

## **Impact assessment of human resources development programs funded by the European Union on improving beneficiaries' quality of life**

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**Abstract:** *The European Union has invested over 3.3 billion euros in Romania in human resource development programs that took over 1,200,000 beneficiaries. So far, no studies have been published that capture their actual impact on increasing the quality of their lives or there were very few published studies. In this paper are shown the results of some qualitative research carried out by the method of focus group research that captures those aspects.*

**Key-words:** *human resource development programs, quality of life, Sectoral Operational Program for Human Resources Development, focus grou.*

### **1. Introduction**

Human resource programs have addressed a variety of categories of beneficiaries, including disadvantaged, unemployed, employees, students, teachers, public administration staff, contractors etc. Some of these categories have a greater ability to harness "investment" made for them through these programs.

To measure the effectiveness of these funding programs it is important to identify categories of beneficiaries with the best chances to capitalize effort for their personal development.

Also, from the wide range of activities eligible for funding under these programs it would be beneficial to identify the most effective activities in enhancing the quality of life of the final beneficiaries and to enhance their career development opportunities.

The results might constitute the basis of a strategy to improve future funding programs in human resources in such a manner that the investments to have maximum impact.

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## 2. Objectives

The quality of life is defined as "the individuals' perception on their social condition, in the context of cultural values systems where they live and in dependence upon their own necessities, standards and aspirations" (OMS, 1998).

Thus, through the quality of life of projects' beneficiaries in human resources development field EU funded, we may state that we understand their physical and psychological, economic and social welfare, as a result of their participation in these projects, as well as their ability to value the knowledge, experiences, adventures they achieved during these projects in order to reach their aspirational life standard, goal which involves a development of the personal and a raise in their career life.

The studies conducted on the quality of life of programs beneficiaries in human resources development field may be very useful for the implementation practice of EU funding projects in this field, in assessing the effects of these investments on the beneficiaries daily life, in assessing the impact these have on their quality of life improvement, in determining the real needs of funding beneficiaries, as well as in identifying the most appropriate methods, activities, solutions that might be implemented within the human resources development programs so that their effectiveness to be maximum.

In Romania, the amplest development program in the human resources filed EU funded is the Sectoral Operational Program for Human Resources Development SOPHRD (POSDRU), funded by European Social Fund and the Romanian Government, whose motto is Invest in people!, the population being considered the most important resource of the country.

Launched after 50 years from the establishment of the European Social Fund, the oldest among all the European structural funds, this operational program, with grants over 4 billion Euros between 2007-2013, offers to the potential and effective work force in Romania more chances to report itself to a working market in a continuous change, improving the training, the capacity to accommodate and the professional competences of the Romanian people.

The priorities or requests sphere in the community identified and promoted by the projects implemented within POSDRU, and within other similar programs, too, in the human resources development filed EU funded, represents the imagine of a society whose members assert a major interest for a better work force employment at the community level, unemployment control, modernization of work organization, human resources development and work employment including the rural areas, promoting the entrepreneurship culture, facilitating the access of young people on the work market, facilitating the vulnerable groups to education and on the work market, measures for better correlations between the individual abilities, education and working potential and the opportunities on the working market, all of these actions leading, as a fact, towards a common result for all the beneficiaries, in concordance with the Europe 2020 strategy goal, our country being aligned to, and this is providing new and better life conditions for these, implicitly for whole the community.

### 3. Literature review

The interest asserted by different entities/specialists/ towards the end beneficiaries opinions regarding the EU funding projects in the human resources development field is proved by the large number of studies conducted among them, materialized in reports and articles published on subjects that regard the satisfaction of funding beneficiaries.

But all these publications in this field indicate statistic results, achieved indicators, which have a contribution upon the beneficiaries objective quality of life, defined as “individual standard of life represented by the verifiable conditions peculiar to a cultural unit” (Evans, 1994), against the subjective quality of their life whose definition is given by Evans as being “the level in which the individual life is perceived as achieving some inner standards, explicit or implicit” and which has a great weight in personal self-appreciation.

The published papers on this research field indicate the results of the projects measured by physical indicators, and do not comprise their real benefices for participants, and how these projects contributed to the improvement of beneficiaries life over the time. In comparison to what has been written in this field until now, through the proposed research within this project it is desired the identification of those factors which have a significant influence on the subjective quality of life of the beneficiaries.

Among the most relevant papers published in the human resources development field EU funded, there are The annual implementation reports of POSDRU published on the website [www.fonduri-ue.ro](http://www.fonduri-ue.ro) and the assessment reports drafted within some projects implemented in this funding program.

In the speciality literature, there have been identified only some articles dealing with human resources development programs EU funded from different perspectives, as: POSDRU implementation efficiency in Romania (Iova, 2009), study which treats the issue of efficient use of structural and cohesion funds with a cost – benefit analysis with positive results for all the social levels; the real impact of projects funded by the European Social Fund, POSDRU on the target public (Chițu, 2012), papers which indicate a marketing research among the beneficiary of a POSDRU funding project whose results highlight the importance of gaining a feedback from project beneficiaries, their opinions being a very useful source of information which contain actions that must be carried on regarding the satisfaction improvement of the projects beneficiaries in the human resources field EU funded.

Another study published in this filed had as a set goal the identification of the needs of the personnel within the organizations and the working market tendencies from the perspective of qualifications requested in Center Region (Gorski, Ciuhureanu, 2012).

Another relevant paper for the approached topic within this projects deals POSDRU program as an approach of quality in higher education and an influence factor to provide an ascending track of career (Stremțan, and Cotîrlea, 2013) outlining an image regarding the role and the importance of such projects in establishing a competitive educational system.

