EUROMA REFERENCE DOCUMENT

Calls for proposals: a key element to achieve Roma equality and inclusion

October 2023

Critical aspects to consider in the design of the calls for proposals of the European Cohesion Policy Funds 2021-2027 to ensure that these funds contribute to promoting and achieving a real social impact on Roma equality and inclusion

The European Network on Roma Equality under EU Funds (EURoma Network) has been working since 2007 to foster (through mutual learning, generation of knowledge and awareness-raising activities) an increased and effective use of European Cohesion Policy Funds (notably ESF/ESF+ and ERDF) to promote the social inclusion, equal opportunities and fight against discrimination of Roma people across the EU. To this end, it brings together public authorities responsible for Roma policies (notably National Roma Contact Points) and those in charge of European Cohesion Policy Funds from 15 EU Member States, as well as the European Commission. The Fundación Secretariado Gitano (FSG) is in charge of the Network Technical Secretariat, which leads and coordinates the Network. For further information, please visit https://www.euromanet.eu

This document reflects initial discussions and exchanges within the EURoma Network about this topic. It is intended to be a living document that will be further developed and completed to incorporate additional relevant information regarding the different aspects mentioned as well as examples of how they are reflected in the calls for proposals of this programming period.

I. INTRODUCTION

We observe a positive picture as regards the consideration of Roma equality and inclusion in the programming documents of the 2021-2027 European Cohesion Policy Funds (to which EURoma contributed with the publication of the 'EURoma Checklist for the Effective Inclusion of Roma Interventions within European Cohesion Policy Funds programming 2021-2027'). A large number of countries plan to devote resources to support Roma equality and inclusion, using different options in terms of funds (European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), European Regional Development

Fund (ERDF) or others), geographical scope (national, regional…), approaches (target, mainstream, territorial…), Specific Objectives, intervention fields…

Now it is time to focus on the actual translation of these programming documents into practice to ensure that, unlike in previous programming periods, there is not a gap between the programming and the implementation. In many cases, even when the programming documents adopted set a favourable framework for promoting Roma equality and inclusion, the results and impact on the ground did not necessarily correspond. This was related to a great extent to the different elements set for the implementation, among them the calls for proposals, which seem to be the most commonly used mechanism for the allocation of funds.

The calls for proposals play a fundamental role in the way projects/interventions are designed, and therefore in their potential for efficiency, effectiveness and impact

Indeed, calls for proposals have proved to the be one of the determining elements for the success in the implementation. On the one hand, they serve to translate what is established in the programming documents into practice. On the other, the way the calls are designed and planned determine to a great extent the characteristics of the projects/interventions that will be selected and implemented as well as their potential efficiency, effectiveness and impact.

Against this background, this EURoma reference document gathers, based on partners' experience and on reflections within the Network, aspects to be considered by relevant authorities in the design of the calls for proposals of the 2021-2027 programming period to ensure that they set the adequate basis for future interventions with the highest potential to contribute to Roma equality and inclusion and achieve social change.

These aspects could be taken into account and reflected, to the extent possible, in the calls for proposals as well as in the different elements related to them such as the selection and evaluation criteria, the guidance documents for potential beneficiaries, the project selection processes…

It is also worth mentioning the existence of other mechanisms for allocation of funds such as contracts and social agreements that, although less commonly used, have proved their value and have characteristics that could serve as reference for the calls for proposals. These mechanisms allow for positive aspects such as the reduction of the administrative burden and a longer-term approach (e.g. several years long agreements with annual extensions).

Regardless of the mechanism used, Member States have now the opportunity to use all the potential of the 2021-2027 European Cohesion Policy Funds, including the wide variety of instruments at their disposal, to support interventions that have a real impact, in line with the goals set in the National/Regional Roma Strategic Frameworks for equality, inclusion and participation and the EU regulations and recommendations.

