementation of a system for public policy development in the area of social inclusion*, Project Brochure.

oriented and evidence-based public policies and other major themes developed through the project⁵.

The project, which ended in 2018, produced the following key deliverables: 1) a set of instruments that assess the need for social services and the infrastructure required for service provision throughout the country; 2) a set of interactive maps that cover the entire country⁶, depicting: i) existing social service provision; ii) the social services required; iii) relative poverty; and iv) in-work poverty; 3) the development of knowledge and capacities within the MLSJ and local governments concerning the methodologies and tools developed.

Key developments and milestones during the implementation of the project

The core project team, consisting of civil servants from the MLSJ and a team of experts from INCE, divided the implementation of the project into a set of inter-connected phases. Every phase included multiple activities, with each culminating in the reaching of milestones agreed in the project application.

The first phase of the project, which commenced on 30 March 2016, focused on building the project implementation team and putting in place the infrastructure required to implement the project over the following two years. The allocation of roles, responsibilities and tasks within the team constituted an important part of this initial phase, along with planning the additional expertise required to implement the project on the ground, as well as the procurement process for equipment and services.

During the project's second phase, the team focused on methodological work – developing the methodologies used to create four national maps providing an up-to-date and accurate picture of poverty and social exclusion across the country. To develop the methodologies and ensure adequate expertise, the team contracted six external experts who were given the task of operationalising the following key concepts used throughout the project: 'vulnerable person', 'poverty', 'in-work poverty', and 'social services'. The project team organised workshops to discuss and agree on the operationalisations, research methods, data collection and analysis, and indicators to be used in creating the maps.

The next phase of the project involved gathering good European practices on poverty and social exclusion and seeing hands-on how counterparts in other EU countries carried out similar work. These exchanges were motivated by a lack of adequate data and the difficulty involved in collecting solid and comprehensive data on poverty and social exclusion in each of Romania's 41 counties, plus the city of Bucharest, which include 3182 administrative-territorial units across the country. The decision to collect good practices from elsewhere in Europe was further prompted by the decentralisation of social service provision in Romania, together with inadequate communication, collaboration and coordination between public and private providers, on the one hand, and local public administrations, on the other. The project included four visits of approximately one week each to four different European countries – Sweden, Poland, Spain and Ireland – each of which represented a different model of social service provision. The first study visit was to Stockholm (20-26 November 2016); the second to Warsaw (4-10 December 2016), the third to Barcelona (22-28 January 2017) and the fourth to Dublin (20-24 February 2017).

⁵ Idem.

⁶ Available at: <https://portalgis.servicii-sociale.gov.ro/arcgis/home/> (Accessed: 31/05/2019).

To continue this international discussion on the best way to map poverty and social exclusion, Florin Dragomir and his colleagues organised an international conference in Bucharest on 9-10 March 2017. International experts, academics and practitioners participated and shared their experiences. The project team used this opportunity to present the project and collect additional input during the two main sessions of the conference on social service infrastructure and provision, and on poverty, including in-work poverty. Following the conference, the project leaders also organised six workshops with the aim of bringing together various stakeholders to discuss the project's proposed methodologies and mappings. These workshops attracted a range of participants from civil servants at the MLSJ to representatives of the Directorates General for Social Assistance and Child Protection from Bucharest and across the country, as well as public and private service providers. In interviews, the project team emphasised the range of opinions, ideas and approaches presented by the various stakeholders.

An important milestone in the project was the **delivery of the final version of the four methodologies**, one for each map: existing social service provision, social services required, relative poverty and in-work poverty. Each of the methodologies was tested by the project partner, INCE, and delivered to the project beneficiary on February 2017.

Once the team had successfully created the methodologies, they moved on to the next phase – data collection. This, according to the team members, was the most time-consuming phase of the entire project (as discussed further below). If the design of the maps had posed methodological challenges that were overcome by recruiting expertise and gathering international examples of good practice, data collection posed a number of practical challenges that resulted from a lack of available data and inadequate collaboration between county and local administrations and service providers.

