



# Deputy Prime Minister's Office for Investments and Informatization of the Slovak Republic

## Evaluation of partnership in implementation of the Partnership Agreement of the Slovak Republic

### Final Report



*Tento projekt bol spolufinancovaný  
Európskou úniou.*



**Európska únia**  
Európsky fond regionálneho rozvoja

KPMG Slovensko

June 2018

This report contains 48 pages

## Abbreviations

<b>APA</b>	Agricultural Paying Agency
<b>CA</b>	Civil Association
<b>CCA</b>	Central Coordinating Authority
<b>CF</b>	Cohesion Fund
<b>CLLD</b>	Community Led Local Development
<b>DPMOII</b>	Deputy Prime Minister's Office for Investments and Informatization
<b>EAFRD</b>	European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development
<b>EC</b>	European Commission
<b>EMFF</b>	European Maritime and Fisheries Fund
<b>ERDF</b>	European Regional Development Fund
<b>ESF</b>	European Social Fund
<b>ESIF</b>	European Structural and Investment Funds
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>EU Ba</b>	Economic University in Bratislava
<b>GD REGIO</b>	General Directorate of regional and urban policy
<b>GO SR</b>	Slovak Government's Office
<b>Grant</b>	grant/ non-repayable financial contribution
<b>HP</b>	horizontal principle
<b>IROP</b>	Integrated Regional Operational Program
<b>MA</b>	Managing Authority
<b>MARD SR</b>	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Slovak Republic
<b>MC</b>	monitoring committee
<b>MC SR</b>	Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic
<b>MD SR</b>	Ministry of Defense of the Slovak Republic
<b>ME SR</b>	Ministry of Economy of the Slovak Republic
<b>MEnv SR</b>	Ministry of Environment of the Slovak Republic
<b>MESR&amp;S SR</b>	Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic
<b>MF SR</b>	Ministry of Finance of the Slovak Republic
<b>MFA&amp;EM SR</b>	Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Matters of the Slovak Republic
<b>MH SR</b>	Ministry of Healthcare of the Slovak Republic
<b>MI SR</b>	Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic
<b>MJ SR</b>	Ministry of Justice of the Slovak Republic
<b>MLSAF SR</b>	Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic
<b>MTC SR</b>	Ministry of Transport and Construction of the Slovak Republic

<b>NMC</b>	National monitoring committee for European structural and investment funds for the programming period 2014 - 2020
<b>OP</b>	Operational Program
<b>OP EPA</b>	Operational Program Effective Public Administration
<b>OPF</b>	Operational Program Fisheries
<b>OP HR</b>	Operational Program Human Resources
<b>OP II</b>	Operational Program Integrated Infrastructure
<b>OP QE</b>	Operational Program Quality of Environment
<b>OP TA</b>	Operational Program Technical Assistance
<b>OP R&amp;I</b>	Operational Program Research and Innovations
<b>PA SR</b>	Partnership Agreement of the Slovak Republic
<b>SR</b>	Slovak Republic
<b>RDP</b>	Rural Development Program
<b>Interreg V-A SK - AT</b>	Cooperation Program Interreg V-A Slovak Republic – Austria
<b>Interreg V-A SK-CZ</b>	Cooperation Program Interreg V-A Slovak Republic - Czech Republic
<b>Interreg V-A SK - HU</b>	Cooperation Program Interreg V-A Slovak Republic - Hungary
<b>Interreg V-A SK - HU</b>	Cooperation Program Interreg V-A Slovak Republic – Hungary

## Summary

Rolling evaluation of partnership in implementation of the Partnership Agreement SR was conducted with the aim to assess the functioning of the partnership and consider its added value in the programming period 2014 - 2020. The monitoring period was set from 20.06.2014 to 31.03.2018 and included all programs under the goal "Investment in growth and employment" and selected programs under the goal "European Territorial Cooperation" of the European Structural and investment Funds. In the programs of cross-border cooperation the partnership principle was examined from the perspective of the entities in Slovak territory. Assessment aspects included the contribution of the partnership in application of the horizontal principles: Sustainable growth, Equality of men and women and non-discrimination.

The evaluation focused to answer the main evaluating questions i) to what end were the provisions of the European legislation in connection with involvement of partners complied with, ii) how in particular are the partners involved and how do they perceive the partnership, iii) how were partners selected and to what end were the selection procedures transparent and adhered to and iv) what was the added value/contribution of the partners engaged in performance of the Partnership Agreement SR.

The methodical evaluation approach made use of both quantitative and qualitative evaluation methods. An analytical method of desk research was used in combination with semi-structured in-depth interviews with the representatives of the managing authorities, central coordinating authority and bodies in charge of management of the horizontal principles, complemented with an online questionnaire sent to entities involved in the preparation and implementation of funds. Primary sources of data gathered from interviews and online survey were complemented with secondary sources especially from the legislative and methodical documents, websites, statutes, meeting rules and meeting minutes of the formal groups.

An analysis of the established partnerships showed that the current involvement of partners is a good prerequisite for fulfilling of the partnership principle, being in accordance with the intended purpose. "A wide-ranging partnership" of representatives of managing authorities, intermediary bodies, bodies in charge of management of the horizontal principles, expert departments of the state and public administration, entities representing territorial self-government, social and economic partners as well as civil society representatives was applied especially in the phase of preparation of the Partnership Agreement of the SR and programs and via monitoring committees. In the phase of program implementation the partners were invited as need be, driven by the need to solve specific tasks.

Partners were selected on the basis of unwritten criteria which included mainly a subject-matter relevance to the content framework of the Partnership Agreement SR or program, representative aspect covering all categories of entities, expertise, entities' engagement and active participation in the preparation and monitoring in the previous programming period 2007 - 2013).

Formal and informal groups established for the partnership purposes are considered as adequately effective. Measures to avoid potential conflicts of interest are adopted appropriately. Up to 74,4% of engaged entities perceive the partnership as beneficial

and 60,2% consider the communication within the cooperation as sufficient/rather sufficient. More than a half of entities were satisfied with the quality of provided information within the activity of the monitoring committees and work groups, while they assessed whether the information was timely, sufficient, comprehensible and up-to-date.

In terms of their partnership activities, partners most often used the possibility to comment on the submitted proposals/materials and to share information with other entities. They present their own proposals and materials less frequently, with a similar frequency they formulate recommendations for the managing authorities and central coordinating authority and invite experts to the group sessions. Up to 79,4% of partners said that their presented opinions for the final wording of documents were partially considered. Most often quoted reasons for discontent among the partners were formal nature of the meetings, insufficient communication (limited personal contact), shortage of time to comment on the materials, failure to include the submitted comments and suggestions entirely, lack of trust and failure to involve all relevant partners in communication

Added value of cooperation among the entities is especially the following:

- being informed, sharing and spreading the information further, feedback from other partners;
- cooperation of entities and communication among them, involvement of various categories of entities, synergies ensuing from wide-ranging knowledge and experience, inspirations, approach to work;
- possibility to present suggestions, opinions and comments, possibility to influence and improve outcomes and the system of management and implementation of ESIF, space to explain/clarify issues;
- spreading professional/expert experience and information, technical know-how, wider range of opinions,
- bottom-up perspective during decision-making processes which facilitate improved thematic balance and focus, identification of real needs on the basis of entities really active in a particular area, locations and regions;
- enhanced commitment and responsibility - easier implementation of the cohesion policy, introducing complementarity with other policies, strategies and funding resources;
- pressure on the quality of outcomes and results;
- control of outcomes by the general public and increased transparency.

The contribution of applied partnership principle was underlined by positive results in the phases of preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the European structural and investment funds. The evaluation showed that the cooperation in partnership facilitates easier achievement of social, economic and territorial cohesion and contributes to a more effective performance of the cohesion policy.

Following the findings and conclusions, the evaluation recommends the following:

- the central coordinating authority, managing authorities and bodies in charge of management of the horizontal principles should ensure that the main criteria and principles underlying the selection of partners be announced in advance in writing (in order to ensure an adequate audit track record and increase the transparency of procedures in the selection of partners);
- introduce a structure of the engaged partners from the beginning of the programming and work with the same partners throughout the entire program cycle of management of the European structural and investments funds (for the sake of preserving continuity and advancing the principle of joint responsibility for the adopted decisions); that does not exclude the possibility to ad-hoc invite experts in real time;
- maximize the use of umbrella organizations or organizations with a mandate to represent interests of a common group of entities (encouraging a more operative task solving by creating groups with fewer members);
- consider involvement of other partners<sup>6</sup> (except the state administration entities) in the design of calls for submission of grant applications in a manner which would avoid conflict of interests (to increase transparency);
- provide a sufficient time for the partners to submit comments on the presented materials and submitted proposals (for the sake of improved quality of outcomes and proposed processes);
- consider adjustment of measures devised to strengthen partners' capacity with a particular focus on social partners and organizations representing the civil society, e. g. remunerate activities connected with acting on membership in groups (foster interest and make the conditions easier for individuals and organizations to actively participate in management and implementation of funds);
- consider introduction of an ethical code of conduct in organizing a partnership, with clearly defined principles to be strictly adhered to by the cooperating partners (in order to build a culture of partnership and shape the environment of trust and respect in a positive manner).

The main principles of such a code of conduct should include especially the following:

- a thorough selection of entities and nominations of experts in their particular area,
- to avoid a merely formal nature of participation, the nominated representatives must be keen to act on the membership, be active and engaged,
- effectiveness of cooperation and quality of outputs can be guaranteed only if the partners come well prepared for the meetings, have studied all the submitted materials in advance and their position corresponds with the opinions of the group they represent,
- for the sake of maintaining continuity it is important to ensure a regular participation of the nominated partner representatives and eliminate proxies at the meetings of groups and committees,



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- in order to complete the common objective of the partnership, the nominated partners must be able to perceive a society-wide interest, must respect the agreed procedures, be discreet in their statements outside the work groups, interpret the results correctly and be tolerant to the adopted suggestions,
- adhering to agreements and honesty are the baseline elements in cooperation.

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## 1 Introduction and report structure

This document represents the *Final Report* within delivery of the *Volume 2 "Evaluation of the partnership in the implementation of the Partnership Agreement of the Slovak Republic"* (hereinafter the "assignment") pursuant to Partial Work Contract no. 93/2017 entered into on 06. 07. 2017 between the Deputy Prime Minister's Office for Investments and Informatization of the Slovak Republic as the client and the consortium of companies KPMG Slovensko, spol. s r. o., Bratislava and stengl. a. s., Bratislava as the contractor (on the grounds of a Framework agreement no. 1122/2013 on rendering advisory services for design, management and evaluation of projects/programs, as amended by Appendix no. 1 to the Framework agreement no. 1122/2013, which was signed by the Slovak Government's Office <sup>1</sup>on behalf of the client and the consortium of companies KPMG Slovensko, spol. s r. o., Bratislava and stengl. a. s., Bratislava on behalf of the contractor).

The *Final evaluation report* reflects the process of evaluation and its individual sub-parts in line with the assigned requirements and presents all the important results, findings, conclusions, recommendations and proposals ensuing therefrom.

The report contains the following parts:

- Summary - a brief description of the subject, purpose of evaluation, evaluating questions and methodology used to perform the evaluation, summary of findings, conclusions and recommendations;
- The purpose and subject of evaluation, scope of evaluation both in terms of contents and time aspects, wording of the evaluating questions.
- Methodology and evaluation procedure - description of the methodical procedures concerning the evaluating questions, the technique applied in data collection and analysis;
- Findings - description of all important findings; results of analyses per evaluating questions;
- Conclusions and recommendations.

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<sup>1</sup> Following the Act no.171/2016 Coll. amending the Act no. 575/2001 Coll. on the organization of the government's activity and organization of the central state administration as later amended, which also changes and appends several other acts, the Deputy Prime Minister's Office for Investments and Informatization (DPMOII) was established with effect since the 1st June 2016. The Partial Work Contract arose from the delimitation from GO SR to DPMOII.

## 2 Purpose and subject of evaluation, evaluating questions

### 2.1 Purpose and subject of evaluation

**The purpose** of evaluation is to assess the functioning of the partnership in implementation of the Partnership Agreement SR (PA SR) entered into between the Slovak Republic and the European Commission on the 20th of June 2014, which defines the strategy, priorities and conditions for effective and efficient use of ESIF in the years 2014 – 2020.

**The subject** of the evaluation is the partnership and participation of partners in implementing the PA SR in the period of 2014 – 2020 following Article 5 of the Regulation of the European Parliament and the Council (EU) no. 1303/2013<sup>2</sup> (general regulation), Article I Sec. 2 par. 2 of the Act no. 292/2014 Coll. on the Contribution provided from ESIF and on the change and amendment of several other laws and in accordance with compliance with the partnership principle according to the Delegated regulation of the Commission (EU) no. 240/2014 about the European Code of Conduct for the Partnership in the framework of ESIF.