II. RELEVANT ASPECTS TO BE CONSIDERED

1. Duration/timeframe

Calls for proposals allowing for a long-term approach are crucial to efficiently address the structural challenges faced by Roma

The period of execution of the projects/interventions has proved to be one of the most relevant factors affecting the impact of the funds. Even if experience shows that the higher the duration is, the higher the impact, and despite the fact that the framework for European Cohesion Policy Funds allows for a long-term perspective (up to 7 years + 2 years), so far calls for proposals have had to a large extent a short-term perspective (with a duration in some cases of even less than 1 year). In addition, it is rare to find mechanisms that allow for renewing and giving continuity to pilot and/or short-term actions that prove their value and success, allowing for their consolidation/ extension/scaling up during the same programming period (or beyond, when considered relevant).

Experience demonstrates the relevance of a longer-term approach for increasing the potential efficiency, effectiveness and impact of the interventions aiming at social cohesion by, for example:

- Providing a better framework for actions related to Roma inclusion, equality and non-discrimination, which require complex and comprehensive/integrated approaches that need long-term approaches and commitments. Enough time is needed not only for implementation, but also for planning, consultation, engaging stakeholders and promoting coordination, building trust with communities, planning and implementing individualised and integrated plans, monitoring, evaluation and policy review…

  In addition, this long-term approach allows for more certainty and trust among beneficiaries as they will have the same reference framework (i.e. persons, working methods…) over time. Furthermore, experience has shown how the lack of continuity may lead to the overall failure of relevant objectives, as in the case of anti-discrimination, prejudice against Roma and change of their social image.
- Facilitating longer and more complex actions, favouring the implementation of comprehensive/integrated approaches involving, when relevant, the use of different funds.
- Allowing for projects (and related interventions) sustained over time without interruptions.
- Reducing the turnover of professionals and participants involved in the interventions, which has a clear impact on the effectiveness of interventions and even allows for adopting a preventive approach.
- Decreasing the management and administrative burden, notably in the initial and final phases of implementation, which are generally more intense in terms of management and bureaucracy.
- Facilitating the implementation of territorial approaches, in general terms more complex/ comprehensive and therefore requiring a longer-term approach.

- Allowing for social innovation as this requires a longer timeframe to experiment and implement adjustments.
- Avoiding that political changes have an impact on the implementation of projects/interventions already on track.

In line with the potential timeframe of calls offered by the Multiannual Financial Framework, it is therefore advisable to plan calls for proposals with an ambitious long-term timeframe, allowing for interventions with the longest duration possible (a crucial factor for achieving goals related to reducing inequality gaps affecting Roma). In turn, implementation of short-term measures (1 year or shorter) should be avoided as much as possible. While administrative barriers may exist, experience from several countries show that it is possible (and positive) to advance towards the implementation of calls with a long-term perspective. In fact, during the 2021-2027 programming period, a greater number of countries are planning to define longer-term calls (some with a minimum length of 3 years).

This long-term approach does not prevent from also having flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances and address potential risks over the programming period, which may require redesigning and reprogramming. Specific mechanisms/measures can be foreseen in this sense, in line with the Multiannual Financial Framework, including the review of the selection criteria for the calls set up by the Monitoring Committees, building upon the needs and circumstances that appear during the programming period; the establishment of mechanisms that allow for the (bi)annual review of the interventions as well as for the interruption of the funding if objectives are not achieved (even if the funding is foreseen for a longer period)…

2. Scale

Experience from previous programming periods show that the distribution of funds in numerous projects of a reduced scale results in the fragmentation of resources and leads to a more limited reach of beneficiaries and of impact. In turn, **projects of a larger scale** have had in general terms a higher potential to use the funds more effectively and achieve a significant social change, by reaching a higher number of beneficiaries, involving a larger number of interventions, adopting more effective approaches, easing the implementation…

Projects of a larger scale (in terms of dimensions/budget and geographical scope) have proven to have a higher potential to reach beneficiaries and achieve significant social change

Another relevant aspect is the **geographical scope** of the projects. Interventions addressing a larger geographical scope (e.g. several territories/regions within a country, several localities within a region…) ensure a greater coverage of population as well as increased territorial equality, promoting an equal access to the interventions in the different regions/localities and not only in a single one/some of them. In addition, it contributes to a more effective use of the resources by promoting synergies and facilitating the use of similar approaches as well as the exchange and transfer of experiences and practices, among others.