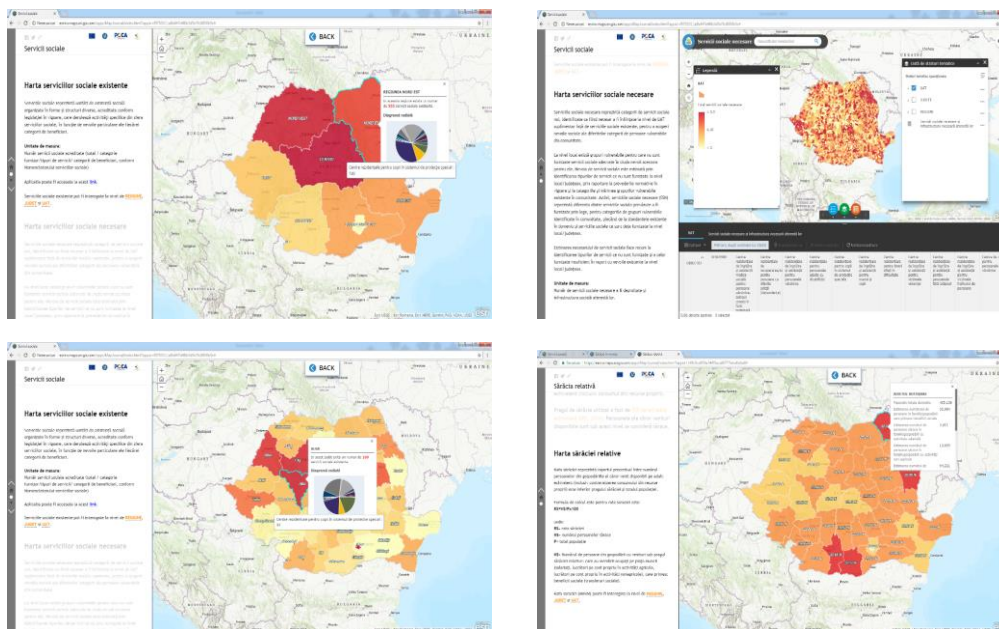
As the project leaders set out to structure the data collection process, they were in no doubt as to the great scale of the endeavour. In their own words, the research was 'a census, not a sample' – in other words, they had to collect data on social services and related infrastructure in every county and administrative-territorial unit, be it a city, town or commune. Not only did the data need to be comprehensive, it also needed to be accurate and collected in a standard form across the country. To address the complexities of this process, the project leaders developed a multi-layered structure. This structure included six national data collection coordinators, eight regional experts (one for each of Romania's eight development regions), and 44 local field experts (one for each county, plus three for the municipality of Bucharest). INCE selected the six national experts, who were responsible for ensuring the project was coordinated nationally in line with the agreed methodologies. These coordinators were also tasked with developing the maps and ensuring effective implementation in each of the country's eight regions. They coordinated data collection in each county and administrative-territorial unit, and addressed any issues that occurred locally. The data collection process lasted five months, running from March 2017 to August 2017, and resulted in the creation of a national database that includes information on local social service infrastructure, material and human resources, as well as data on social service providers. The core project team provided methodological support to this process, and made one visit to each of the 41 counties and to Bucharest, to assess progress and to help resolve any delays or information gaps. Before the process began, each field operator attended a one-day training session on data collection in Bucharest on 16 March 2017. Field operators employed a variety of data collection methods: questionnaires sent to each local administration, field visits to service providers, and interviews. The core project team organised focus groups in each county and region prior to developing the mappings to coordinate methodologies and ensure the good quality of the data.