**Scope of evaluation from the time perspective** covers the period from 20.06.2014<sup>3</sup> to 31.03.2018.

**The scope of evaluation in terms of content** includes the assessment of the partnership principle in preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the PA SR including all the programs under the objective "Investment into growth and employment" and selected programs under the objective "European territorial cooperation" provided below. In the programs of cross-border cooperation, where the managing authority is a body outside the territory of the SR, the perception of the partnership principle by the national authority was assessed, addressing selected partners within the Slovak territory. For the programs of cross-border cooperation, where the managing authority is located in the Slovak territory, the partnership principle was assessed only within the SR (national authority and other members of the eligible territory were not included in assessing of the partnership).

Thus the evaluation includes programs of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), European Social Fund (ESF), Cohesion Fund (CF), European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF). Assessment aspects included the contribution of the partnership in application of the horizontal principles (HP), sustainable growth, gender equality and non-discrimination.

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<sup>2</sup>Regulation of the European Parliament and the Council (EU) no. 1303/2013 of 17 December 2013 laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and laying down general provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and repealing Council Regulation (EC) no. 1083/2006

<sup>3</sup> Date of approval of the Partnership Agreement of the SR

## Programs included in evaluation

Programs under the objective Investment in growth and employment		
Program	Fund	Managing Authority
Operational Program Research and Innovations (OP R&I)	ERDF	MESR&S SR
Operational Program Integrated Infrastructure (OP II)	ERDF, CF	MTC SR
Operational Program Human Resources (OP HR)	ESF, ERDF	MLSAF SR
Operational Program Quality of Environment (OP QE)	ERDF, CF	ME SR
Integrated Regional Operational Program (IROP)	ERDF	MARD SR
Operational Program Effective Public Administration (OP EPA)	ESF	MI SR
Operational Program Technical Assistance (OP TA)	ERDF	GO SR
Rural Development Program (RDP)	ERDF	MARD SR
Operational Program Fisheries (OPF)	EMFF	MARD SR

Programs of the objective European territorial cooperation		
Program	Fund	Managing Authority
Cooperation Program Interreg V-A Slovak Republic - Czech Republic (Interreg V-A SK - CZ)	ERDF	MARD SR
Cooperation Program Interreg V-A Slovak Republic - Austria (Interreg V-A SK - AT)	ERDF	MARD SR
Cooperation Program Interreg V-A Poland - Slovak Republic (Interreg V-A PL - SK)	ERDF	Ministry of Investment and Development of the Polish Republic /MARD SR
Cooperation Program Interreg V-A Slovak Republic - Hungary (Interreg V-A SK - HU)	ERDF	Hungarian Prime Minister's Office/MARD SR

## 2.2 Evaluating questions

According to the terms of reference evaluation questions are as follows:

- To what extent were provisions of Article 5 of the General regulation and the European Code of Conduct in connection with involvement of the partners in the implementation of the Partnership Agreement SR adhered to?***
- What is the specific involvement of the partners according to Art. 3 of the European Code of conduct in implementing the Partnership Agreement SR and their perception of the partnership principle?***

The second evaluating question has been split into two parts due to better overview and extensive scope of information

Part 2.1. is dedicated to the specific involvement of partners in implementing the PA SR. Part 2.2. describes perception of the partnership principle from the view point of the partners.

3. ***How were partners selected in implementing the Partnership Agreement SR and to what end were transparent procedures applied in the selection process?***
4. ***What was the added value/contribution of the partners involved in implementing the Partnership Agreement SR?***

### 3 Evaluation methodology and procedure

The work was conducted in three connected phases:

- 1 *Preparation/initial phase*, where the Contractor identified key data resources, performed an overall review of the data and proposed the evaluation methodology to be applied. Within this phase the Contractor applied the method of *desk research* to scope the mapping, collection and summary of the necessary baseline documents.
- 2 *The phase of proper evaluation - data collection, analysis* where the following methods were applied:
  - a. *Desk research* in the scope of collection and analysis of relevant documents and information;
  - b. *Semi-structured (in-depth) interview* aiming to establish more detailed information from the responsible persons of the CCA, MAs, bodies in charge of HP management or other entities on the specific cooperation with partners, method of partner selection and perception of the added value in the partnership;
  - c. *On-line questionnaire survey* as a basic tool to assess the opinions of the partners involved;
  - d. *Synthesis*, an approach whereby the outputs and findings from the aforementioned methods were used to formulate conclusions and recommendations.
- 3 *Final project phase* - processing and finalization of the final evaluation report. *Synthesis* was used to define findings, conclusions and recommendations in the preparation of the final report.

Ongoing evaluation makes use of both quantitative and qualitative evaluation methods. Qualitative techniques - individual semi-structured interviews with the MAs, CCA and bodies in charge of HP management as an in-depth conversation technique were deployed to clarify important details and causal context, to identify the selected procedures, to find out the opinions and results compared to expectations. Quantitative evaluation techniques - online questionnaire survey was used to find out information and opinions in a large group of entities (involved partners). Lists of engaged partners identified during assessment of the first evaluating question were used to identify respondents who were then asked to complete the online questionnaire (with respect to the total number of entities involved), and a census was used.

The desk research method was used as the main analytical method in combination with partially structured in-depth interviews to answer the first evaluation question, to assess the compliance with the requirements of the general regulation<sup>2</sup> and the European Code of Conduct for partnerships in connection with identification of partners in defining the subject categories. The subjects were grouped in categories according to Article 3 and 4 of the European Code of conduct for partnership, providing detailed descriptions of entities to be included in the researched categories (especially by the nature of activity

and funding resources)<sup>4</sup>. The obtained information about the numbers and nature of entities were analysed and assessed in total for the formal groups, numerically and in per cent, in graphs, charts and descriptions. Assessed was also the application of the change in accordance with the requirement Sec. 7, par. 5 of the amended Act no. 292/2014 Coll. and the System of management of ESIF, version 5.0, i. e. to ensure that representatives of other entities in the monitoring committees have a majority of votes since 01.01.2018.

To examine the specific involvement of the partners in the preparation and performance of PA SR and ESIF programs (second evaluating question), the desk research method was used, complemented by partially structured interviews with MAs, CCA and bodies in charge of HP management. The perception of the partnership principle was assessed using in-depth interviews with MAs, CCA and bodies in charge of HP management and the online questionnaire was distributed to 989 identified entities.

The method of selection of the partners and compliance with transparent procedures of the partner selection (third evaluating question) was assessed using semi-structured interviews with MAs, CCA and bodies in charge of HP management.

To answer the fourth evaluating question and to determine the added value of the applied partnership principle, deployed were the partially structured in-depth interviews with MAs, CCA and bodies in charge of HP management, an online questionnaire and desk research in the scope of publicly available information.

The primary source of data were the data collected in the course of interviews and on-line questionnaire survey. The secondary data resources were especially the data from the survey of relevant documents: general regulation<sup>2</sup>, the European Code of Conduct for the Partnership, Act no. 292/2014 Coll., systems of managing ESIF and PRD, methodical instruction of the CCA no. 8. Important sources of the secondary data included relevant information obtained from the websites of the MAs, CCA and bodies in charge of HP management, information from statutes, meeting rules and minutes of meetings of the monitoring committees and formal work groups.

The evaluation did not include an examination of the process of commenting every draft which the partners could influence according to their competences, since the ultimate responsibility for the document stays with its presenter.

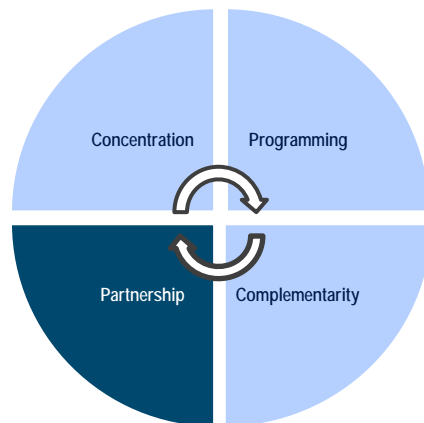
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<sup>4</sup> Public administration entities were identified according to the List of accounting units of the total group for the accounting consolidation in the public administration in 2017.

## 4 Findings

### 4.1 Partnership principle

The use of ESIF depends on compliance with the four principles [Concentration-Programming – Complementarity – Partnership]:



Partnership is one of the bearing pillars of the EU regional policy. Partnership principle is, in accordance with Art. 5 of the general regulation <sup>2</sup> and in line with the approach of a multi-level governance, based on the need of close collaboration of entities from the following categories:

- a) **bodies of state and public administration and bodies of municipal administration** (central bodies of state administration, budgetary and state-funded institutions established by the state, bodies of government plenipotentiaries, municipalities, self-governing regions, academic education institutions);
- b) **economic and social partners** (business chambers, entrepreneurs' associations and organizations, associations of companies representing general interests of the industry, associations of municipalities);
- c) **entities representing the civil society** (non-governmental and non-profit organizations, funds, local action groups, chambers of non-governmental non-profit organizations of the government council, entities active in the protection of environment, entities supporting social inclusion, gender equality and non-discrimination).

Partners should be involved in the preparation and implementation of the PA SR and ESIF programs, both on the horizontal (e. g. collaboration between municipalities and regions) as well as the vertical level (e. g. collaboration between the bodies of central state administration and regions, municipalities and non-profit organizations).

The ultimate objective of the partnership principle is to ensure that ESIF-funded investments are expedient and transparent and the entire cohesion policy is publicly controlled. Partnership applies to all phases of the ESIF program management, from the preparation process through the management and implementation to monitoring and evaluation. This approach aims to ensure that the introduced measures adjust to local and regional needs and priorities. The partnership intends to direct the ESIF assistance to those areas and in such a manner that PA SR is implemented in accordance with its purpose and in order to achieve the anticipated effect of applied regional and cohesion policies across SR.

## **4.2 Legislative framework advancing the partnership principle**

### **European legislation**

Advancing the partnership principle in the programming period 2014 – 2020, as opposed to 2007 – 2013, has been enhanced by drawing up of a legislation framework by EC. That prevented absence of a consistent legislative regulation in relation to the principle. Upon the EC motion, the partnership principle was introduced in the general regulation for the first time<sup>2</sup>. Article 5 of the regulation lays down an obligation of the member states to organize partnership at all levels of program preparation, management, monitoring and evaluation. Provisions of the same article are an actual break-through in this regards, as the previous programming periods saw the partnership organized only in those areas where it was inevitable.

In accordance with the mandate granted by the general regulation, the EC issued a Delegated Commission regulation (EU) no. 240/2014 on the European Code of Conduct on partnership, with the purpose of laying down the rules of conduct in order to support the member states and make organization of partnerships easier. Having issued the Code of conduct on partnership, the EC determined baseline requirements for high quality partnerships while maintaining adequate flexibility, so that the member states could define their ways of organizing the participation of partners. The European Code of conduct on partnership is another important milestone, advancing the collective commitment and responsibility for the cohesion policy.

### **Legislation and methodical documents at the national level**

Partnership Agreement SR (PA SR) entered into between the SR and EC on 20.06.2014 defines the strategy and priorities for effective and efficient investment for the period of 2014 - 2020 and the partnership principle is a significant aspect thereof, as well as its application throughout the entire ESIF programming cycle.

The obligation to apply partnership in ESIF funding has been adjusted in Slovakia by Act no. 292/2014 Coll. on contributions provided from ESIF (hereinafter the "ESIF Law"). At the same time the Act defines jurisdiction and procedures for the bodies of state administration and bodies of territorial self-administration in providing such grants.

The elementary framework of involvement of the partners in the specific processes of preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the programs has been



determined by the CCA in the System of ESIF management for the programming period of 2014 - 2020 and by the MA for PRD in the System of PRD management 2014 - 2020 (hereinafter as "the management system"). In order to ensure a consistent procedure of MA in organizing partnerships, the CCA issued the following methodical documents:

- Methodical guidance of CCA on preparation of OP/programs in the programming period of 2014 - 2020, significant in defining a single statute of work groups for the preparation of programs and an obligation of engaging relevant partners in designing the programs;
- The CCA guidance on engaging the partners, non-governmental non-profit organizations in the preparation of PA SR and programs, established an obligation to ensure a proportional representation of representative NGOs in the work groups for the preparation of programs;
- CCA Samples no. 1 and 2 for developing statutes and rules of a meeting procedure of the monitoring committee which established the need to respect the partnership principle;
- Methodical instruction no. 8 on the progress report on implementation of the PA SR defines the structure and contents of the report including an obligation to evaluate involvement of partners in program implementation.

