

## Executive summary

The study covered by this study was carried out between September and November 2023. The main objective of the evaluation was to assess the effects of the implementation of Operational Programme Knowledge, Education, Development (PO WER) and the degree of achievement of the assumed socio-economic goals, including those resulting from the provisions of the Europe 2020 Strategy for Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Development. The specific objectives of this evaluation were set out as follows: analysis and assessment of the degree of implementation PO WER objectives, including an analysis of the reasons for their possible failure to achieve them; identification and assessment of the effects of the implemented intervention; assessment of the effects of support provided under Measure 2.6 of PO WER; assessment of the implementation of the objectives contained in the PO WER Communication Strategy. A wide catalogue of research methods and techniques was used in this evaluation: desk research (analysis of existing sources), econometric and statistical analyses - separately for each of the areas covered by the study, econometric modelling taking into account the counterfactual method - separately for each of the areas covered by the study, research techniques within the qualitative method (secondary data): individual in-depth interviews (IDI) within various respondent groups, case studies, Charrette workshops, recommendation workshop, expert (recommendation) panel, Research techniques within the quantitative method (secondary data): Quantitative online survey (CAWI) addressed to PO WER beneficiaries - N=2333, Quantitative study - computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATI) of all Polish residents - representative sample N=1000.

**The nine main areas of intervention** within which the analyses were conducted are: labour market, poverty, exclusion and social integration, adaptability of enterprises and employees, education, higher education, good governance, support for young people, health care system, social innovations, transnationalism and programs mobility.

**The level of implementation of PO WER indicators is high.** In most cases, the target values and the values achieved (specified in the grant agreements) exceed the level specified as the final goal for PO WER. At the time of this evaluation, the final target had not been achieved only in the case of individual indicators defined in the performance framework. With the completion (by the end of 2023) of the implementation of all concluded support agreements, the achieved values may (according to the estimates of individual Intermediate Bodies) increase significantly.

Problems with achieving the assumed indicator values were declared by 10% of PO WER beneficiaries. The main difficulty in this respect was related to the socio-economic changes taking place during the implementation of PO WER - for example, a decrease in the unemployment rate and an increase in the employment rate made it difficult to recruit participants in projects addressed to the unemployed and professionally inactive. There was competition among beneficiaries for participants from particularly difficult groups, such as the long-term unemployed and the disabled. In the case of projects implemented in schools, problems resulted from the ongoing crisis in Polish education as well as an overloaded core

curriculum or teacher strikes. The required levels of some result indicators were set at a high level (e.g. in relation to support for the unemployed) and were very difficult to achieve. The COVID-19 pandemic, rising inflation and the war in Ukraine also contributed to the failure to achieve the indicators. **In all areas, the Program had a positive impact on the change in the socio-economic situation**, but it was not statistically significant everywhere. The Program had relatively the greatest impact in the areas of the labour market and support for young people, as well as education and poverty and social exclusion. In these areas, projects with the highest value were also implemented, ranging from an average of PLN 330 per capita (support for young people) to PLN 437 per capita (education). For comparison, in the remaining 4 areas the average value of projects per capita ranged from PLN 66 (social innovations) to PLN 232 (higher education).

**As for the provincial impact of the projects, it was the strongest in the Lubelskie Voivodeship (in the area of poverty, support for young people), Podkarpackie Voivodeship (labour market, education), Małopolskie Voivodeship (higher education, health care), Podlaskie Voivodeship (adaptability) and Masovian Voivodeship (good governance, social innovations).**

Qualitative research confirmed that **the projects implemented under PO WER effectively contributed to the phenomenon of regional convergence** - therefore, the Program turned out to be an effective tool for levelling differences between regions. These effects were more noticeable in the case of the impact of projects on reducing differences between rural areas (less developed) and urban areas (characterized by a better level of development). Positive results were noticed by approximately 60% of beneficiaries; positive changes in eliminating interregional differences were identified slightly less frequently (52%), which, however, seems understandable, because the assessment in this case - as a rule - requires a broader perspective than the perspective of individual projects, often anchored. The research data also showed that an important source of levelling the differences were model solutions (the quantitative survey of beneficiaries shows that they were created on average in over ¼ of the projects) with a broader application, i.e. going beyond the needs of the project in which they were developed. There were numerous projects with a nationwide impact.

The results of the survey of support beneficiaries also indicate the main spheres of impact of PO WER projects. In this context, the most frequently mentioned result was the acquisition of new skills by the target group, then the improvement of the situation of project participants on the labour market, and finally the possibility of using support not available elsewhere, as well as increasing independence. The results identified here were of a very universal nature, as they occurred with a very similar intensity regardless of the area of PO WER intervention. The high added value of the intervention was also emphasized (total lack of availability of support in the absence of a project), most often revealed in projects implemented in the areas of "Good governance", "Innovation" and "Adaptation". Finally, the effects of convergence in the social sphere are also clearly noticeable (definitely more clear

than in the case of effects in terms of regional differences). According to the beneficiaries, they are visible primarily in the area of improving the situation of young people, improving the situation of women and people with disabilities. The effects of equalizing social differences are distributed differently across individual areas of Program intervention. They are most noticeable (much above average) in the areas of "Labor Market", "Poverty, Social Exclusion and Integration", "Education" and "Support for Young People", where the equalization of differences was observed in all dimensions included in the study.

**The main obstacles to the implementation of projects under PO WER include the pandemic COVID-19**, which led to delays in the implementation of many projects, and in some cases could also lead to a reduction in the quality of the support offered (as a rule, remote training is slightly less effective than face-to-face training)<sup>1</sup>. In the recent period (2021-2023), a significant increase in prices was also a problem, as a result of which some project promoters had some problems, for example with recruiting trainers (the amounts provided for in the budgets turned out to be insufficient). Specific problems were also noted in individual areas of intervention, described in more detail in the report.