#### **4. Material and Methods**

In order to assess some of the projects funded by the European Union from European Social Fund through Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development there were conducted a series of qualitative research marketing focus groups which, among other objectives, were aimed to find out the opinions and attitudes of final beneficiaries regarding the impact of these projects on increasing of the quality of their lives.

This method of research was chosen because it is one of the best ways to capture aspects regarding motivations, motives and attitudes and, in addition, benefit from the emergence of the group's ideas, each participant developing their position due to expression in group of various positions, consistent or inconsistent with other opinions.

Focus groups were moderated in order to obtain the information in question but without affecting the positions of participants. Projective techniques were used in the focus groups, such as: spontaneous association, imaginative personification, completing phrases to capture the most subtle aspects to assess the project beneficiary's satisfaction.

#### **5. Results and Discussions**

The following is the summary of the results obtained in this research.

On the project "Entrepreneurship and Supply Chain Management" project funded by the European Social Fund Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development, which had among the targets offering courses in entrepreneurship, a series of 4 focus groups were conducted whose research subjects were constituted by project beneficiaries.

From the research results it can be concluded that the Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development is seen as an alternative to professional conversion courses organized by state, subjects making associations with the Structural Funds, money, training (specialization), promoting, support, efficient human resources, business opportunities in consulting, training, development opportunity, being seen as a tool that can contribute to their physical, psychological, economic and social well-being.

Regarding the importance of training people working in the field of entrepreneurship, we can shape the overall opinion that for entrepreneurs or future entrepreneurs a specialized training is essential, now being precarious.

Subjects consider that in order to be a successful entrepreneur experience-based intuition is not enough, training and continuing education being very important, to develop a strong entrepreneurial culture that underpin successful business.

All participants said that participation in such courses helped them in at least two directions: the accumulation of knowledge leading to increased chances that the business they started or the business they intent to start to have a greater chance of success and also led to increased motivation and optimism. It can be inferred that the respondents' participation as beneficiaries under this project has led to increased quality of their life.

On the project "IT for Managerial and Entrepreneurial Skills Development" project funded by the European Social Fund Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development, a range of financial advisory, accounting, marketing and management services were offered to people who wanted to start a small business and thus being able to change their status on the labour market becoming entrepreneurs from people looking for a job.

At the end of the project implementation, a qualitative focus group research was performed that took into account detailed analysis of the participants' satisfaction and their opinions on the effectiveness and usefulness of services that benefited from the project.

The subjects said they had great benefit from participation in this project as persons who initiated an independent business because companies set up with small financial resources were able to benefit from a complete package of services designed to help to overcome the difficult times through which small investors usually encounter when they start a business.

This free service package, was appreciated to be complete and of valuable assistance to all those who have potential and dare to "venture" in the business world. We can therefore draw the conclusion that such projects are a real support for those who wish to change their status in the labour market which often leads to increased quality of life.

To identify the marketing and management services that people who had started their own business under the "Solutions for Today's Economy", funded by SOPHRD, deems necessary for small entrepreneurs during the start-up business, a qualitative research focus group was conducted composed of two groups.

Among the objectives of this research are to identify the reasons or needs which led the subjects to set up their own business and determine the level of optimism of the subjects on how the business will evolve in the next period.

From the research results it appears that the project, through the offered services, provided an opportunity for its beneficiaries by giving them more chances

to relate to a rapidly changing labour market. Research subjects believe that there are people who, in a certain moment of their lives, are in an impasse in the labour market and identify the opportunity to become entrepreneurs as a new beginning, with more chances of success than the possibility of being mere employees.

As a conclusion, one of the main reasons for which subjects have taken the decision to become entrepreneurs is the fear of being rejected at job interviews because of age or lack of work experience for the youngest but also by the desire of achieving a new standard of living, target that requires both personal development and career growth.

The project that provides support for this category of persons can be considered as one which indirectly contribute to increasing the quality of life.

Another category of projects funded through SOPHRD (POSDRU) targeted the employees and the health and safety conditions at work.

To find out the opinions of experts who have been involved in implementing human resource programs funded by the EU regarding the real impact of these programs on the beneficiaries of the project "Network for the Protection of Health and Safety at Workplace in Manufacturing Industry- AERONAVSECUR", a qualitative focus group research was conducted resulting in extensive discussions with a number of 8 experts, presidents and vice presidents of unions in manufacturing, aeronautical and naval sectors, regarding actions that could be taken to reduce costs, both economic and social generated from the risks assumed by employees at the workplace.

Following these discussions it was noted that subjects are demanding safer jobs in the future, considering this extremely important, besides improving conditions at work, information and awareness among employees to know and learn not to accept to be exposed to risks of occupational disease.

Participants in this research understand that man has a number of values and specific characteristics such as life, health, anatomical and functional integrity, capacity for work, skills, creative and emotional ability, knowledge they must learn to appreciate, to protect and continuously improve to enable them to live and carry on normally lucrative and non-lucrative activities.

## **6. Conclusions**

From the research results presented can be concluded that the programs SOPHRD can help raise the living standard of the final beneficiaries, however, the limits of this research are linked in particular to the fact that they were designed to analyze aspects related to activities, results, categories of beneficiaries without necessarily be focused on the connection between the financed activities under these projects and the real impact on increasing the quality of life of users.

The research will determine the funded activities that had a significant contribution to the personal development or career development of the beneficiaries, improving their quality of life.

The research will highlight the real needs of the beneficiaries that gain from the human resources development programs and as well the actions, activities that can fulfil these needs.

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