### **4.3 Mechanisms of partnership implementation created at the national level**

The partnership principle is fully applied at the PA SR level and within all ESIF programs. To apply partnership means especially to provide all the relevant information on the process and contents of programming, monitoring and evaluation to the public; ensure balanced representation of individual sectors and adequate representation of civil organizations in the advisory councils, committees and work groups and to provide appropriate time framework for commenting of the materials by the entities and the public. The main principle in applying partnership is to ensure proper representation of adequate stakeholders who are nominated in a transparent and unambiguous manner, with precisely defined competences.

Partners are involved in the ESIF management and implementation activities as follows:

- a. preparation of PA SR/programs and changes thereof;
- b. performance of tasks of a monitoring committee (MC) - national, for programs;
- c. program implementation (especially in designing calls for proposals<sup>5</sup>, in approving the selection criteria, in preparation and approval of the national projects proposals, in developing and implementation of integrated territorial investments and local development strategies);
- d. application of horizontal principles;
- e. drawing up materials (e. g. progress report, conceptual and legislative documents);
- f. monitoring of PA SR and programs;

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<sup>5</sup> Calls for submission of project proposals and calls for submission of grant applications, calls for presenting national projects

- g. raising awareness of ESIF;
- h. evaluation of ESIF interventions.

The partnership principle is generally applied via setting up formal and informal groups with a defined purpose. CCA, in order to ensure timely, meaningful and transparent consultations with the partners established baseline requirements for the MA procedure in involving partners in the preparation and implementation of programs in the ESIF management system and special methodical guidelines (refer chapter 4.2).

Formal groups are established on the grounds of a written statute which also defines powers of partners in the group. Formal groups are governed by written rules in the code of their meeting procedure, while the group meetings, decisions and agreed tasks are minuted. Group members can present position of the institution they represent, comment on submitted documents and discuss on proposals and questions related to the subject-matter and activity of that group. A work group adopts conclusions and recommendations which were discussed and voted on, while a simple majority of votes is necessary to approve a conclusion/recommendation (in cases of significant importance a consensual approval of all the group members is required). A formal group can be established as an advisory body in accordance with the organizational rules of the Ministry. Formal groups are created in all entities involved in ESIF management, that is CCA, MA, IB and bodies in charge of HP management.

In order to promote a transparent environment, all MAs worked with a wide-ranging group of partners in developing the program proposal through created work groups, especially in the matters of need analysis, definition of priorities and specific objectives aligned with the program focus. MAs usually took the structure of work groups in program development as the basis for subsequent choice of partners for their MCs. MCs have a special position among the formal groups, establishment thereof is governed by the Act on ESIF and ESIF management system and they are established as follows:

- a national MC established by the CCA to evaluate implementation of the cohesion policy objectives and the efficiency of activities related to ESIF-funded grants;
- MCs established by each MA to examine program performance and evaluate progress achieved in implementation of the program objectives.

Informal groups are set up without statutes formalized in writing and administrative procedures. They comprise fewer members, often experts in a clearly specified area and their meetings are driven by a need to discuss or solve a specific subject-matter. Informal groups have been set up for instance within CCA, OP R&I, OP QE, RDP, OP HR.

The decision on selecting partners into committees and groups is a competence of their founder (MA or IB). When selecting partners, MAs/IBs consider the content and thematic focus of the program, with regard to a balanced representation of sectors and adequate representation of civil society entities. Stricter rules apply to the structure of MCs, which must fully adhere to the principle of partnership and non-discrimination. In accordance with the ESIF management system, up to 31.12.2017 it was recommended to respect the principle of thirds in the structure of MCs (1/3 committee members as state administration representatives, 1/3 representatives of self-government and 1/3

representatives of the economic and social partners and the third sector). Amended ESIF law effective as of 01.01.2018 requires the MAs to adjust the MC structure in such a manner that the representatives of the other entities <sup>6</sup>have a majority of votes in the MC<sup>7</sup>. This aims to ensure a balance in the MC composition and to restrict the majority of votes among representatives of the state entities.

Representatives of partners for the committees and groups are delegated by the relevant partners. Partners in MCs function as due members with a voting right or as voteless observers. MC chair person and every member of the committee or group may invite to the session (after previous consent of the chair person) experts on the subject-matter to be discussed in the committee meeting.

Third sector representatives are delegated by the Chamber of non-governmental non-profit organization of the Slovak Government's council for the NGOs. Since the partnership required a particular emphasis on the civil society, there was established a Slovak Government's Plenipotentiary Office for the development of the civil society as a tool for better understanding of the needs and importance of the involved civil entities.

Information exchange within the partnership is ensured via websites of CCA, MAs, IBs, bodies in charge of HP management, by e-mail, issued informative and professional publications, organized trainings, workshops and information meetings, especially via TV shots and programs as well as social networks. The DPMOII established information and consulting centers for entities and the public in the regions, with a special focus on general awareness of ESIF. Building of the institutional capacities of the partners is done also through specifically focused projects funded by the programs.

Consideration of partners' interests within the set-up mechanisms is a result depending on the legislative framework, ex-ante analyses performed in connection with the planned use of ESIF, earlier results and experiences, respect and negotiated compromises of the engaged stakeholders, as well as competences of the bodies responsible for the management and results of ESIF. The ultimate accountability for the presented document is always with its presenter, that is CCA, MA, IB or bodies in charge of HP management.

## 4.4 Results of analyses per evaluating questions

### 1. *To what extent were provisions of Article 5 of General regulation and the European Code of Conduct in connection with involvement of the partners in the implementation of the Partnership Agreement SR complied with?*

The PA SR document itself, as well as any related materials, were prepared in line with the principle of "wide-ranging partnership" since the moment of their first initiation. Many entities were involved in the process of **preparation of the PA SR**, MAs responsible for

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<sup>6</sup> Other entities include entities except the representatives of MAs, IBs, other organizations of state administration and legal entities established thereby.

<sup>7</sup> This excludes the collaboration programs included in the evaluation - Interreg V-A SK-CZ, Interreg V-A SK-AT, Interreg V-A PL-SK and Interreg V-A SK-HU.

the preparation of future programs, other bodies of central state administration, as well as a wide range of partners from the regional and local self-government, academic sphere, as well as a wide range of various associations of interest, representative professional associations, non-governmental organizations (covering gender equality, non-discrimination, sustainable growth and environment), organizations in the area of rural development and fisheries and European groups of territorial collaboration, which resulted in the creation of platforms:

- "Slovak government's council for the Partnership Agreement for the period of 2014-2020", comprising 18 organizations of the public administration, 9 organizations representing economic and social partners and 1 civil society entity (appendix 1, C1). Disproportion in categories of represented partners has triggered involvement of all state entity stakeholders acting in the role of an MA and IB for individual programs in this programming period;
- work group "Partnership for the cohesion policy", currently working as the "Partnership for cohesion policy 2020+" consists of 30 organizations of public administration, 21 social and economic partners and 14 civil organizations (Appendix 1, C2), where it is possible to state a wide-ranging and even balance of public administration representatives and other entities;
- "Work group for the development of territorial agreement between the Slovak government, regional self-governments and local self-governments for the period of 2014-2020" consists of 6 public administration entities and 1 umbrella organization of the economic and social partners (Appendix 1, C29). The work group consists of state administration representatives who exert influence over territorial development, self-governing regions and the association of cities and villages.

In an effort to promote a transparent environment for effective and efficient management of programs, the MA included into the process of **program preparation** relevant partners by creating special work groups within all programs under the objective of "Investment into growth and employment" and programs of "European territorial cooperation". In summary, there were observed 73,0 % of state administration entities and territorial self-government entities, relevant central bodies of state administration and other bodies of public administration (with subject-matter departments as expert administrators and institutions in the role of MA and IB), 22,0 % of entities from the category of economic and social partners and 5,0 % of civil society entities (appendix 1B). Analysis of group structure shows major involvement of relevant entities for individual expert parts and thematic focus of the programs. State administration entities dominated in the development of programs, as they bear responsibility for meeting the program objectives.

Within the PRD, ad-hoc sub-groups were created in the preparation of project and non-project measures, with evident focus on justified nominations of expert partners operating and having practical experience in the focus areas of individual measures. Almost equal representation was observed in the sub-groups - 60,0 % of public administration entities to 40,0 % of other entities (appendix 1B, 9.1 - 9.16).

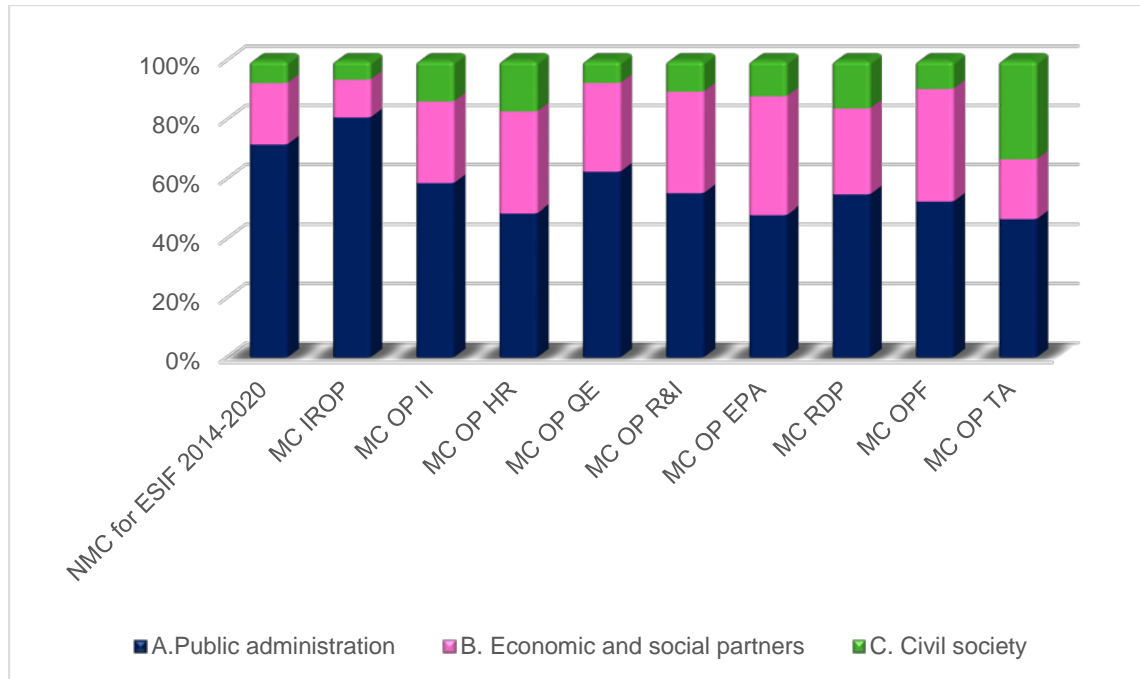
Social and economic partners were not involved in the preparation of OP TA (appendix 1, B11). According to input from MAs, their involvement was not necessary with regard to the nature of the program and selection of operations which are funded from the program.

A more significant difference in the structure of partners can be observed in the work groups for the development of "European territorial cooperation" programs Interreg. Representatives of the public sector comprised over 80,0 %, in the Program Interreg V-A Poland - Slovakia it was 55,0 %. The remaining part included representatives of regional self-government or umbrella organizations thereof. Representatives of civil organizations were not involved in the development of cross-border cooperation programs. MAs explained this fact by low interest among this category of entities to engage in the preparation of programs and also the fact that these programs are so-called "complementary" to the main ESIF programs, which makes them less attractive for some partners to engage.

Involvement of partners in the activity of the **National MC for ESIF** reflects the structure of PA SR and brings together 38 public administration organizations and 11 organizations representing social and economic partners. There are 4 representatives of civil organizations who were nominated by the Slovak Government's council for non-governmental non-profit organizations and they are mandated to represent the entire third sector (Appendix 1, A1). The proportion of 72,0 % of public administration entities to 28,0 % of other partners is caused by cross-sectional nature of the national MC, where the public administration entities are represented by central bodies of state administration (several representatives for a single ministry due to a broad agenda of departments) and self-governing regions representing the regional needs.

The scale and involvement of entities **in MCs established at the level of individual programs** reflects the needs and thematic focus of the programs themselves. Concerning MCs, it may be said that in most cases the representatives of partners in the work group for the program development continually proceeded to become MC members for the program MC. For the same reason the structure of partners is almost identical in the groups for program development and program MCs. As of 31.12.2017, public administration representatives comprised 65,0 % including municipal administration, economic and social partners counted for 26,0 % and civil entities 9,0 % (appendix 1, A).