The next phase of the project consisted of creating the software needed to develop the mappings. Due to a lack of software development expertise within the team, this task was contracted out to a software development company, which created the '**geographic information system**' or **PI-GIS**, and provided technical support to maintain the system's functionality. The software package, whose electronic and geographic dimensions were essential to the success of the project, provided the following main functionalities: i) electronic support for the creation of a national database that includes data and information on social service provision across Romania, as well as data on social service infrastructure, poverty, including in-work poverty and ii) geospatial analysis and presentation of the four thematic maps created by the project.

The software development company delivered a second component of the software, PI-IASS, which allowed the experts to analyse data provided by local public administrations concerning existing and required social services and related infrastructure.

The project leaders were aware of the need to continually monitor progress, and to ensure that each phase of the project aligned with its objectives and agreed methodology. In practical terms, this involved holding regular meetings with the external experts and fine-tuning the IT system and database. Along the way, the project leaders engaged with policy experts from the MLSJ and received constructive feedback, which proved a key ingredient to the project's final success. This resulted in the **four interactive maps being finalised** during the first quarter of 2018 – an important milestone. The PI-GIS and the national database enabled the project team to build four IT applications, one for each of the four maps (existing social service and infrastructure, required social services and infrastructure, poverty, and in-work poverty; see Figure 1 for the four maps developed). The project team also developed toolkits to facilitate the use of the maps and coordinated the design of the applications to improve its user friendliness⁷ (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. Snapshots of the four maps⁸



⁷ All four maps are available at: <https://portalgis.servicii-sociale.gov.ro/arcgis/home/> (accessed: 04/06/2019).

⁸ The full interactive maps created by the project are available at: <https://portalgis.servicii-sociale.gov.ro/arcgis/home/> (accessed: 05/06/2019).

focused on technical training for the administrators of the IT systems, to ensure adequate skills in maintaining the applications.

Finally, to promote the project's outputs and facilitate their use once the project came to a close, the team organised a final conference in Bucharest on 19 April 2018. This was attended by 105 participants, representing a variety of stakeholders.

Main difficulties encountered during the implementation of the project

The project team succeeded in achieving the project's deliverables and milestones despite some delays encountered during the data collection phase. First, the data collection process was more difficult and time-consuming than originally foreseen. Despite the multi-layered structure (national-regional-local) put in place to facilitate data collection, difficulties arose in communicating with certain local administrations and service providers. In some cases, field operators and regional coordinators did not receive the required data on time, or data was missing. The project team met regularly with the national data collection coordinators and with regional coordinators and local operators to discuss and find solutions to the issues that had occurred in each county and administrative-territorial unit. This involved direct contact with town halls, mayors' offices, local and county councils and service providers, to better explain the purpose of the project and the information and data that each stakeholder needed to provide.

A second difficulty related to the financing of ESF projects by the Managing Authority of the Operational Programme Administrative Capacity 2014-2020. To avoid financing multiple projects of the same type, the Managing Authority issued a letter on 21 June 2016 informing the team that it had identified another ESF-funded project with similar goals to their own. This project included the development of minimum cost standards, which the project team had originally planned to do. The difficulty was resolved by excluding activities relating to this goal from the project.

Third, the collection of accurate and current information on social providers was hindered to some extent by the changing nature of the providers, particularly with regard to accreditation. The accreditation of providers is reviewed regularly – some gain accreditation, while others lose it. Thus, data collected at one point in time may at some point in the future no longer be current. To address this issue, the project team revised the database regularly with information received from the Social Policies and Services Unit, which leads the accreditation process. This issue remains a concern after the end of the project, unless the database continues to be updated regularly. Losing currency poses the risk of the database losing credibility, leading to it being used less and less over time.

Conclusion: results, lessons learnt and the role of ESF financial support

Key results and outcomes

The ESF-supported project 'Implementation of a system for public policy development in the area of social inclusion' was implemented by the Social Service Policies Unit (SSPU) of the Romanian Ministry of Labour and Social Justice (MLSJ) between March 2016 and March 2018. The project team was led by the project manager, Florin Dragomir and Elena Dobre, Director of the SSPU. The team partnered with the Romanian Academy's National Institute of Economic Research 'Costin C. Kirițescu' (INCE), as well as with external experts and collaborators who provided methodological support, IT expertise and coordinated the data collection. The central

idea behind the project was to build capacity in relation to citizen-oriented and evidence-based policy making, both within the MLSJ and within local public administrations.

