

## **A CONCEPTUAL MODEL REGARDING THE INFORMATION TO BE MADE AVAILABLE ABOUT PROJECTS FINANCED BY THE EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND**

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**Abstract:** *Providing information to the general public about the interventions that receive financial assistance from the European Social Fund (ESF) is a requirement of the European Union (EU) regulations that member states must fulfill. Although, these requirements have evolved from 2007-2013 to 2014-2020, they still offer a very limited insight into the achievements made possible by the EU assistance. The introduction of the new e-cohesion concept in the implementation of the EU-funded programmes offers the national authorities new opportunities in terms of information that could be easily made available to the citizens. The paper presents an empirical study of the information already presented by the new member states that joined the EU after 2004 (except Croatia) with regard to the projects funded by the European Social Fund in 2007-2013, identifying best practices in terms of types of data that are published. Building on the experience gained in 2007-2013 and taking into account the new requirements imposed by the European Commission for 2014-2020, the paper suggests a conceptual model for data to be made available to the general public about ESF projects for the years to come. The suggested model is more result-oriented, shifting the focus from the information regarding what is to be achieved to what has actually been achieved. As it is still an early stage in the implementation of the 2014-2020 generation of ESF operational programmes, the model could be useful for the authorities in charge of their implementation when designing the webpages that publicize the use of the EU funds. The model offers an increased transparency of the ESF spending in the member states and allows a wider range of data to be used for different types of analyses and research the results of which would contribute to an increased efficiency of the EU regional policy implementation.*

**Keywords:** regional development; European Social Fund; information and publicity; e-cohesion; data availability

**JEL classification:** R58; C80

### **1. Background**

The European Social Fund (ESF) is one of the structural funds provided by the European Union (EU) to the member states, within the framework of the regional

policy. The ESF addresses development needs in areas such as employment, labour market, education, lifelong learning, improvement of public policies and services.

The assistance granted by this fund must be publicized, both the authorities responsible for its implementation and the beneficiaries receiving the financial support having obligations imposed by the European regulations in this respect. For 2007-2013, the minimum information required was the name of the beneficiary, the title of the project and the value of the granted amount (European Commission, 2006). The member states were able to decide to make publicly available additional information or not.

The amount of information required for 2014-2020 increased significantly. In addition to the information mentioned above, the responsible authorities have to provide details regarding the start and the end of the project, a brief summary, the eligible expenditure and the percentage of EU assistance (as established at priority axis), the location of the project and the classification of the project according to a predefined list of criteria established by the European Commission, covering 8 dimensions, such as intervention field, type of territory covered and economic activity (European Commission, 2013). New features are also required, such as spreadsheet format (.CSV/.XML) and single website/portal with information about the operational programmes implemented in the member state.

We foresee that the amount of information that could be made publicly available could also be increased as a consequence of the implementation of the e-cohesion concept, which transforms the communication between the beneficiary and the national authorities from a flow of paper documents to an electronic flow of data. The member states expressed their willingness to provide additional information (Technopolis Group, 2010) despite the additional burden involved.

## **2. Purpose**

The paper explores the information currently available with regard to the ESF projects implemented in the member states that joined the EU after 2004 (except Croatia, due to its late admission). The purpose of this analysis is to build a conceptual model for data to be made available to the general public, taking into account the requirements imposed by the European Commission and building on the experience gained in 2007-2013. The model suggests a shift of focus from the financial aspects of the projects to a more technical approach, shading more light on the achievements obtained as a result of implementing the ESF-funded interventions. Since the implementation of the 2014-2020 ESF operational programmes is still in its early stages, the model could be taken into consideration when elaborating the design of the webpages that publicize the use of the EU funds at the level of the member states.

## **3. Methodology**

The process of building the conceptual model included 3 stages. First, an empirical study of the information already available to the general public was performed. In this respect, the analysis focused on the webpages of structural

funds from the selected member states (that joined the EU after 2004, except Croatia): Bulgaria, Romania, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Cyprus, Malta, Slovakia, Slovenia, Poland and Hungary. These countries were selected as it was considered that they form a more homogenous group due to their similar experience regarding the implementation of structural funds.