**Graph 1: Structure of monitoring committees in the operational programs in per cent as of 31.03.2018**

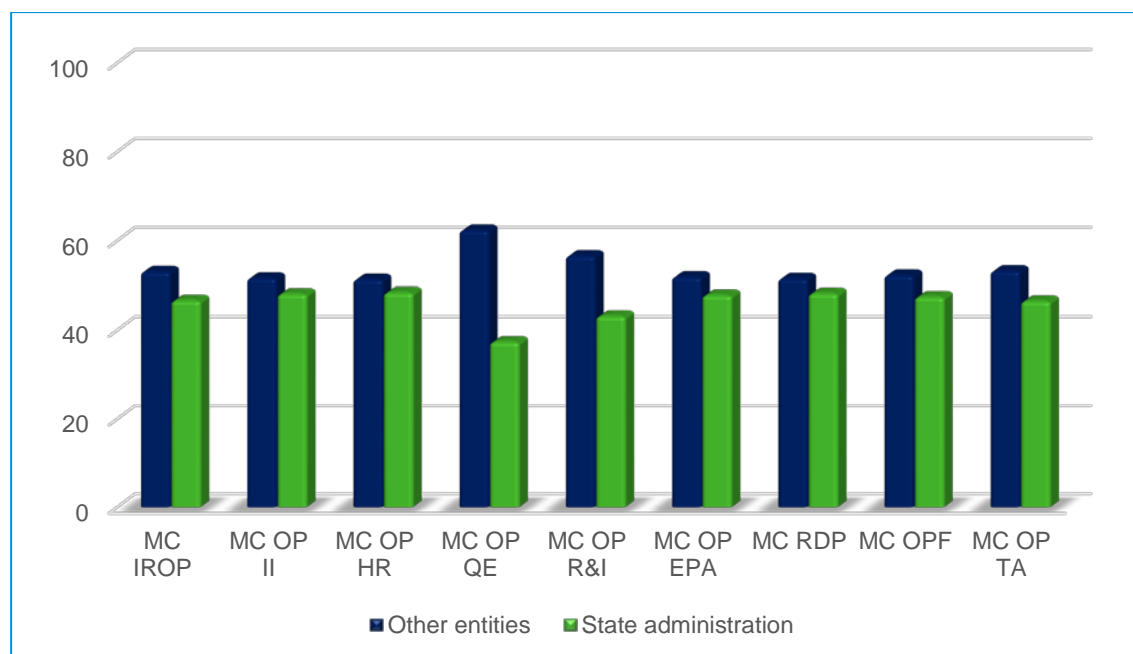


The MA did not apply the principle of thirds in the structure (1/3 committee members to be state administration representatives, 1/3 self-government representatives and 1/3 social and economic partners and the third sector representatives) recommended by the ESIF management system as of 31.12.2017. This is because of the specific focus of the very programs, distribution of the overall responsibility for programs, the need of wide-ranging representation of partners and impossibility to achieve balanced representation in the partner categories in embracing the expert aspects of the programs.

For the sake of balanced representation and restricting the majority of state representatives in voting, the amended law on ESIF laid out an obligation of MAs to adjust the structure of MCs in such a manner that would allow a majority of votes to representatives of other entities, effective no later than 01.01.2018<sup>6 7</sup>. This obligation was complied with in all programs. Within the monitored period only one MC had a meeting after 01.01.2018, OP R&I, therefore it was not possible to assess the effect of adjusted structure of the MCs. According to the survey among the MC members,<sup>8</sup> up to 62,2% perceive the increased proportion of economic and social partners and civil organizations positively vs. 9,2 % negatively.

<sup>8</sup> A survey among the members of MC OP/ESIF was conducted within the project "Effective engagement of civil society in implementation and monitoring of ESIF through introduction of participatory procedures". It was conducted by the Slovak Government's Plenipotentiary for the development of the civil society and funded from the OP TA.

**Graph 2: Representation of state administration and other entities in monitoring committees in the operational programs in per cent as of 31.03.2018**



**In the course of implementation of programs during the monitored period,** there were identified as many as 32 formal groups (committees, boards, councils) established by MAs and IBs with a view to discuss specific topics (program evaluation, information and communication, committees for selecting of the evaluators, groups to coordinate implementation of program parts, etc.). Representatives of relevant central bodies of state and public administration dominated significantly, especially expert departments and institutions of MAs and IBs, which ensues from the responsibility of MAs (state institutions) for program implementation. The changed approach is evident within work groups of OP R&I, for the areas of RIS3 specialization,<sup>9</sup> which contribute to shaping of the research, development and innovations policy in the SR. Therefore a broader representation of social-economic partners is relevant here, on average up to 39,0 %, as experts in the given area (appendix 1, C21-C28).

To achieve the main objectives of **HP Sustainable development** and **Equality between men and women and Non-discrimination** the following work groups were established:

- "Work group for horizontal principle Sustainable development for the programming period 2014 - 2020", composed of 69,0% public administration entities, 12,0% entities of economic and social partners and 19,0% entities from non-profit organizations (appendix 1, C6),

<sup>9</sup> Strategies of research and innovations for smart specialization of SR (RIS3 SK), as approved by the Slovak Government's resolution no. 665/2013 dated 13. 11. 2013, defines investment and structural measures for the politics of research, development and innovations in the SR.

- "*Coordination committee for horizontal principles of equality between men and women and non-discrimination*" composed of 83,0% public administration entities and 17,0% non-profit organizations (appendix 1, C7).

The structure of the work group and the coordination committee was driven by the focus of the very PA SR, which also indicates the ratio in favor of public administration entities as these include all the departments in the role of MAs and IBs, as well as Slovak Government's plenipotentiaries covering the areas of Roma community, development of the civil communities and ethnic minorities.

The "*bottom-up approach*" and the need to accelerate the regional needs and priorities influenced the composition of established structures **in the context of application of integrated strategies of local development IROP**. Partnership councils for **regional integrated territorial strategies (RITS)** are created in individual self-governing regions as platforms for collaboration of the bodies of regional self-government, local administration, state administration, local initiatives (local action groups, associations of municipalities) and other social and economic partners (business sector, associations of interest and the third sector) active in a given territory and relevant for the specific RITS from the viewpoint of legislative powers, competences and jurisdiction (subject-matter, expert or territorial). Partnership councils typically include 35,0 % of public administration entities and the 65,0 % majority of representatives of economic and social partners and third sector entities. With the exception of Partnership council of the Bratislava region where the ratio is 55,0 % to 45,0 % in favor of public administration entities (appendix 1, E).

A tool to engage local players in decisions about social, economic and environmental development of the territory are **community-led local development strategies (CLLD)**. A total of 87 Local action groups (LAG) were approved <sup>10</sup>, having met the requirements for granting a contribution, to whom the Agricultural Payment Agency (APA) sent a Decision on approval of the community-led local development strategy and of granting of the LAG status (appendix 1F) LAGs represents partnerships that bring together entities of public and private social and economic interests (partners from various social-economic sectors and non-governmental organizations), members include municipalities, entrepreneurs, civil associations, non-profit organizations, societies, unions or citizens themselves. Involvement of partners leads to setting up a public and private partnership from the geographical, sectional, institutional, social and economic point of view (appendix 1, F).

For the purposes of cooperation in solving relevant specific matters, the following work groups were created at the central CCA level in the monitored period:

- "*Work group to supervise evaluation and preparation of the progress report*", the structure of which reflected the need to embrace the inputs for the progress report itself, and its member structure reflect the same (mostly representatives of MAs and IBs), 97,0 % entities of public administration and 3,0 % of entities from the non-profit organizations category (appendix 1, C3),
- "*Council of the Central Coordination Authority*", as an advisory body to CCA, whose outputs serve as an expert support in performance of activities of the individual MAs,

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.nsrv.sk/?pl=91> - List of approved LAG Call no. 21/PRV/2017



in amendments to ESIF law and ESIF management system, composed of 60,0% of public administration entities and 40,0 % of non-profit organizations (appendix 1, C8),

- "*Sectional coordination group for cohesion policy DPMOII*", comprised of subject-matter experts from DPMOII and other ministries and state authorities, hence 100,0 % of public administration entities (appendix 1, C9).

**In order to perform efficient evaluation of the PA SR**, a CCA work group was established with 100,0 % representation of state administration institutions. Concerning the evaluations in the context of the evaluation plan, the CCA sets up ad-hoc informal work groups (structure of entities considered according to the nature of a particular evaluation). Examples of work groups for managing evaluation created at the MA level include the following:

- "*Work group for evaluation of OP R&I*" comprises 60,0% of public administration entities representing the MA and IB and 40,0% of entities representing the non-profit organizations (appendix 1, C11),
- "*Work group for managing evaluation of OP HR*" consisting of 87,0% public administration entities (representatives of MA OPHR - MLSA&F SR and IB - MI SR and MSESRS SR) and 13,0% entities representing economic and social partners (appendix 1, C19).

To sum up in general, a "wide-ranging partnership" was observed in the development of PA SR and individual programs (except OP TA) as well as in the activities of MC at the CCA and MA level, engaging relevant representatives of the state and public administration, territorial and regional self-government, economic and social partners as well as civil society entities. In the phase of program implementation there were special work groups created, with the structure of members reflecting the particular needs of task performance and covering expert issues.

### ***2.1. What is the specific involvement of the partners according to Art. 3 of the European Code of conduct in implementing the Partnership Agreement SR?***

Participation of national, regional and local level entities is applied across all phases of the ESIF management process, in the development of PA SR and all programs, in management, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. This approach enables introduction of procedures and making of decisions which are aligned with the needs and priorities of the Slovak regions and ensures that ESIF-funded investments are expedient and transparent and the entire cohesion policy is publicly controlled.

### **Development of the Partnership Agreement of the SR**

To observe the multiple-level of governance, the PA SR was coordinated by the CCA, with participation of a broad group of relevant partners. An analysis of differences and needs in the area of development and growth potential of the SR was prepared in cooperation with partners in the initial phase of drafting the PA SR, with regard to the thematic objectives and key activities defined in the EC Position paper. Proposal of the analytical part of the PA SR was discussed at the meeting of the work group "*Partnership*

*for the cohesion policy*". The strategic part and ex-ante evaluation of the PA SR as well as partial outputs were discussed with relevant partners on an on-going basis.

While the draft PA SR was subject to comments, the CCA held meetings with MAs responsible for the preparation of programs who communicated their opinions with relevant entities in order to include the key issues resulting from the raised comments and results of negotiations with the EC. Discussed in the meetings were mainly the open questions regarding territorial development, thematic concentration, application of integrated approaches, coordination between ESIF programs and other assistance tools, linking program activities with measures for the climate change and setting the mechanism of implementation of the performance framework. Concurrently the CCA ensured coordination of performance and evaluation of compliance with the ex ante conditionalities in the context of the Slovak Republic and in collaboration with bodies in charge of HP management. The partnership principle was ensured also via commenting of the PA SR draft by the general public in the process of assessing the environmental impact of the Paper.

One of the presented documents within the development of the PA SR was a "Proposal of the baseline principles for the preparation of the PA SR for the programming period of 2014 - 2020". This paper, also thanks to the partners' comments, included the partnership principle among the main principles in the programming period 2014 - 2020.

Communication with the partners was conducted through the CCA work groups and flexibly as needed (electronic communication, e-mail). The general public was involved in the process of PA SR development also by means of a CCA questionnaire (28.02.2013) which aimed to obtain opinions and public contributions to the topic of the use of EU funding. Survey outputs (151 respondents including HTU, municipalities, state administration bodies, academic sphere, representative professional associations, non-governmental non-profit organizations, private entities, individuals) endorsed the selection of thematic objectives and investment priorities in the draft of the PA SR. Public suggestions to cut down the administrative burden are contained in the relevant section of PA SR and were also included in processing of the ESIF management system.

### **Development of programs**

The partnership principle was applied in the form of work groups set up in line with the "*Methodical guidance of the CCA for the preparation of OP/programs for the programming period 2014 - 2020*", bilateral negotiations, but also in the form of sending comments and suggestions via MAs' websites for the general public. The lifetime of work groups was limited by the end of purpose for which they were established, from the moment of program approval. The partners could submit written comments on drafts, propose suggestions and engage in discussions in the work group and thus influence the following:

- identify development needs in a given area
- proposals of program investment strategies and the main priorities of funding
- manner of achieving of the thematic objectives
- definition of target groups, qualified beneficiaries
- focus of supported activities
- allocation of funds

- definition of specific program indicators
- performance of the horizontal principles within the program.

Engagement of partners during the initial phases of program implementation played an important role also in terms of ex ante conditionalities. That includes mainly the partners at the level of central state authorities and economic and social partners, where the collaboration between the sectors was inevitable. Active approach of the entities from one sector directly affected performance of ex-ante conditionalities in another sector, e. g. performance of the "Action plan for the public administration reform".