The project focused on social policy – more specifically, on social services. In doing so, it responded to a highly-relevant policy area that had received insufficient attention in Romania, and about which there was a lack of systematic and up-to-date data across the whole country. Social benefits, which include governmental financial support granted to people in need, are relatively easy to assess – but in the case of social services, the situation was very different. Social service provision in Romania is decentralised and delivered by various providers, both public and private. Although a National Registry of Social Service Providers was in place prior to the initiation of this project, it did not include adequate information, thus depriving the MLSJ of the evidence it needed. The changing nature of social service provision, including frequent changes in the accreditation status of providers, meant that the existing registry was prone to becoming outdated. Furthermore, the existing database did not provide a thorough and accurate description of existing social service provision and infrastructure, nor of the need for social services and related infrastructure nationwide. At the same time, little information existed that covered the entire country in relation to in-work poverty. The experienced policy experts among the researchers at INCE and the MLSJ, who had collaborated together previously, had grappled with these gaps for years. Thus, they were in a very good position to address them with ESF support. ESF funding proved instrumental in seeing their ideas come to fruition.

In this context, the project leaders framed their project proposal and succeeded in gaining the ESF support required to implement their idea. The project addressed the need to map poverty and social exclusion across Romania, as well as to provide central and local policy makers, service providers and service users with current information on the need for and availability of social services. The main results achieved by the project are as follows: methodological development, adapted to the Romanian context, on how to map existing and required social services, poverty and in-work poverty in a manner that is standardised and comparable; a national database containing information that covers the existence of social services and related infrastructure, the need for social services and infrastructure nationwide, and poverty, including in-work poverty; a geo-spatial information system that facilitates data analysis and provides electronic support to present the mappings in an attractive manner and make them available online to policy makers, service providers and users, as well as to the general public; four interactive and accessible maps depicting existing and required social services and infrastructure, poverty and in-work poverty for every county and administrative-territorial unit in Romania; and capacity building, both within the MLSJ and within the local administrations responsible for coordinating social service provision.

Elena Dobre characterised the project as 'the backbone of all our future work on social service provision in Romania' – a prerequisite that can assist policy makers at the MLSJ and within local public administrations in developing evidence-based policies. In particular, she and her colleagues emphasised the usefulness of the four mappings – a tangible result that anybody can access and use: central and local policy makers, service providers, current and prospective service users and the general public. Although the maps were not the only output of the project, they constituted the main deliverable and were an innovation for Romania's social policy. The maps are comprehensive, covering all 41 counties, the city of Bucharest, which include 3182 administrative-territorial units and present information at national level and for each county and administrative-territorial unit. Importantly, in the case of existing social services and infrastructure, the data can also be filtered by service beneficiary, type of service, or the status of providers (public or private). The mappings are presented in an attractive manner, and data can be easily retrieved and analysed using these filters.

Lessons learnt and success factors

The main actors in the project were committed to introducing a novel tool that would facilitate decision making based on accurate evidence, and provide current and future beneficiaries with the information they need to decide between the options available where they live. In implementing the project, the team learned a number of valuable lessons. First, they learned that local realities do not necessarily align with the aspirations of central authorities – and that a top-down approach to public administration reform and capacity building is therefore unlikely to be successful. Numerous initiatives had been proposed previously, but none of them made a visible impact. This led to a loss of credibility and lack of belief that major change could occur. The project team was aware of this reality, and sought to bridge the gap between central and local authorities by working with regional experts and local field operators. Working with non-governmental actors also facilitated interaction with a wide variety of private social service providers, which play an essential role in delivering social services in Romania. These include non-governmental organisations affiliated with churches, international charities, and locally-supported foundations.