Poland's implementation of the Europe 2020 Strategy, an important element of which were the activities undertaken under PO WER, was monitored by the European Commission, which every year presented recommendations and goals to be achieved in the form of the so-called Country Specific Recommendations ( CSRs ); the resulting (mostly positive) conclusions are presented in the report.

**The conclusions drawn from the study, based on the opinions of beneficiaries of PO WER support, indicate that the implemented projects were generally planned in an appropriate manner.** In the reality of the implementation of the Program, there were no special opportunities to organize them differently, which could result in a better impact on the target groups. First of all, the generally good adjustment of the catalogue of eligible costs was emphasized. Nevertheless, it was possible to identify some indications regarding project configurations that could result in better results. Namely, the need for broader promotion of projects was pointed out, ensuring better results in the recruitment of participants, which turned out to be a problem in the practice of project implementation (in the case of approximately 1/3 of them, this problem occurred, with a positive exception being the area of "Good governance") . Attention was also drawn to the tight budgets of the projects, concluding that it was not possible to achieve similar results with lower expenditure. In the case of many projects, the implementation context was important, especially the emergence of the pandemic, then the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and finally inflationary pressure. Among other desirable changes in projects, various issues related to their organization were also mentioned, but most of them were specific to a given beneficiary/project. However, the need to better identify and recognize the needs of target groups was often pointed out.

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted, however, that although the pandemic caused delays in the implementation of projects, it had a minor impact on the level of indicator implementation - delays due to the pandemic were in most cases made up for.

Many of these proposals indicate the need to place greater emphasis on substantive issues in the future at the project planning stage. In addition, the effects of the intervention were also the result of the construction of models and solutions developed as part of many supported projects. Key modifications in this area included recommendations for better identification of the needs of target groups, basing the process of creating model solutions on project management methodology, creating model solutions using the principle of their positive verification within the framework of designated milestones and in the widest possible partnerships with a clear definition of the target "owner". " models/solutions.

**As for the conclusions resulting from the study that can be used within the 2021-2027 perspective, one of the very important and probably the most difficult issues related to the implementation of PO WER was how to coordinate the use of project implementation results** by the state administration and ( to a lesser extent) local government. The completed case studies, as well as the results of the interviews, indicate that this issue was somewhat problematic in many areas. Therefore, as part of the recommendations, we indicate possible directions for improving this situation.

**Measure 2.6 *High quality policy for the social and professional inclusion of disabled people*** included projects implemented under the supervision of the Ministry of Family and Social Policy in Priority Axis II: Effective public policies for the labour market, economy and education of PO WER.

The projects were implemented by entities with extensive practical experience in cooperation with people with various disabilities. This allowed for the development of very detailed models/recommendations embedded in the realities of everyday functioning. It is difficult to evaluate the results of ongoing projects in terms of (greater or lesser) accuracy. However, from the MA's perspective, it is assessed that the implemented activities were "an appropriate response to the observed gaps in the support system for people with disabilities."

There is a consensus among the beneficiaries, IB and MA that the usefulness of the implemented projects should be assessed very highly.

The study allows us to conclude that the models and effects of monitoring projects developed under Measure 2.6 of PO WER have a very high potential for permanent use and replication.

A strong point of actions to improve the situation of people with disabilities is the high consistency of actions in the subsequent financial perspectives, this also applies to FERS ( European Funds for Social Development Programme).

**In the PO WER Communication Strategy**, the budget for the implementation of information and promotional activities by the PO WER MA and IP for the years 2014-2023 was estimated at approximately EUR 12.7 million, of which EUR 10.70 million was to come from the ESF.

In an effort to minimize information noise and rationalize communication expenses, the Strategy assumes that the promoted brand is European Funds. However, references to the PO WER program clarify and supplement communication about FE. This change seems beneficial. It did not make it difficult for beneficiaries to identify the fund under which they were willing to take action. However, it allowed us to focus on communicating specific activities carried out in connection with PO WER.

The knowledge of the name ESF - European Social Fund among all Poles surveyed is at a much higher level than the knowledge of PO WER, which is primarily due to the much longer presence of this name in public awareness. In total, in 2023, 42% of respondents declared knowledge of the ESF. This percentage was clearly higher among people aged 30-49, i.e. in the group whose early adulthood coincided with the years of accession to the EU (50%). People with higher education more often declare knowledge of the ESF. The logo of the European Funds is a very well-recognized symbol for Poles - already in 2022, over ¾ of respondents confirmed that they had encountered their logo.

Research to date indicates that general knowledge of what EU funds are is quite well spread in Polish society and has been at a similar level for the last 8 years (61-63% in 2014-2022). However, the possibility of obtaining support from EU funds can currently be described as common. From the perspective of FE beneficiaries, information on the availability of financing is described as easily or very easily available.

The specific objectives of the PO WER communication strategy for 2014-2020 should be assessed as achieved. This was influenced by the great diversity of activities carried out and the multi-channel nature of the message. The indicators assumed in the Strategy were not fully achieved, the reason for this is their initial overestimation in relation to other operational programs and the lack of corrections during the program duration.

When constructing guidelines for future communication activities, it is worth considering several changes:

- It is important that the Communication Strategy itself is formulated in direct, detailed reference to the program it concerns.
- From the perspective of all participants of communication activities, it is crucial to formulate the message in such a way that will allow building individual motivation to apply for funds/participate in a specific project.
- We also recommend maintaining the possibility of carrying out some of the beneficiaries' activities online (e.g. training, consultations).