For the purposes of unambiguous setting of objectives for the future programs, some MAs (PRD, OP F, programs of cross-border cooperation Interreg) distributed a questionnaire among the public where respondents could express their thoughts concerning program focus and specify local and regional needs.

The final program proposals resulted from active participation of engaged partners in their preparation.

### **Organization of the monitoring committee**

CCA fully applied the partnership principle by having established a **National MC** in order to monitor and evaluate implementation of all ESIF programs within the PA SR. Committee members participate in the committee activities by attending the meetings, commenting the documents, proposing suggestions and voting, especially within:

- monitoring and assessment of achieving of the cohesion policy objectives
- monitoring of the status and progress achieved in implementation of ESIF,
- proposing measures to improve effectiveness and efficiency in implementation of ESIF,
- approving the Progress report,
- approving the ESIF evaluation plan and updates thereof,
- presenting comments on the Summary report on ESIF evaluation activities and evaluation results,
- commenting on the proposed re-allocations of funds, revisions of PA SR and programs,
- presenting report on the activity of the Coordination committee for cooperation in control of public procurement.

**MCs set up within the programs** for the purposes of monitoring progress and implementation of the program are organized with participation of a wide range of relevant representative entities that can present comments to the MAs, especially in connection with the following:

- progress achieved in the implementation of the program objectives,
- issues with impact on the program performance,
- program changes and re-allocation of funds,
- processes of program implementation and evaluation,
- measures leading to reduced administrative burden for beneficiaries,
- selection of operations to be funded by the program,
- methodologies and criteria for the selection of projects and changes thereof;
- lists and national projects proposals and changes thereof,

- examination and approval of the program communication strategy and changes thereof.

Both in the case of the National as well as programs' MC activities, the partners may invite experts on the subject-matter to be discussed. That advances the possibilities of using expert knowledge, experience and insights to design and perform the ESIF strategies. Partner engagement in MCs means an active tool of ESIF management and coordination, not only in approval of documents but also in formulating processes for proper performance of the programs in order to achieve their goals.

With some programs (OP II, OP HR, OP EQ) **the MC activities are complemented by special boards** (referred to also as a work group or management committee) with the aim to formulate recommendations for the MC decisions on special topics and make the MC activity more efficient. The committees are established for the purposes of collaboration with relevant partners, especially in order to:

- solve issues and adopt decisions related to the preparation and implementation of projects, approval of proposals and beneficiaries of national projects (Steering group of the priority axes 1 and 6 OP II),
- solve issues and adopt decisions related to the implementation of feasibility studies, implementation of projects, approval of intentions and beneficiaries of national projects (Steering group of the priority axis 7 Information society OP II),
- approval of the national projects proposals (Committee of the MC for the OP HR for the priority axis 1, Committee of the MC for the OP HR for the priority axes 2, 3 and 4, and Committee of the MC for the OP HR for the priority axes 5 and 6), in the case of the Committee of the MC for the OP HR for the priority axis 1 also giving opinions on the calls for submission of grant applications.
- support the MC activity in ensuring progress in acting on measures to achieve compliance with ex ante conditionalities in the area of fisheries, for the purpose of specifying measures of flood prevention, mainly those making use of the green infrastructure, the so-called "green measures"(Work group of MC to support measures making use of green infrastructure within calls for flood protection),
- working out criteria for sustainable use of biomass (Work group "Biomass").

### Implementation of programs

The extent of partner engagement in performance of the implementation phase of the programs was at the individual discretion of the MAs according to the actual program needs. The contribution of the group of entities is most visible mainly within the processes:

- approval of evaluating and selection criteria,
- preparation and approval of national projects' intents and preparation of the big projects,
- preparation and announcement of calls for submission of project proposals and calls for submission of grant applications, calls for submission of national projects proposals
- design and implementation of integrated territorial strategies,
- community-led local development.

### **Approval of evaluating and selection criteria**

Partners take an active part in commenting and formulating evaluating and selection criteria (they are adopted by MCs in all programs except OP F). The MC statutes were updated with this power based on the provisions of the ESIF management system.

### **Preparation and approval of national projects' intents and preparation of big projects**

MCs serve the partners to express their opinion on the national and big projects under preparation. In terms of national projects, their intent must be approved by the MC. To ensure a more efficient adoption of conclusions to partial issues by MCs, partners are represented also in established committees of the MC (their tasks can be defined by the MA e. g. in approval of national project proposals, commenting on calls under preparation, etc.), if it is more efficient than discussing the topics at the MV meetings with regard to expert subject-matters or higher frequency of meetings.

### **Preparation and announcement of calls for submission of project proposals and calls for submission of grant applications, calls for presenting national projects**

When engaging partners in the preparation of calls, all MAs take into account the risk of potential conflict of interests and exclude from commenting all entities who may be involved in its preparation and be in the role of a potential beneficiary at the same time. Nevertheless, it can be observed that there exists a cooperation between MAs and partners also when preparing calls, often as individual consultations.

A greater share of responsibility and direct participation in the program implementation is borne by the partners in programs of the "European territorial cooperation" Interreg. Given the interstate aspect, focus, nature and organizational background of the program, the partners are involved through MCs in making decisions in approving projects, approving project amendments, approving proposed re-allocations of funds among the priority axes of the program, analyzing the program implementation status and proposing solutions to remove deficiencies. With this type of programs the MC responsibility for the selection of operations (projects) is based on EU legislation (Regulation of the European Parliament and Council (EU) no. 1299/2013 on special provisions for the support from the European Regional Development Fund to the European territorial cooperation goal).

Such a partnership enables obtaining subject-matter opinions from a wide range of experts in the relevant area which may be helpful for a better preparation of projects/calls and thanks to the experts' rich experience it helps to eliminate potential risks in the process of their implementation.

### **Regional integrated territorial strategies**

Emphasized IROP accent on competences of regional partners and delegation of powers to several entities can be observed in the implementation mechanism of **regional integrated territorial strategies (RITS)**<sup>11</sup>, whose task is to address the

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<sup>11</sup> Annual report IROP 2014-2015, Appendix no. III of the Annual report of the Integrated regional operational program 2014 – 2020: <http://www.mpsr.sk/index.php?navID=1142&navID2=1142&SID=67&id=10736>,  
Annual report IROP 2016 <http://www.mpsr.sk/index.php?navID=1258&navID2=1258&SID=67&id=12210>

development needs of the region by means of integrated measures/approaches in accordance with Art. 36 of the general regulation<sup>2</sup>. Enhancing the partnership principle and its practical application is significant also in the preparation and implementation of **the strategies for a sustainable urban development** (SUD) as a part of RITS, where the regional cities made a partnership with participation of partners representing a functional area of a city.

roles of entities in relation to RITS are defined at the national level by Section 15 of the ESIF law. The process of preparation and approval of RITS and competences of entities engaged in the preparation and implementation of RITS are laid out in the Methodological guidance of IROP MA for the preparation of RITS.

IROP MA coordinated and methodically guided the preparation of RITS and the SUD strategies based on the opinion of the Partnership council from the perspective of their compliance with IROP. Self-governing regions have a specific position as a technical and organizational coordinator of the partnership in the development and implementation of strategies as well as in their monitoring and evaluation. Regional cities ensure the preparation and implementation of the SUD strategies. During the monitored period, the HTUs and regional cities were in charge of RITS processing via expert advisory groups for the RITS and SUD strategies consisting of groups of expert partners for particular areas being addressed in the strategies.

Advisory councils to the partnership for RITS in collaboration with HTU and regional cities conduct the following:

- issue opinions on the RITS proposal and SUD strategy,
- take part in monitoring and evaluation of RITS implementation,
- issue recommendations for improved implementation of RITS and SUD strategy for the IB,
- comment materials for the annual/final report on IROP implementation,
- give statements on the evaluation report of the progress in RITS as well as the SUD strategy.

### **Community-led local development.**

Community-led local development strategies (CLLD) are a tool to engage local players in decisions about social, economic and environmental development of the territory. The local level is typical by a wide variety of needs and calls, which the individual territories need to address. These often include solutions with a direct impact on a given territory, given the assumption that the respective local community has organizational, technical and financial capacities to solve them.

An important added value of the tool LEADER is in the way it contributes to the development of a territory, i. e. through engaging local players who thoroughly know their area and people. Representatives of the concerned micro-region determine their development priorities (strategy) and once it is approved by the MA they can choose the projects. The task of the LAGs is to identify and implement the strategy of local

development (multisectional and multifund strategy CLLD approved in accordance with the provisions of Sec. 13 of the ESIF law), decide on allocation and management of its funds. LAG is a tool how to bring communities together in partnerships where information is exchanged and partners are educated (e. g.: surveys, questionnaires, information campaigns, organization of events for various target groups). As a result of engaging partners in LAGs, it is easier to achieve strategic planning and to define goals across the entire territory, which serves as a basis for complex projects which are feasible and sustainable.

LAGs are expected to connect the relevant groups of interest around a joint project, to make autonomous decisions and to take a fresh perspective of local resources, to be able to examine opportunities offered in a combination of local resources, connect and integrate independent sectional approaches and to be open to innovative ideas. Involving partners in a given type of partnership is a route to the development of business and employment within sectors such as agriculture, food industry, forestry, rural tourism, diversified agricultural activities, as well as to improving the physical regeneration of the territory, enhancing the urban-rural connections and relationships between the development centers and their surroundings, improvement of quality of life in the rural municipalities through investments in small infrastructure and improvement of local services within the LAG's territory.

### Global grants

Global grants mean a grant mechanism for small projects with a territorial and/or thematic focus aiming for a defined activity directly in the territory through selected partners, who can be a public or private legal entity as well as a non-governmental non-profit organization. The use of global grants is considered within the OP HR. The MA of the OP EPA admits the possibility to use the global grant mechanism on the basis of reassessing its suitability during the program implementation phase. However, in the course of the monitoring period, no MA had a scheme of implementing global grants introduced and functioning.

### Application of horizontal principles

Compliance with effective system of application of the **HP Sustainable development and HP Equality between men and women and Non-discrimination** is ensured by the bodies in charge of HP management through the system of HP implementation. Bodies in charge of HP management work in the National MC and MCs of the programs on the partner level as members of the MCs.

Other partners can influence the coordinating activity in the HP area and participate in making application of HP more efficient by means of taking part in the "*Coordinating committee for the Horizontal Principles Equality between men and women and Non-discrimination*" (MLSAF SR is the body in charge) and in the "*Work group for the Horizontal principle Sustainable development*" (DPMOII is the body in charge). Through these groups partners participate in introducing procedures and commenting on the System of implementation of the horizontal principle Sustainable development for 2014 - 2020 and the System of implementation of the horizontal principle equality of men and women and non-discrimination for 2014 - 2020.

### Preparation of conceptual materials (progress report, legislative materials)

Preparation and writing of the **Progress report** were based on the partnership approach, as there was established a "*Work group to supervise the evaluation and preparation of the Progress report*". Body in charge of presenting the report was the CCA and it was written on the basis of data from the representatives of bodies responsible for particular agendas, annual reports and external evaluation reports. The structure of the work group reflected the need to embrace the inputs necessary for the progress report. The timeline of preparation of the progress report and planned engagement of partners were announced at the work group "*Partnership for the cohesion policy 2020+*", whose members indicated interest to participate on the preparation of the report. There was an external evaluation conducted in the initial phase of the preparation of the report, entitled "Evaluation of progress in the preparation of the Partnership Agreement of the SR as of 31. 12. 2016". The final report of external evaluation as well as Progress report were commented by the National MC, "*Work group Partnership for the cohesion policy 2020+*", "*Work group to supervise the evaluation and preparation of the Progress report*" and "*Work group for evaluation*". Overall, the requests for an opinion were sent to over 200 email addresses.

The partnership principle was fully demonstrated also in the **preparation of strategic documents**, necessary for implementation and access to ESIF, the instances of which included in the monitored period e. g.:

- Act no. 292/2014 Coll. on contributions from ESIF and its amendments;
- Action plan to enhance transparency and simplify ESIF implementation developed by the DPMOII together with the fund Zastavme korupciu (Let's stop corruption) (approved by the government's resolution no. 449/2017);
- National reforms program of the Slovak Republic 2017 (approved by the government's resolution no. 204/2017);
- Implementation plan Strategies of research and innovations for smart specialization of SR (approved by the Slovak government's Council for Science, Technology and Innovations);
- Strategic plan for the development of transport infrastructure SR by 2020;
- Strategic document for the area of digital services growth and for the area of new generation network infrastructure.