Second, the project leaders also learned that a countrywide survey of social services is time consuming, and that delays in data collection are inevitable – meaning that extra time needs to be considered in advance. Structuring the project team into three layers (national, regional and local) and holding regular meetings to discuss progress and recurring issues helped to keep the project on track.

The third lesson of the project relates to the sustainability and use of the tools developed once the project had come to an end. The project leaders were aware that simply building a tool and making it accessible online was not sufficient to ensure that the tool would be used. Any system devised by the project needed to become part of the working processes of the administrations responsible for policy making and social service coordination. They also needed to become a gateway for beneficiaries and carers who are in need of services. This is where the capacity building and promotional activities of the project came into play. The training sessions targeted both dignitaries and civil servants in the MLSJ and local administrations. The capacity building exposed them to the functionalities of the tools, as well as to the importance of developing citizen-oriented and evidence-based policy making. Connecting the two competencies not only provided trainees with information on why policy making needs to be evidence-based, but also provided them with the 'how to' knowledge to make it happen. The attractiveness and user friendliness of the mappings, together with the detailed descriptions provided, gave trainees the impetus to use them as part of their daily work. It should be noted, however, that the project has only recently come to an end and that an assessment of its full impact would be difficult to gauge at this moment. A key benefit of this ESF-supported project is that, although it mainly targeted central and local policy makers, its impacts were not restricted solely to these groups, but also included public and private service providers, service beneficiaries and their families and the general public, who at some point might be in need of social care.

The main factors that contributed to successful implementation were: strong methodological and technical expertise; effective project management; well-functioning team-work and collaboration with external actors; and a multi-layered data collection structure that included local field operators. The project benefitted from the policy experience of the Social Service Policies Unit, the research capacity provided by INCE and from the project management skills provided by the MLSJ. This trio believed firmly in the relevance of the project and worked effectively both within the team and with external experts and collaborators. They also managed

to recruit skillful social scientists and IT experts, who made an important contribution to the methodological and technical parts of the project.

The international exchanges and contacts carried out as part of the project further facilitated the project team's learning, and motivated them to produce relevant results by identifying gaps in the provision of social services in Romania. The scale of the project, covering the entire country, was both intimidating and motivating at the same time. As the trio described during their interviews, the aim of covering the entire country seemed intimidating at first, knowing that they might not be able to collect all of the required data. At the same time, however, they were highly motivated and believed that the project could make a difference. The 'census', as Luminița Chivu termed it, was something that would be 'difficult to ignore, once finalised'. Although the data collection process was hampered by delays, the use of local operators who knew the administrations and service providers proved effective. Thus, the project was perceived less as another central-government initiative that might lead nowhere (as others have), but as a local project that mattered to local people. It is likely that the project team did not entirely manage to address this concern, but the use of local researchers was certainly a step in the right direction.

To ensure sustainability, the project leaders need to continue to spearhead the mappings and associated methodologies in the future, and to update the database regularly to maintain its currency. In addition, they need to continue to train and promote the project's results and gain further buy-in from key policy makers who can do the same, thus improving the project's saliency.

Role of ESF support

Florin Dragomir and Elena Dobre underlined the importance of ESF support, without which their idea, which they had wanted to implement for some time, could not have been carried out. ESF funding was essential and contributed to the building of an innovative tool that tackled an important gap in the Romanian social services sector. The project has laid the foundation for the development of social services that are better informed by accurate and comprehensive evidence, and which are accessible and of good quality, reflecting the needs of beneficiaries who can choose the type of service they need. The ESF support also helped the project leaders to structure their project by focusing it on a relevant policy area that the Managing Authority decided to fund. In addition, the focus of the ESF support on capacity building in public administration helped channel the project towards administrative capacity gaps in social policy. The ESF support and its reporting requirements also stimulated the project team to plan its activities carefully and within budget, to build partnerships, to engage a range of stakeholders and to aim for achieving outputs that make a difference.

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