Nevertheless, the definition of the optimal geographical scope should go hand in hand with the consideration of the context of each territory/region and/or locality (including characteristics, specificities, stakeholders…) in order to adapt the general framework/approach to such context, as well as to rely on the most relevant stakeholders, which are in the best position to understand the needs of the different territorial contexts.

This is also linked to the geographical targeting of the interventions addressing the most vulnerable groups, including through the use of territorial indicators, which help identify and define the optimal geographical scope of these interventions.

3. Actors involved

The role of different stakeholders (as managing and implementing bodies) and the formulas of collaboration established are also particularly relevant. Counting on the adequate stakeholders (whether public or private and with a national, regional or local geographical scope) to design and implement the projects/interventions, as well as, when relevant, the form and conditions in which the collaboration and complementarity between stakeholders take place, have an impact to a big extent in the successful and efficient achievement of objectives.

Selecting the stakeholder in the best position to implement the projects/initiatives is a key element for success

Experience shows that the most determining factor for success is that the **projects/initiatives are entrusted to the stakeholder (whether it is public or private, whether it has a national, regional or local geographical scope) in the best position to implement them and to ensure that they achieve the highest impact.** If there are no individual stakeholders in a good position to implement the actions on their own, **alternative options could be found such as the establishment of cooperation and alliances between different stakeholders.**

Aspects such as the specialisation and the geographical scope of beneficiary entities prove to be relevant to achieve impact

The **specialisation of beneficiary entities** in charge of the implementation (e.g. national CSOs specialised in the work with vulnerable groups) has also proved to be a key element. This allows better reaching out the target group (particularly relevant for vulnerable groups such as Roma) and better voicing and addressing their needs.

The **geographical coverage of the beneficiary entities** could be another element to value. It seems that, when possible, a broad geographical coverage of the beneficiary entity (e.g. several regions/territories, several localities…) could contribute to ensure a high and equal reach of the interventions, taking advantage of this coverage to reach a higher number of beneficiaries and to use the funds more effectively, by for

example using similar approaches (with the necessary adaptations to the different contexts) and promoting learning and exchange on practices.

In addition to the beneficiary/implementing entities, it is important to consider and, when relevant, involve other relevant stakeholders (including experts and operators, leading figures…) in the planning, implementation, monitoring of the geographical area of implementation (at national, regional, local level) to ensure that the initiative is linked to the general framework of services and resources. When relevant, calls could foresee the use of participatory approaches of the target communities in the interventions/projects, which could contribute to incorporating their views and promoting active participation and citizenship.

4. Scope of projects/interventions

Given the remaining situation of inequality in the **core areas of employment, education, health, housing or fight against discrimination,** there is a need for the calls for proposals to maintain their focus on these fields. Likewise, the promotion and support of **approaches that have proved successful (e.g. personalised pathways…)** is still needed.

In addition, other areas could be considered in order to make full use of the options available within ESF+ and ERDF and to take into account new elements of the current socio-economic context. Among them, those related to the **green and the digital transformation** that has been taking place over the last years with a view to addressing the potential risks this transformation could bring for vulnerable groups, such as Roma, while taking advantage of the opportunities it could also offer for them. Possible actions may be related to promoting a fair, green and digital transition; countering energy/transport poverty; green and digital skills developments; promoting employability related to green and digital jobs (including entrepreneurship); providing support to innovative job-to-job or labour market transitions; uptake and use of green or digital innovations…