Although making data available to the general public was mainly a responsibility of the managing authorities in 2007-2013, all member states analysed have dedicated webpages, managed at national level, that include accessible information regarding the projects implemented within all operational programmes or at least all the ESF programmes (the Czech Republic). The webpages used are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1:** National webpages containing information about EU-funded projects

<b>Member state</b>	<b>Webpage</b>
Bulgaria	<a href="http://umispublic.government.bg/Default.aspx">http://umispublic.government.bg/Default.aspx</a>
Cyprus	<a href="http://www.structuralfunds.org.cy/">http://www.structuralfunds.org.cy/</a>
Czech Republic	<a href="http://www.esfcr.cz/modules/projects/index.php?lang=1">http://www.esfcr.cz/modules/projects/index.php?lang=1</a>
Estonia	<a href="http://www.strukturifondid.ee/">http://www.strukturifondid.ee/</a>
Hungary	<a href="http://emir.nfu.hu/kulso/jelek/index.php">http://emir.nfu.hu/kulso/jelek/index.php</a>
Latvia	<a href="http://esfondi.lv/aktivitates">http://esfondi.lv/aktivitates</a>
Lithuania	<a href="http://www.esparama.lt/igyvendinami-projektai">http://www.esparama.lt/igyvendinami-projektai</a>
Malta	<a href="http://eufunds.gov.mt/en">http://eufunds.gov.mt/en</a>
Poland	<a href="http://www.funduszeuropejskie.2007-2013.gov.pl">http://www.funduszeuropejskie.2007-2013.gov.pl</a>
Romania	<a href="http://old.fonduri-ue.ro/baza-de-date-proiecte-contractate">http://old.fonduri-ue.ro/baza-de-date-proiecte-contractate</a>
Slovenia	<a href="http://www.eu-skladi.si/kohezija-do-2013/razpisi#c1=upravicenec&amp;c0=5v">http://www.eu-skladi.si/kohezija-do-2013/razpisi#c1=upravicenec&amp;c0=5v</a>
Slovakia	<a href="http://www.nsrr.sk/sk/mapa-realizovanych-projektov-po-2007-2013/">http://www.nsrr.sk/sk/mapa-realizovanych-projektov-po-2007-2013/</a>

Source: Author's own adaptation

The information available was grouped in 5 main categories: beneficiary, financing contracts – financial, financing contracts – technical, results obtained – financial, results obtained – technical, as explained in Table 2. The compulsory information was not taken into consideration (name of the project's beneficiary, title of the project and public grant).

**Table 2:** Content of categories of information

<b>Category of information</b>	<b>Explanation of content</b>
beneficiary	information regarding the beneficiary, including project partners
financing contracts – financial	committed amounts as reflected in the financing contract
financing contracts – technical	non-financial information included in the financing contract (general data and to be achieved)

Category of information	Explanation of content
implementation results – financial	amounts spent as a result of the implementation of the project, resulting from the beneficiary's reimbursement claims and payments made by the authorities
implementation results – technical	information regarding the non-financial information resulting from the beneficiary's progress reports (achieved)

Source: Author's own adaptation

Special attention was paid to identifying best practices across the member states, in terms of the types of available data. The best practices were later on included in the suggested model.

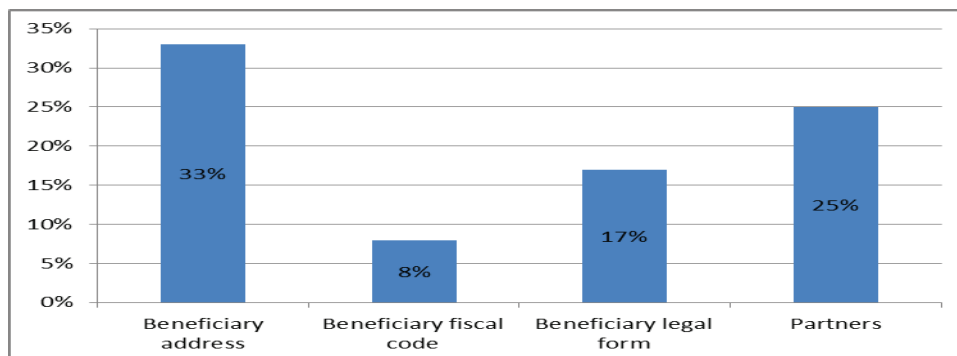
In the second stage, an analysis was performed on the data to be collected from the beneficiaries by the responsible authorities in order to grant the ESF assistance in 2014-2020. This reflects the amount of data that could be made available to the general public, with due regard to the constraints imposed by the regulations on intellectual property. For 2014-2020, this information is formally imposed by the EU regulations in the form of data to be included in the national monitoring IT systems for structural funds.