### Monitoring of the PA SR and programs

Monitoring as a regular activity focused on watching how the set objectives of the ESIF implementation are fulfilled via a systematic gathering and evaluation of data and information, which serves to obtain a timely overview of the implementation status of the PA SR and the programs. It is a tool for obtaining the necessary data to make rolling decisions in performing the PA SR and programs and in performing evaluation thereof. Partners are involved in ESIF monitoring especially by taking part in the National MC and program MCs with regular monitoring of the status of implementation and drawing of programs and projects.

The MA in cooperation with interested partners prepares the **Reports of OP implementation**. The MA is responsible for the scope, quality, freshness and accuracy



of data provided in the report, while the partners can raise comments to influence the final report.

### Evaluation of the PA SR and programs

Evaluation of the PA SR must be based on the principles such as transparency, independence, partnership and distribution of results. Cooperation with partners in the area of monitoring includes a systematic exchange of information, knowledge, experience and implementation of joint activities. It concerns cooperation within **work groups set up to supervise the performance of evaluation** and cooperation with external evaluators. Partner participation can be observed in preparation of the CCA evaluation plan. CCA works with members of the "*work group for managing of evaluation*" and relevant subject-matter partners to develop the ESIF plan of evaluations for the programming period 2014 - 2020 and/or its updates.<sup>12</sup> Relevant partners are involved in ESIF evaluation updates in addition to the evaluation managers of the CCA's evaluation department, especially members of the "*Work group for evaluation*", bodies in charge of HP management and employees of other departments of the CCA section. ESIF evaluation plan represents a summary document containing all ESIF evaluations which the CCA plans to conduct in the programming period 2014 - 2020, including the evaluations focused on HPs and it aims to capture current needs in the area of evaluation and to improve the quality of evaluations. Members of the "*Work group for evaluation*" discuss with the CCA representatives at the same time about the proposed structure of the Summary report of the evaluation activities and results of program and HP evaluations in the programming period 2014 - 2020. The process entails a wide range of partners, respecting the partnership principle, which illustrates connections among individual passive or active players within coordination of the evaluation of programs.

Individual MAs are responsible for evaluation of programs. The program evaluation plan is approved in collaboration with the engaged partners within the MC activity and performance thereof is monitored. In general, MAs establish formal or informal **work groups to manage evaluation** within their programs. Members of such work groups typically include representatives of relevant subject-matter departments. Members can include the representatives of further MAs, IBs, CCA, representatives of the bodies in charge of HP management, representatives of relevant institutions or invited experts per adequate topics. Work groups for evaluation within individual MAs are a part of the coordination of procedures within evaluation, which is one of the key needs for ensuring quality of evaluations through opinions of individual partners. Partners express their opinions especially on the achieved progress in performance of the plan of evaluations and subsequent measures adopted with a view to the findings from evaluations.

### Exchange of information and experience

Accessibility and sharing of knowledge is one of the elementary prerequisites for an efficient functioning of a partnership. CCA established a "*Work group for information and communication*" in order to optimize procedures in devising the information strategy and providing information and communication. The work group, in addition to ensuring communication of PA SR, presents suggestions to update the ESIF management system in the area of information and communication, the CCA's Methodical instruction for

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<sup>12</sup> ESIF Summary report for 2016

informing and communication of ESIF no. 16 and coordinates functioning of the joint information tools for the general public:

- information portal about ESIF - web site <http://www.partnerskadohoda.gov.sk/>;
- ESIF newsletter - a quarterly called Eurokompas, which is distributed by the CCA to all municipalities, regional information and advisory centers of CCA (ICC, self-governing regions and to other stakeholders;
- information publications (e. g. flyers, brochures) issued by CCA in cooperation with MAs for professional and general public.

Serving as a source of information about the program activities are the very websites of the MAs and IBs, information meetings organized by MAs and IBs, publications about the achieved positive benefits and examples of good practice issued by the individual MAs and IBs.

Partners involved in the MC activity participate in approving of the communication strategy of a relevant program, whereby actively cooperate in the preparation of objectives, implementation plan and communication tools within the program. Partners engage also in the subsequent monitoring and evaluation of communication strategies done by the MA at the level of evaluation of the annual communication plans and evaluation of the communication strategy in the annual report on program implementation.

Communication and sharing of information among the CCA, MA, IB and partners happens especially using the traditional communication channels, by e-mail, in person or by phone. Communication through social networks is increasing as well.

Mobilization of relevant partners is ensured also by organizing workshops and trainings on the matters connected with the use of EU funds and professional conferences and projects, such as:

- professional trainings on the announced calls, on the procedures of management and implementation of projects for the applicants and beneficiaries (organized by MAs/IBs across all programs);
- The national project of SIEA called inovujme.sk (under OP R&I) which aims to increase the innovation performance of the Slovak economy through discussion forums, seminars, innovation clubs, webinars, workshops, activities for secondary schools and universities, hackathons, professional advisory services in regional consulting centers in Bratislava, Nitra, Banská Bystrica, Žilina and Košice;
- ITAPA events which deal with digitalization of the public administration (support of the priority axis 7 OP II);
- Day of Europe on the 9th May, when there are presented information and specific projects supported by the ESIF programs (promotion of the cross-border cooperation programs).

Within the preparations for the Cooperation program Interreg V-A Slovak Republic - Austria, there were two big events held for the stakeholders at the national level with a thematic focus, in Hainburg and Senec. When preparing the Cooperation program

Interreg V-A Slovakia - Hungary, there were interviews and workshops organized with the target groups and at the same time there was a work group initiated by the state bodies on both sides, for strategic planning and programming composed of the representatives of the central state bodies, regional bodies at the NUTS3 level and other partners.

There is another significant communication channel used within ESIF, **the integrated network of the information and consulting centers (ICC)**, administered by the CCA, established gradually from 1.7.2016 in 7 self-governing regions (regional cities Trnava, Trenčín, Nitra, Banská Bystrica, Žilina, Košice, Prešov)<sup>13</sup>. In order to improve awareness and engagement of the entities active in the Slovak regions, ICC provide the partners with informational service about ESIF, individual consultations and professional advice, organize educational activities and ensure the promotion of ESIF.

In the period from 1.1.2014 to 31.3.2018 the ICCs provided most consultations upon request from the municipalities (37,0%), legal business entities (28,0%), organizations reporting to municipalities (16,0%), non-governmental organizations (7,0%), other entities (7,0%), individual entrepreneurs (4,0%) and state organizations (1,0%). Consultations were rendered in the monitored period mainly by phone (36,0%), e-mail (33,0%) or in person (31,0%). Most consultations concerned specific programs, announced calls or preparation of grant applications<sup>14</sup>. The role of ICC is also to help identify partners for raising awareness of ESIF.

The communication strategy is implemented also on the basis of public opinion polls conducted by CCA and MA, aiming to find out the level of general awareness of the results of rendered ESIF support, polls on a specific topic within the implemented evaluations and projects.

### **Cooperation with universities**

Memorandum between the DPMOII and the universities UK, STU and EU signed on 6.2.2017 can be deemed as a special form of cooperation. It aims to support the education in the SR through cooperation of universities and colleges with the bodies of state administration in the development of a platform for motivational tools for the study of priority disciplines and in effective implementation of the scientific results of the priority disciplines. The cooperation should work through participation in surveys, analyses, studies, cooperation in formulating theses for diploma and PhD papers, attendance at conferences, exhibitions, workshops and making use of the academic expert capacities also in the expert matters of the EU funds and regional politics. Going forward, the space for a more active cooperation with the universities has been created, however, no specific activities were identified and neither was a department of DPMOII which would coordinate such activities.

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<sup>13</sup>ICCs are set up across all ESIF operational programs except EAFRD. With regard to the proximity of the central institutions/central bodies of state administration directly in Bratislava, the CCA does not intend to localize an ICC in the Bratislava self-governing region in the initial phase of establishing the integrated ICC network.

<sup>14</sup> Data from the ICC database provided by the CCA

## Enhancing the partners' institutional capacity

Effective partnership can be also achieved by enhancing of the partners' institutional capacity by means of activities to build the same, especially with regard to small local bodies of public administration, social partners and organizations representing the civil society. There should be a strong support for removal of institutional barriers which could have a negative impact on the ability of partners to participate in activities within ESIF.

In order to encourage cooperation among as many social, economic and civil society partners as possible, when preparing the PA SR, the CCA offered the possibility to refund the travel costs for representatives of the civil society entities, associations of interest and professional associations active outside the place of work group meeting "*Partnership for the cohesion policy*". The costs were refunded from the budget of the GO SR.

At present the meeting rules of all MCs (national as well as OPs') allow the MC members to have their related legitimate travel costs reimbursed (fare, accommodation, meals). There are defined conditions, principles and mechanism in connection with applying for reimbursement and refunding such costs from OP TA (in case of the national MC) and from technical assistance of a relevant program (in case of programs' MCs). There were only a very few instances when partners applied for reimbursement of their travel costs in the monitored period.

Within the cooperation programs Interreg V-A, all costs related to the attendance at the MC sessions including fare, accommodation and daily allowances are covered by the institutions appointing MC members ("delegating institutions") with the exception of the cooperation program Interreg V/A Slovakia - Hungary where the accommodation expenses are refunded to an MC member. Costs incurred to the Common technical secretariat in relation to the preparation of the committee meeting are paid from the technical assistance of the program. There have not been observed other forms of partner funding.

Technical assistance of the programs is determined also for activities related to information and publicity, organizing conferences, workshops, trainings and seminars to exchange experience and promote examples of proven practice in order to strengthen administrative capacities of the beneficiaries. Operational programs OP EPA, OP HR, OP R&I and PRD allow supporting activities for building institutional capacities of the partners through projects.

### 2.2. How is the partnership principle perceived by the partners?

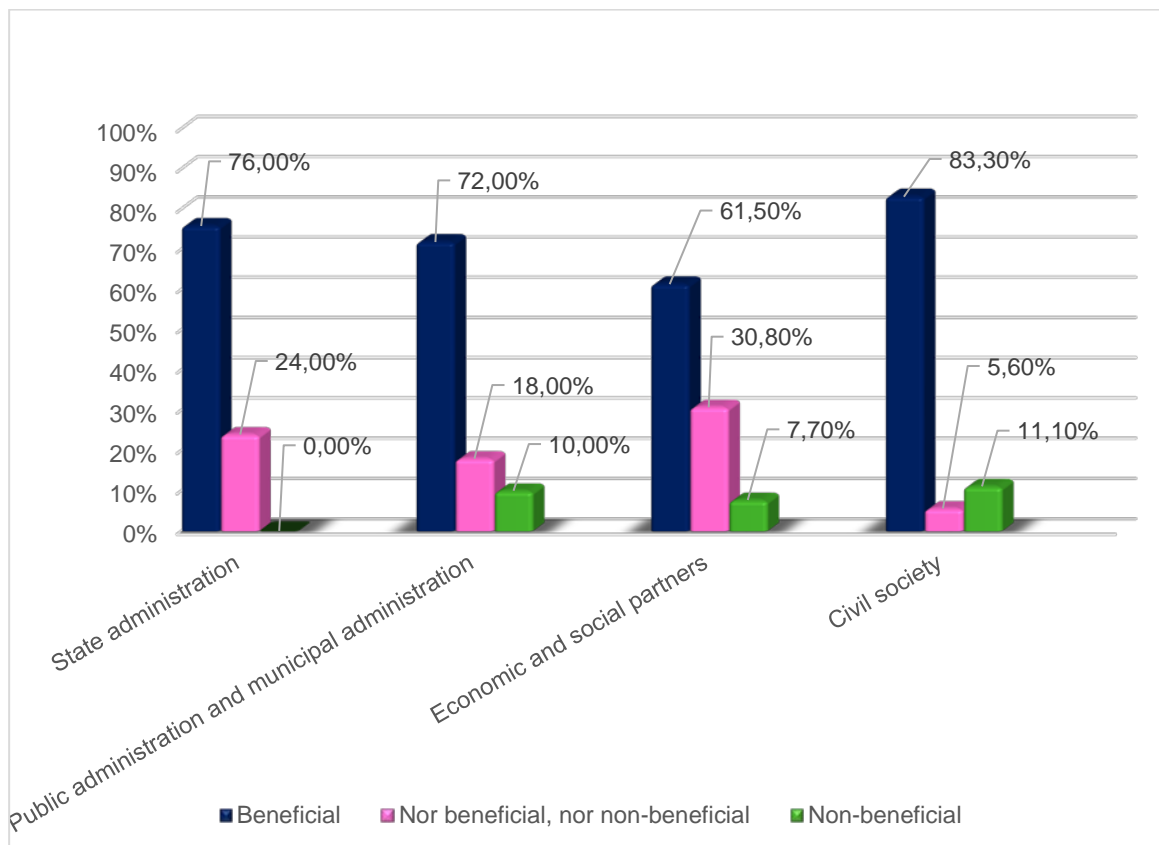
Perception of the partnership principle is influenced by the way it is organized, the set communication style and participation of specific partners. Based on interviews, the CCA, all MAs and bodies in charge of HP management consider the partnership **beneficial**.