While there is a need to maintain support to core areas (employment, education, health, housing, fight against discrimination) and successful approaches (e.g. personalised pathways), other options available within ESF+ and ERDF (e.g. green and digital transformation) could also be considered

While there may be some challenges for the implementation of actions related to these new elements in certain contexts, such as those of extreme poverty, it is possible (with the required adaptations) and advisable as they do offer opportunities to improve the living conditions and equal opportunities of persons living there. Examples of types of initiatives include employment programmes providing training for low qualified profiles of new green jobs; housing restoration including clean energy facilities (solar panels, isolation panels…) or digital tools for Roma children, etc…

Additionally, ESF+ and ERDF calls may also provide support to initiatives related to **capacity building, awareness-raising and dissemination**, promotion of exchange and transfer of practices and the setting up of cooperation/networks (at national and transnational level), testing integrated and social innovation approaches, etc.

Moreover, it is important that projects/interventions allow considering and addressing the **diversity among Roma and take into account the situation of specific target groups,** such as Roma families, children, young people, women and EU mobile Roma. To this end, it is essential that the different target groups are mentioned and considered in the design and implementation of the calls and of the interventions as well as to be flexible to allow adapting the interventions to each of the target groups. The diversity of situations could also be taken into account (e.g. situations of extreme poverty…).

5. Integrated and comprehensive approach

Integrated and comprehensive approaches are needed, including different sectors, stakeholders, funds…

European Commission's "Report on the implementation of national Roma integration strategies - 2019" highlights that intersectional, cross-sectoral, integrated approaches to tackle multiple discrimination and multi-dimensional exclusion are one of the key success factors for planning, implementation and monitoring Roma inclusion interventions.

In the case of marginalised communities and individuals, significant and complex needs call for a multi-dimensional, multi-sectoral, integrated approach combining investments in different fields such as employment, education and training, healthcare and housing, in line with the objectives of the National/Regional Roma Strategic Frameworks.

In addition, it is important that calls do not remain sectoral and incorporated/aligned with the global frameworks in the different areas of relevance for Roma equality and inclusion such as employment, education and training, healthcare and housing, as well as other areas such as poverty and social exclusion, fight against discrimination…

Furthermore, these integrated and comprehensive approaches should go hand in hand, when relevant, with specific/target approaches within the different areas (e.g. early school leaving in the education field) or the focus on specific target groups (e.g. such as children, including in the context of the Child Guarantee).

Linked with this approach, references must be made to the potential of the **complementary use of ESF+ and ERDF** (together, when relevant, with other EU Funds and programmes) for the implementation of comprehensive and integrated measures (involving different types of expenditures, for example those related to human resources, equipment and infrastructure…).

The use of the complementarity of funds (whether it is within the same call or mainly when there will be different calls/programmes involved) should be taken into account when designing and launching the calls for proposals in order to address challenges that may arise in terms of timing,

selection criteria used, eligible expenses, administrative complexity (in terms of selection, management and evaluation). To this end, communication and coordination between the relevant departments in charge of the different funds is essential.

Other elements that could contribute to the use of an integrated/comprehensive approach include the coordination between different stakeholders (at horizontal and vertical level), the use of a territorial perspective (especially at local and microlocal level) and the alignment/flexibility of rules of eligibility of different expenses and interventions.

6. Ensuring that the calls contribute to Roma equality and inclusion, whether they are planned under the "Roma-related Specific Objectives" or under others

In the cases where the **ESF+ Specific Objective (j)** *Promoting the socio-economic integration of marginalised communities, such as Roma people* **or Specific Objective (i)** *Promoting socio-economic integration of third-country nationals, including migrants* (to address challenges related with third country nationals Roma) are used, it will be easier to ensure that Roma equality and inclusion are actually addressed. These specific objectives allow, among others, for targeted measures connected with the objectives of the National/Regional Roma Strategic Frameworks, the designation of a specific budget, the definition of specific outputs and indicators and the selection of key intervention fields related with Roma equality and inclusion.