Finally, in the third stage, the model for data to be made available to the general public about ESF projects was built. The model is just a starting point, the more authorities decide to make public the information about the interventions that receive financial assistance from the ESF, the more transparent becomes the entire process of granting and using the support.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 The information available regarding 2007-2013 ESF projects

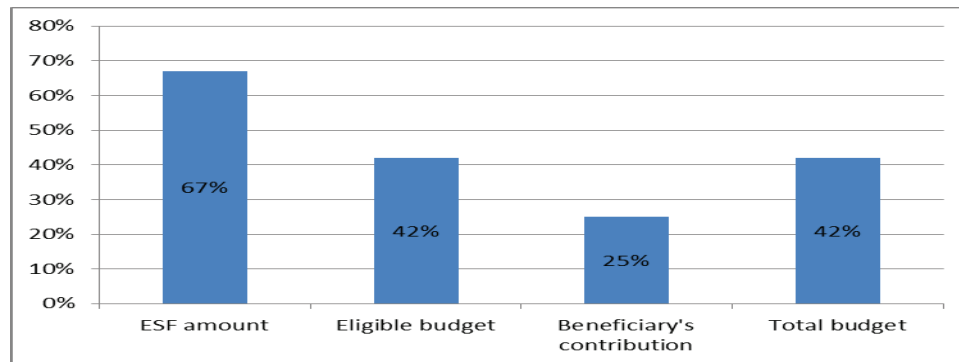
As mentioned above, 5 categories of information were used in the analysis. The first one concerns data about the beneficiary and, in addition to the name of the beneficiary which is compulsory, according to the EU requirements, 4 different types of information were identified: address, fiscal identification code, legal form and name of the partners involved in the implementation of the project. Figure 1 reflects the distribution of this information across the 12 member states analysed.



**Figure 1:** Member states providing additional information about beneficiaries  
Source: Author's adaptation of information from Table 1

Most information is provided by Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Latvia, who publish information about the address of the beneficiary and about the partners. A best practice is provided by Poland, where the fiscal identification code and the legal form of the beneficiary are available.

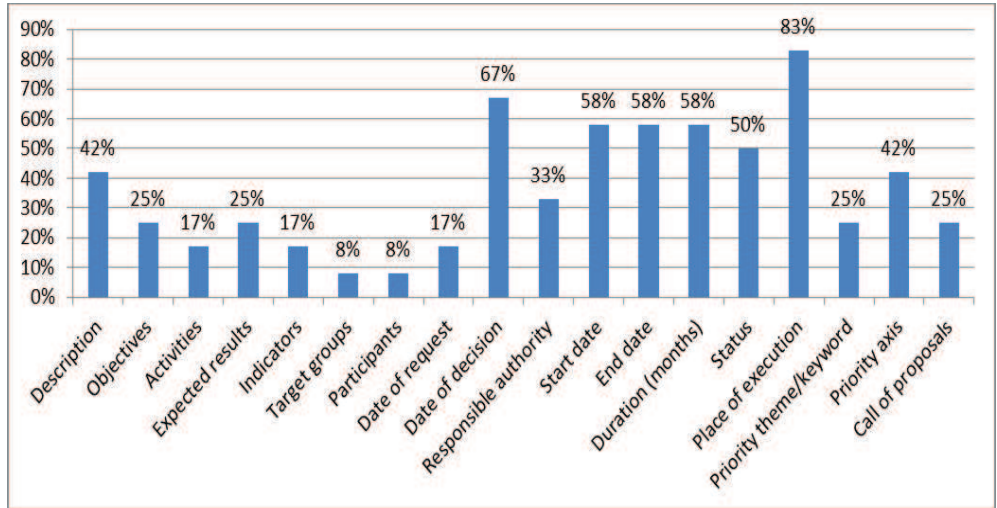
The second category of information analysed is the financial data from the financing contracts concluded between the beneficiaries and the responsible authorities. The analysis revealed 4 pieces of information, apart from the compulsory data regarding the grant awarded: the ESF amount, the eligible budget, the beneficiary's contribution, the total budget. Figure 2 presents the availability of information at the level of the member states.



**Figure 2:** Member states providing additional financial information about projects  
Source: Author's adaptation of information from Table 1

Poland provides all the 4 types of data mentioned above, followed by Latvia and Slovakia with 3 types of data. Most member states publish the value of the ESF assistance and only 3 the contribution of the beneficiary.