There were 191 fully completed responses received (about 20 % response rate) from an online-distributed questionnaire. 41,4% responses came from the state administration entities, 26,2% from other bodies of public administration and urban self-administration, 18,8% from the representatives of the civil society and 13,6% from the social and economic partners.

According to the results of the survey across all partner categories, up to **74,4%** of all respondents **perceive the partnership as beneficial**. The highest share of those who think the partnership is beneficial, 83,3%, is among the civil society respondents, 76,0% in the state sector, 72% in the public sector and municipalities and 61,5% in the category of social and economic partners.

Only 5,8% of entities deem the partnership not beneficial. No representatives of state administration marked the partnership as not beneficial, on the contrary, up to 11,1% of civil society representatives believe it is not beneficial. With the representatives of public administration and municipalities it is 10,0% and 7,7% of the economic and social partners.

**Graph 3: Partner categories by perception of partnership benefit**



The main reason some entity representatives consider the partnership not beneficial was the formal nature of the work groups without a real possibility to influence anything and insufficient way of communication (without personal meetings, e-mail, voting in the form of "per rollam"). Several negative responses were influenced by perception of the problems in EU funds implementation in general, which cannot be considered a direct influence or impact of the application of the partnership principle.

In the course of cooperation, 49,7% of partners regularly comment on the submitted proposals/materials, 42,9 % do so only occasionally. In terms of sharing information with other entities, 48,7% share sometimes, 42,4% on a regular basis. 55,0% of entities sometimes present their own suggestions/materials, 21,5% do so regularly. 52,9% of partners use the possibility to invite experts to the meetings sometimes, on the other hand, 38,2% of representatives have never took advantage of such an option. Majority of partners 58,6% make use of the possibility to formulate recommendations for the MAs/CCA, 18,9% of entities do so regularly.

Up to 75,4% of partners said that their submitted opinions for the final wording of documents were partially considered, this was true especially of the representatives of the public administration and municipalities (84,0%). In 11,5 % cases the partners' opinions were considered in full extent, of which 24,1% were the state administration representatives. Opinions were not considered in 13,1% cases, mainly in the group of civil society representatives (19,4%) and representatives of economic and social partners (19,2%). The lowest share - 7,6% - of opinions not considered were among the state administration representatives.

**60,2% of respondents consider the communication in the partnership sufficient/rather sufficient.** Most satisfied with the communication were the state administration representatives (67,1%), the civil society (58,3%), followed by public administration and municipalities (54,0%) and economic and social partners (53,8%). On the other hand, 22,5% of respondents believe the communication is not sufficient/is rather insufficient, mainly 36,1% representatives of the civil society, 30,8% of economic and social partners, 22% of the representatives of the public administration and municipalities and the least unhappy were 13,9% of the state sector entities.

Reasons for insufficient communication are seen mainly in the lack of communication and information, formal nature of the meetings, fewer meetings and less frequent personal interaction, shortage of time to comment on materials, not processing all of the submitted suggestions and comments, insufficient activity of the participating members but also lack of trust and failure to involve all the relevant partners into communication.

**More than a half of all respondents were satisfied with the quality of provided information** within the MC activity and work groups. Partners rated as sufficient/rather sufficient the following aspects of information: it is "up-to-date" 66,7%, "comprehensible" 61,1%, "sufficient" 58,3% and "timely" 52,8%. Partners had almost identical opinion on the individual quality attributes across entity categories. A relatively significant part of the partner representatives think that the "freshness" (30,6%) and "comprehensibility" (27,8%) of information is not sufficient/is rather insufficient.

In their suggestions for improvement of the functioning and organization of a partnership, 18,8% of partners emphasized the improvement of communication (e. g. through preferring personal meetings or video-conferencing to e-mails) and cooperation, 15,5% of partners said the important aspects of providing information should be improved, their timeliness and freshness in particular. 9,7% of entities wouldn't change the current organization or functioning of the partnership. 8,2% of responses dealt with suggestions to restrict and decrease the formal approach in managing and implementing ESIF. Further recommendations and suggestions followed to increase the frequency of the sessions and ensuring their regular schedule 6,3%, emphasis to ensure experts and adequate qualification of the work group members 6,3%, simplify processes 6,3%.

Topics such as transparency in providing the funds, systematic and open approach are considered as important by almost 6,0 % of respondents.

According to the survey of members of the MC<sup>8</sup> up to 64,3% of respondents said they are not interested to extend the scope of MC activity. Whereas 35,7% MC members are positively geared towards extending activities of the MCs. Most respondents consider approval of the criteria for evaluation and selection of projects as key for real engagement of the MC members in monitoring of programs. This extends to the activities such as approval of national projects proposals and proposed revision of programs including changes in the financial plan. Other activities that MCs should undertake according to the respondents most often include participation in the preparation of calls.

In personal interviews the representatives of CCA and MAs highlighted the importance of regular participation of the nominated partner representatives and elimination of proxies at the meetings of groups and committees. They also believe it is inevitable to ensure nominations of experts in their area. In their opinion, effectiveness of cooperation and quality of outputs can be guaranteed only if the partners come to the meetings well prepared, have studied all the presented materials in advance and their position corresponds with the opinions of the group they represent.

MA representatives also perceive certain limits in applying partnership principles. According to them the participating partners do not make sufficient use of the potential to spread information, in some cases they put forward their own interests regardless of the general interest, they are not always correct in speaking outside the work groups and interpreting the results of the discussions.

The CCA and MA representatives put high importance on the perception of the overall public interest on the side of the nominated partners and the need to respect the agreed procedures in order to fulfill the ultimate partnership objective.

### ***3. How were partners selected in implementing the Partnership Agreement SR and to what end were transparent procedures applied in the selection process?***

It is necessary to take regard to the defined strategies and priorities of the PA SR and individual programs when selecting relevant partners. The selection should be transparent and take into account the institutional and legal frameworks of the member state, as well as national and regional powers and competences. The selected partners should include the most representative stakeholders.

PA SR includes all the ESIF programs, therefore in the selection of partners to be involved in preparation thereof within the work group "*Partnership for the cohesion policy*" the CCA took into account the planned use of funds from all programs. Previous cooperation with the partners in the programming period 2007 - 2013 was considered, their active participation, results in the relevant area and the need to cover all the areas of PA SR by relevant representative entities.

Generally speaking, in terms of preparation and implementation of programs, MAs selected entities which were relevant with regard to the content and thematic focus of the program and in relation to the planned use of the funds from the particular program.

When selecting partners, the MAs took into account the need of expertise in a particular area and the need of balanced representation of all the entity categories (entities of public administration, economic and social partners, civil society representatives). MAs based their selection of partners on the previous cooperation experience with the partners, they assessed the way of communication of the entities while considering their ability to contribute professionally and they also considered the entities' interest to take part in active cooperation.

The selection of entities in the preparation of programs was also the basis for the MAs in the subsequent choice of partners for their MC. The MC structure across all OPs was compliant with the requirement that the representatives of the other entities have a majority of votes in the MC. Concerning the cross-border cooperation programs, the selection of partners per member state is decided by the relevant national body while applying the principle of pro-rated representation of all entities from both member states. In justified cases and upon suggestions of specific entities, the structure of MCs and formal groups was extended and new partners were involved.

Representatives of the partners for committees and groups are delegated by relevant partners, third sector representatives are delegated by the Chamber of non-governmental non-profit organization of the Slovak Government's council for the NGOs. Individual nominations of MC members are approved and signed by a minister across all MAs.

Expertise and engagement of the nominated partner representatives need to be assessed individually. It ensued from the interviews with the CCA, MAs and bodies in charge of HP management that the partner representatives attending the meetings were not always professionally apt and competent.

Generally speaking, there's a prevalent opinion among the partners that the size of the group directly affects the ability to adopt a decision in the right time. The higher the number of group members, the lower the chance of consensual adoption of resolutions. Therefore it is preferred to select umbrella organizations which promote interests of a homogeneous group of entities.

For the sake of transparency in the processes, all MAs adjusted the rules for the MC activities and decision-making so that the entities who may be potential applicants at the same time be excluded from voting in specific cases (e. g. when deciding about the evaluation and selection criteria, approving project proposals, commenting on calls). In such cases there was drawn a division line between a cooperation with a partner and a conflict of interests. In order to eliminate the risk of conflicting interests, the MA took measures such as: revocation of a voting right to a member, nominating members as voteless observers whereby they could still attend the meetings and be informed about the development in the given area, or amendment of meeting rules so that a partner who was in conflict of interests did not vote.

Neither CCA or MAs introduced any special processes on partner selection in a written form. The approval of statutes for MCs and work groups can be considered as a certain form of approval of the partner selection process, since by this act all the partners could object the structure and choice or ask for other entities to be involved.



#### **4. What was the added value/contribution of the partners involved in implementing the Partnership Agreement SR?**

The added value of the partnership is visible especially in the encouragement and strengthening of the mutual relationships between individual partners and in the development of their multifaceted cooperation. Cooperation of entities on the horizontal and vertical levels enables the development of necessary conditions to achieve joint objectives.

MA, CCA and the bodies in charge of HP management mentioned many instances of good practice in personal interviews, as well as successes achieved thanks to cooperation with the partners (specified in Appendix 5). In their opinion, the partnership contribution is generally demonstrated in a positive way, especially in the following:

- mutual communication and cooperation of entities, involvement of various entity categories and mutual coordination;
- extending the professional and expert opinions and discussions, sharing know-how and experiences on a particular theme, benefits of new and innovative proposals;
- spreading information, easier access to information, feedback from other entities, sharing examples of good practice but also of implementation obstacles;
- possibilities to comment system and conceptual materials, proposing improvements thereof;
- increased pressure on a thorough preparation and performance of programs, influence on achievement of the set objectives, enhanced commitment and responsibility;
- benefits of real and specific needs from regions, cities and villages (so-called bottom-up approach);
- possibilities to foster integrated approach to regional development and design of integrated projects thanks to mutual coordination of partners;
- increased transparency and synergies, in a multiple control of outputs.

Within the online questionnaire, up to 31,5% of partners perceive the added value of the partnership mainly in better access to information and a space to share experiences. These two most important areas prevail across all entity categories.

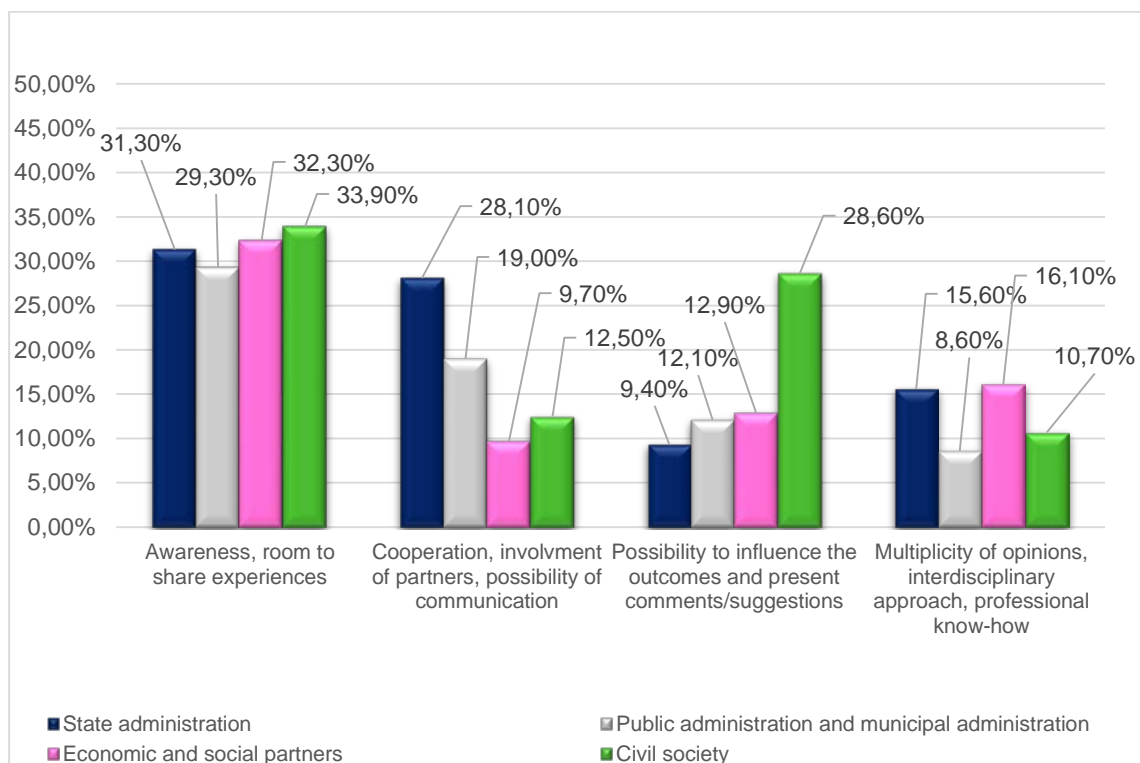
The cooperation aspect, involvement of various entity categories and the possibility of communication between the involved entities are seen as added value by 19,9% of entities. This category is emphasized mainly by the state sector representatives (28,1%), followed by 19,0% of public administration representatives and representatives of the regional self-administration and by 12,5% of civil society representatives. It is of lesser significance, 9,7%, to the representatives of the social and economic partners.