When the calls are related to other Specific Objectives, and notably when they do not include measures targeting specifically Roma, it is essential to make sure that they are inclusive with them by, for example, making explicit reference to Roma as a priority vulnerable target group and foreseeing safeguards, positive actions or adaptations to ensure that Roma can also benefit from the programmed measures. Moreover, this could be reflected in the selection and evaluation criteria set for the calls, including additional scores for those general interventions considering Roma explicitly.

In both cases (and specially in the second one), it is very important to include **indicators** (those established by EU Regulation or others set up in the programme) **and a system of monitoring and evaluation** that allow measuring progress, effectiveness and efficiency as well as impact of the interventions as regards Roma equality and inclusion. And, when relevant, also for re-programming or redefining an intervention itself. Indicators should be clearly defined and not leave room for interpretation.

Including indicators and a system of monitoring and evaluation that allows measuring impact of interventions on Roma is essential, notably when calls do not include a targeted approach.

A challenge to be addressed is choosing best moment to undertake impact evaluations of projects/interventions (notably of those with a longer duration) so that they allow for assessing impact in the long-term (and therefore may be implemented as late as possible in the period) but also for gathering information that can feed in

the design of the next calls or the next programming period. The outcomes of evaluations are a fundamental source of information on initiatives and approaches that (do not) work, of high value when considering future investments in order to maintain successful projects/approaches and avoid previous mistakes. Different methods can be used for these evaluations, including qualitative, quantitative and participative approaches.

It is worth reminding that **it is possible to determine the indicators based on informed estimates** provided by the beneficiary, which should contribute to overcoming the challenges experienced in many Member States in the previous periods. Other options used in previous period to overcome the potential challenges as regards data collection included the establishment of adequate processes or the involvement of specialised CSOs in the implementation of the measures as they normally have a better reporting capacity.

The **allocation of a specific and adequate amount to Roma equality and inclusion** is another strategy to ensure that funds are really used to this end. While the ideal option is that this is done at the programming stage (for example with specific allocations in the framework of ESF+ Specific Objective (j) or others, or in the framework of ERDF), if this has not been the case, this can be done at a later stage (in subsequent modifications of the programmes or in the interventions planned).

7. Simplification of administrative aspects

Finally, while not in an exhaustive manner, a reference should be made to the administrative aspects that are related to the application, implementation and monitoring of the interventions in the framework of the calls.

Progressing towards the simplification of administrative aspects will have an impact on the efficiency, effectiveness and impact of interventions

The importance of progressing towards the simplification of administrative aspects needs to be further considered as it clearly affects the efficiency, effectiveness and impact of interventions.

To this end, options could be explored to reduce as much as possible the administrative burden of beneficiaries/implementing bodies, allowing them to concentrate on the implementation of the interventions (funds authorities could assume aspects related to administration and verification so that beneficiaries can concentrate on the actions). Possible options could include an increased focus on the efficiency and impact rather than on administrative aspects in the reporting processes or the use of simplified cost options (while their use may involve certain limitations and challenges in certain cases, they have proven their value for different types of initiatives/projects, both with a small and large dimension, in terms of scale and duration). In general terms, the flexibilization and customisation of administrative aspects (taking into account the type of funding, project, timeline and other aspects considered relevant) could be actively considered to advance in a better use of the funds.

EURoma Network (European Network on Roma Inclusion under ESI Funds/European Cohesion Policy Funds) has been working since 2007, bringing together public authorities responsible for Roma policies and those responsible for ESI Funds/ European Cohesion Policy Funds from 15 EU Member States, as well as the European Commission, with the aim of improving the use of these funds for the promotion of the social inclusion, equal opportunities and fight against discrimination of the Roma community. Fundación Secretariado Gitano (FSG) is in charge of the Network Technical Secretariat, which leads and coordinates the Network. For further information, please visit https://www.euromanet.eu

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