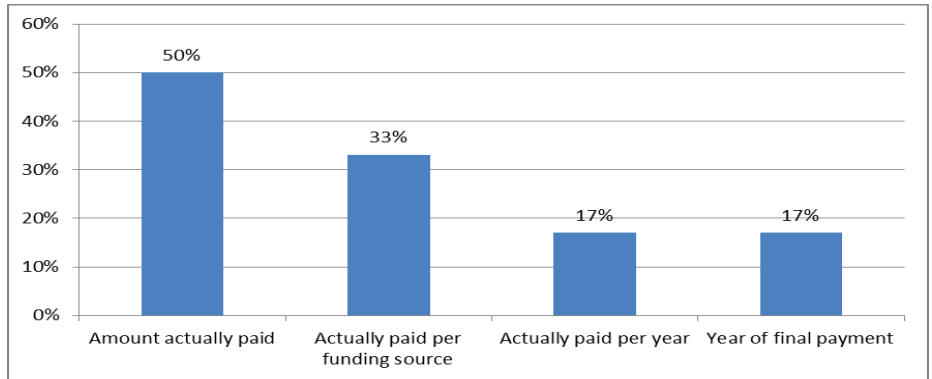
One of the most interesting categories of information includes technical data from the financing contracts. A wide range of information is included in this category, from important dates (start date and end date of the project, financing agreement date, financing proposal date), to short description, objectives, activities, expected results, as presented in Figure 3.



**Figure 3:** Member states providing additional technical information about projects  
Source: Author's adaptation of information from Table 1

Most information is provided by the Czech Republic (11 data), Latvia and Lithuania (10 data) and Bulgaria (9 data). A good practice can be identified in the case of Poland and Romania, who publish the priority theme, which is a classification of interventions provided by the European Commission. Also, in the case of Slovenia, a keyword describing the scope of the project is published, such as training, employment, social inclusion.

The fourth category of information regards the financial results obtained. In this category, 4 pieces of information were found: amount actually paid, amount actually paid per funding source, amount actually paid per year and year of final payment. How many member states publish this type of data can be observed in Figure 4.



**Figure 4:** Member states providing additional financial information about implementation of projects  
Source: Author's adaptation of information from Table 1

Most detailed information is provided in this case by Bulgaria and Romania. A best practice can be identified in the case of Romania, which makes available detailed information about the reimbursement claims of the beneficiaries and their related payments, per funding source.

Finally, the fifth category of information regards the implementation of the projects. Very little information was identified falling in this category, namely achieved results and list of contractors. Only Slovakia publishes data on the results obtained by the projects and Bulgaria on the names of contractors. Nevertheless, a best practice is provided by the Czech Republic, which has a separate database of studies, reports, methodological papers, training programmes etc., resulting from the implementation of the ESF projects. A similar approach was identified in Lithuania, allowing users to identify the results of the implemented projects, for instance strategies, studies, training programmes etc. in a specific programme, year and domain.

#### 4.2 The information collected for 2014-2020 ESF projects

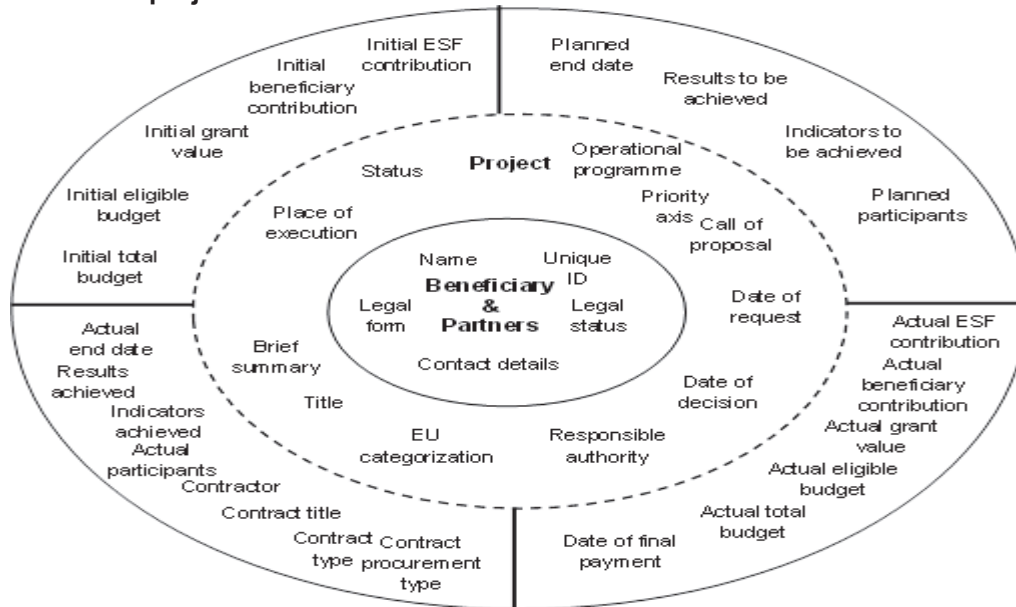
The 2014-2020 regulations ask member states to collect a large amount of information with regard to ESF projects, namely 113 pieces of information (European Commission, 2014). This information is to be stored in electronic format within the national IT systems managing the EU-funded programmes and projects. The main types of data are reflected in Table 3.