14,9% of partners appreciate the possibility to influence the outcomes and present comments/suggestions (prepared materials, intents and objectives of the strategic documents, initiate simplified procedures). This is an important benefit for up to 28,6% of representatives of the civil society and about 12,5% social and economic partners and representatives of the public administration appreciate this possibility. State sector representatives indicated this as a benefit in 9,7% of responses.

Multiple opinions, a more complex view of certain topics related to the preparation and implementation of ESIF, interdisciplinary approach to the discussed topics and professional know-how are seen as a benefit by 12,5% of respondents. This is seen as a benefit for 16,1% of social and economic partners, for 15,6 % of state administration representatives, for 10,7% of civil society entities and finally for 8,6% of the representatives of the public administration and regional self-government.

Individual opinions brought forward topics of transparency, effort to achieve synergies, help in achieving joint objectives, reflecting real needs and potentials from the perspective of possible investments/interventions, public interest, assistance of SR in implementing projects (implement good projects in compliance with the rules), improved expediency of calls for submission of project proposals/grant applications and national projects.

**Graph 4: Added value of partnership by partner categories**



7,1% of respondents are skeptical about application of partnership principles and do not see any added value in it. This opinion is shared by 16,1 % of social and economic partners and 15,5% of the public administration representatives. Neither representatives of the state sector nor civil society representatives expressed such a view.

It transpired from the partners' opinions, from assessment of specific impacts and examples of good practice which resulted from the partner cooperation, that the partnership principle enhances joint responsibility and decision-making processes in the implementation of PA SR and individual programs.



**Deputy Prime Minister's Office for Investments and Informatization of the Slovak Republic**  
Evaluation of partnership in implementation of the Partnership Agreement of the SR  
June 2018

The very engagement in the partnership ensures that technical and practical know-how of the partners is taken into account during the decision-making processes, which enables a better thematic balance and focus. Cooperation of various entities contributes to increased volume of available knowledge, professional experience and insights in creation and implementation of strategies, thereby ensuring a better transparency of the processes.

## 5 Conclusions and recommendations

Based on the conducted evaluation it can be said that the partnership principle was strengthened in both the legislative framework of the EU as well as on the national level for ESIF for the period of 2014 - 2020. Requirements of the Art. 5 of the general regulation<sup>2</sup> and the European code of conduct for partnership were extensively taken into account in setting of the ESIF management system by the CCA, in executing powers and development of strategic documents of the MAs and bodies in charge of HP management, which further led to enhanced task of applying partnership principles.

Preparation and implementation of PA SR is conducted in line with the multiple-level management approach, which is demonstrated in practice by involvement of various categories of partners in various phases of PA SR performance. A "wide-ranging partnership" was observed in the development of PA SR and individual programs (except OP TA) as well as in the activities of the monitoring committees at the CCA and MA level, engaging relevant representatives of the state and public administration, territorial and regional self-government, economic and social partners as well as civil society entities. There hasn't arisen a need for any special involvement of representatives of economic and social partners in the preparation of OP TA, which can be understood by the nature and focus of activities supported from the program. In the phase of program implementation there were special work groups created, with the structure of members reflecting the particular needs of task performance and covering expert issues. Therefore it can be concluded that the provisions of Art. 5 of the general regulation and the European code of conduct for partnership are adequately complied with in accordance with their intended purpose. Current involvement of partners within preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the PA SR and programs creates conditions for fulfilling of the partnership principle in accordance with the intended purpose.

In addition to the progress in refining the structure of partner groups in the programming period 2014 - 2020, attention is given also to the creation of procedures related to formulation the rules of membership, mainly in the form of statutes and meeting rules of the groups. Specific involvement of entities is ensured via formal and informal groups and it is defined by powers and competences in accordance with the purpose of the established group. Engagement of the members is related to their particular activities, tasks, duties, responsibilities as well as partner mandate.

Formally established groups (monitoring committees, councils, boards, work groups) and informal work groups (without statutes and meeting rules set up for an ad-hoc discussion of a specific subject-matter or as advisory boards to formal groups) are generally deemed as effective.

Partners were selected on the basis of unwritten criteria which included mainly a subject-matter relevance to the content framework of the PA SR or program, representative aspect (need to cover all categories of entities or their umbrella organizations), experience and active participation in the given area (expertise, engaging in the development of legislation or conceptual documents in the given area, participation in the preparation and monitoring in the programming period 2007 - 2013). Representatives of the entities are delegated by relevant partner organizations, third sector representatives are delegated by the Chamber of non-governmental non-profit

organization of the Slovak Government's council for the NGOs. The MAs and CCA adopted sufficient measures to avoid potential conflicts of interest in creation of the monitoring committees and work groups, especially in cases where the partners could be potential beneficiaries at the same time.

Involvement of the same partners in preparation as well as implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the PA SR/programs seems to be beneficial. Positive aspects of such an approach are evident in enhanced perception of joint responsibility for the adopted decisions where they result from a collective decision-making of the partners, in better feedback among the partners throughout the program cycle of managing the PA SR/program and in better comprehensibility for partners.

Groups with fewer members are considered more effective and flexible in terms of managing and making decisions. Therefore it is preferred to select umbrella organizations or organizations with a mandate to defend interests of a homogeneous group of entities.

According to the evaluation results, up to 74,4% of engaged entities perceive the partnership as beneficial and 60,2% consider the communication within the cooperation as sufficient/rather sufficient. More than a half of entities were satisfied with the quality of provided information within the MC activity and work groups, while they assessed whether the information was timely, sufficient, comprehensible and up-to-date.

In the course of cooperation, almost 50,0% of partners regularly comment on the submitted proposals/materials and share information with other entities. A majority of entities sometimes formulate recommendations for CCA/MAs, present their own suggestions/materials and use the possibility to invite subject-matter experts. Up to 79,4% of partners said that their presented opinions for the final wording of documents were partially considered.

64,3% of MC members are not keen on extending the scope of MC activities,<sup>8</sup> whereas 35,7% of MC members are positively geared towards such extension. Most respondents consider approval of the criteria for evaluation and selection of projects as key for real engagement of the MC members in monitoring of programs, as well as approval of intents of national projects and proposing revisions to programs including financial plans thereof. Other activities that MCs should undertake according to the respondents most often include participation in the preparation of calls.

Added value of cooperation among the entities can be summed up in the following points:

- easier access to information, being informed of the subject-matter and spreading the information further, sharing examples of good practice, feedback from other entities;
- cooperation of entities and communication among them, involvement of various categories of entities, synergies ensuing from wide-ranging knowledge and experience, inspirations, approach to work;
- possibility to present suggestions, opinions and comments which contribute to improved outcomes and the system of management and implementation of ESIF, possibility to influence the outcomes (prepared materials, intents and objectives of the strategic documents), space to explain/clarify issues;

- ensured professional/expert experience and information, technical know-how, wider range of opinions,
- bottom-up perspective during decision-making processes which facilitate improved thematic balance and focus, identification of real needs on the basis of entities really active in a particular area;
- enhanced commitment and responsibility - easier implementation of the cohesion policy, introducing complementarity with other policies, strategies and funding resources;
- pressure on the quality of outcomes and results;
- control of outcomes by the general public and increased transparency.

The main reasons why some partner representatives do not consider the partnership beneficial most often include the formal nature of the work groups without a real possibility to influence anything and insufficient way of communication (e-mail, without personal meetings). Reasons for insufficient communication are seen mainly in the lack of communication and information, formal nature of the meetings, fewer meetings and less frequent personal interactions, shortage of time to comment on materials, not processing all the submitted suggestions and comments, insufficient activity of the participating members but also lack of trust and failure to involve all the relevant partners into communication. Several negative responses were influenced by perception of the problems in implementing the EU funds in general, which cannot be considered a direct influence or impact of the application of the partnership principle.

Contribution of the nominated representatives of entities involved in cooperation within partnerships can be seen mainly as follows:

- mutual communication of the entities, bringing new perspectives on the topics, new ideas and innovative suggestions;
- sharing know-how and professional experience, practical knowledge;
- addressing the needs of a specific target group;
- bringing answers from multiple levels (local, regional, national and international);
- spreading information.

Support of building capacities of the partners is quite limited in the individual programs. A common element is the reimbursement of travel costs in case of MC sessions and the possibility of partners to attend information seminars and trainings organized by the MAs/CCA, consultations via information and consulting centers.

In order to maximize the contribution of the engaged partners, it is necessary to emphasize compliance with the principles (code of ethics):

- A thorough selection of entities. It is inevitable to ensure nominations of experts in their area.
- To avoid a merely formal nature of participation, the nominated representatives must be keen to act on the membership, be active and engaged.
- Effectiveness of cooperation and quality of outputs can be guaranteed only if the partners come to the meetings well prepared, have studied all the presented materials in advance and their position corresponds with the opinions of the group they represent.

- For the sake of continuity it is important to ensure a regular participation of the nominated partner representatives and eliminate proxies at the meetings of groups and committees.
- In order to complete the common objective of the partnership, the nominated partners must be able to perceive a general interest across the society, must respect the agreed procedures, be discreet in their statements outside the work groups, interpret the results correctly and be tolerant to the adopted suggestions.
- Adhering to agreements and honesty are the baseline elements in cooperation.

Having considered partners' suggestions, specific impacts and examples of good practice which resulted from the partner cooperation, it can be said that the partnership principle enhances joint responsibility. Thus it enables easier implementation of the cohesion policy, introducing complementarity with other policies, strategies and funding resources.

Work based on "wide-ranging" partnership and multiple-level management within ESIF facilitates easier achievement of social, economic and territorial cohesion and priorities of the EU in the area of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.

Following the findings and conclusions **we recommend** the following:

- CCA, MAs and bodies in charge of HP management should ensure that the main criteria and principles underlying the selection of partners be announced in advance in writing, in order to ensure an adequate audit track record and increase the transparency of procedures in the selection of partners;
- set the structure of the engaged partners at the beginning of the programming and work with the same partners throughout all of the phases of the program cycle from the preparation, implementation to monitoring and evaluation of ESIF (ensure long-term cooperation). This will help to maintain continuity in the performed activities, enhance the joint responsibility principle for decisions made and increase the comprehensibility of the provided information. The said procedure however does not exclude adjustments to the partner structure during implementation of the PA SR/ program, if such adjustment should lead to the benefit of improved achievement of objectives or increased expertise;
- maximize the use of umbrella organizations or organizations with a mandate to represent interests of a common group of entities. Involvement of such entities contributes to a more operative task-solving by creating groups with a lower number of members. It aims to ensure a sufficient engagement of the relevant range of partners from a given sector, increase transparency and distribution of information among a wider range of agents, ensure a more flexible management of work groups. It is necessary however, that such entities are adequately representative so as to cover a particular topic/area/sector sufficiently. The said method may help ensure a prompt feedback with a sufficient added value. Received inputs and information thus can be flexibly used to modify outputs and strategies and ensure a more targeted impact on target groups;

- consider involvement of other partners<sup>6</sup> (except the state administration entities) in the design of calls for submission of grant applications in a manner which would avoid conflict of interests;
- create a sufficient time reserve for commenting the presented materials and submission of suggestions. If need be, organize personal meetings or individual consultations more frequently in order to explain or clarify issues to partners;
- consider further measures to enhance partners' institutional capacity with regard to social partners and organizations representing the civil society. Thus enhance the interest and conditions of individuals and organizations to actively participate in the preparation and performance of the cohesion policy and ESIF and deepen their knowledge and skills in the relevant areas (consider the possibility to remunerate activities in connection with performance of membership in certain work groups or choose other tools to motivate group members to a greater responsibility in performance of their duties, "professionalized partnership").
- consider introduction of an ethical code of conduct in organizing a partnership, with clearly defined principles to be strictly adhered to by the cooperating partners. The aim is to build the culture of partnership and to positively shape the environment of respect and trust.



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