**Table 3:** Data to be collected by member states for 2014-2020

<b>Category of information</b>	<b>Data collected</b>
beneficiary	name/unique identifier, type (private or public), contact details
financing contracts – financial	eligible budget, public expenditure, public support
financing contracts – technical	name/unique identifier, short description, date of request, start date, end date, priority axis, type of region in question, classification of project according to categorization criteria (intervention field, thematic objective), target for each indicator broken down by gender
results obtained – financial	date of each payment claim from beneficiary, date of each payment made, eligible expenditure claimed, out of which public, payment value
results obtained – technical	actual end date, achievement for each indicator per year, broken down by gender, name/unique identifier of contractors, contract value, contract type, procurement type

Source: Author's adaptation of List of data to be recorded and stored in computerized form in the monitoring system (European Commission, 2014)

### 4.3 Conceptual model for data to be made available to the general public about ESF projects



**Figure 5:** Model for data to be made available to the general public about ESF projects

Source: Author's adaptation

The model we propose has 6 different sections. The first one concerns the beneficiary and its partners and includes data regarding the name, a unique identifier, which could be the fiscal registration code, in case the name suffers modifications, contact details, in the sense of an email address where additional information can be requested, the legal status (public or private) and the legal form (such as microenterprise, small, medium or large enterprise etc.).

The second section describes general information about the project, including information such as the operational programme, the priority axis and the call of proposal under which the project receives the financial support, the date of request of funds (the date when the financing proposal was received), the date of decision (the date of the financing contract), the responsible authority (the name of the intermediate body, if the case or the name of the managing authority), the compulsory dimensions of EU categorization, the title of the project, a brief summary (such as objectives and main activities), the place of execution (at least the name of the locality and of the region) and the status of the project (in implementation/finalized/interrupted).

The third and fourth sections include financial information from both the financing contract (planned) and the implementation of the project (actual). The last 2 sections include nonfinancial information. One section covers the initial stage of the project, containing data such as results and indicators to be achieved, planned end date and participants (in terms of typology and number). The other section



focuses on the implementation of the project and includes data regarding achievements; the actual end date of activities; procurement contracts (title, contractor; type – works, services, infrastructure; procurement type – direct award, open procedure etc.).

The model presented above represents minimal information that authorities should consider making available to the general public. Any additional information could also be added.

## **5. Conclusions**

The amount of information currently available for the general public for 2007-2013 ESF projects varies considerably among the new member states. Some member states, such as Bulgaria, Latvia, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, publish a large amount of data, while others, such as Cyprus, Slovenia and Malta provide very little information, apart from what is required by the EU regulations.

Also, the typology of the public information is diverse. More than half of the member states analysed publish data regarding the ESF amount, the amount actually paid, the date of decision, start and end date of the project, duration, place of execution and status. In terms of implementation results, only 2 member states make available information regarding contractors and results obtained. An interesting feature was identified in the Czech Republic and Lithuania, where separate databases of studies, reports, training programmes etc. resulting from the implementation of the ESF projects, are available. The analysis performed showed that there is a large room for improvement in this area.

New opportunities regarding data availability arise also from the implementation of the e-cohesion concept, according to which all communications between the beneficiaries and the authorities will be carried out electronically. From financing requests to financing contracts, reimbursement claims and reports of progress, a large volume of data will be available in real time in an electronic format.

Taking into consideration the new requirements of the European Commission, regarding the information and publicity, the data to be electronically collected and the e-cohesion concept, the available amount of data will allow the responsible authorities to increase the information that they make available to the general public.

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