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**REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE
COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE
COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

**on the interim evaluation of the implementation of the Rights, Equality and Citizenship
Programme 2014-2020**

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REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

on the interim evaluation of the implementation of the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme 2014-2020

The Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme¹ was launched in a particularly difficult period for the EU, at a time when the effects of the economic crisis had resulted in a general reduction in the amount of national resources and funding available for social and human rights issues. Since 2014, the Programme aims at further developing a Europe of rights and equality in accordance with the Europe 2020 Strategy².

This report sets out the mid-term results obtained by the Programme and the qualitative and quantitative aspects of its implementation, as required by Article 13(2)(b) of the European Parliament and Council Regulation establishing the REC Programme for the period 2014-2020³.

The reference period for the interim evaluation is the first half time of the Programme's implementation, from 2014 to mid-2017. The evaluation covered the 2014, 2015 and 2016 annual work programmes. The 2017 work programme, on the other hand, has been analysed chiefly in terms of design and structure, but not in terms of execution.

This report is based on the findings of the evaluation⁴ prepared by the European Commission supported by an externally run evaluation⁵.

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The 2014-2020 Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme has replaced the programmes in force in the 2007-2013 Programming period, namely the Daphne III Programme, the Fundamental Rights and Citizenship Programme and the Progress Programme⁶.

The current Programme was established by the European Parliament and Council Regulation (EU) No 1381/2013.

The Regulation sets its **general objective** as being to:

- Contribute to the further development of an area where equality and the rights of persons as enshrined in the TEU, in the TFEU, in the Charter and in the international human rights conventions to which the Union has acceded, are promoted, protected and effectively implemented.

¹ Regulation (EU) No 1381/2013 of 17 December 2013 establishing a Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme for the period 2014 to 2020 (OJ L 354, 28.12.2013).

² For more info on the Europe 2020 Strategy, see https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/eu-economic-governance-monitoring-prevention-correction/european-semester/framework/europe-2020-strategy_en.

³ Regulation (EU) No 1381/2013 of 17 December 2013 establishing a Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme for the period 2014 to 2020, (OJ L 354, 28.12.2013).

⁴ Commission staff working document accompanying the report on the interim evaluation of the implementation of the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme 2014-2020.

⁵ Interim evaluation of the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme 2014-2020, Ernst & Young Financial-Business Advisors, Final Report, April 2018, published.

⁶ European Commission (2015), Ex-post evaluation of five programmes implemented under the 2007-2013 financial perspective – Final Report. Specific programme evaluation: Daphne Programme, http://ec.europa.eu/justice/grants1/files/expost_evaluations_2007_2013/daphne_programme_evaluation_final_report.pdf; Fundamental Rights and Citizenship, http://ec.europa.eu/justice/grants1/files/expost_evaluations_2007_2013/frc_programme_evaluation_final_report.pdf; Ex-post evaluation of the Programme for employment and social solidarity – PROGRESS 2007-2013 and recommendations for the successor programmes to PROGRESS 2014-2020 <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=12610&langId=en>.

Its **specific objectives** are to:

- Promote the effective implementation of the principle of non-discrimination on grounds of sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation and to respect the principle of non-discrimination on the grounds provided for in Article 21 of the Charter;
- Prevent and combat racism, xenophobia, homophobia and other forms of intolerance;
- Promote and protect the rights of persons with disabilities;
- Promote equality between women and men and to advance gender mainstreaming;
- Prevent and combat violence against children, young people and women, and other groups at risk;
- Promote and protect the rights of the child;
- Contribute to ensuring the highest level of protection of privacy and personal data;
- Promote and enhance the exercise of rights deriving from EU citizenship;
- Enable individuals in their capacity as consumers or entrepreneurs in the internal market to enforce their rights deriving from Union law, having regard to the projects funded under the Consumer Programme.

The Programme is implemented by the European Commission via direct centralised management.

Geographically, all EU Member States are eligible to participate in the Programme. European Free Trade Association countries, candidates and potential candidate countries can also participate in the Programme, if certain conditions are fulfilled. Iceland joined for all the specific objectives of the Programme, while Liechtenstein participates only in those related to non-discrimination, racism, xenophobia, the rights of persons with disabilities and equality between women and men.

2. KEY ELEMENTS AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROGRAMME

According to Article 5 of the Regulation, **the Programme supports a wide range of activities** such as, analytical activities, mutual learning, cooperation, awareness raising and dissemination activities, training activities and actions to support the main actors whose activities contribute to the implementation of its specific objectives. The Programme supports also **organisations** active in the area of social and human rights across Europe, such as: European networks; public or private organisations usually non-profit-oriented; national, regional and local authorities in EU Member States; non-governmental organisations; universities and research institutions as well as international organisations.

In terms of **target groups**, intended as the groups that can benefit, directly by participating in the Programme's activities or indirectly from the implementation of the Programme, public authorities, non-governmental organisations and other research entities concerned with pursuing the objectives of the Programme are also among the beneficiaries of the Programme. Target groups are also all citizens, since the Programme's objectives and initiatives aim at promoting, protecting and effectively implementing equality and the rights of persons, in particular those subjected to discrimination, intolerance or violence, including migrants and minorities.

As provided by in the Regulation, the Programme uses action grants, operating grants and procurement actions as main funding mechanisms to support projects related with its objectives. While action grants usually last for two years, through annual operating grants, the Programme funds European networks active in the following areas: non-discrimination; racism, xenophobia, homophobia or other forms of intolerance; disabilities; equality between women and men; preventing and combating all forms of violence and promoting the rights of the child.

2.1. The Programme's specific objectives

- ***Specific objective 1: Promote non-discrimination***

The Programme supports projects aiming towards preventing and combatting discrimination on the grounds of sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation. In particular, the promotion of Roma integration is a key topic of this specific objective. In this regard, the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme supports the National Roma Platforms and works in close cooperation with EU Member States and their National Roma Contact Points and with civil society organisations active on non-discrimination and Roma integration. The Programme finances also the activities of the European Network of Equality Bodies. The core task of this network includes strengthening the cooperation and exchange of information between the National Equality Bodies designated by the Member States on topics related to non-discrimination.

- ***Specific objective 2: Prevent and combat racism, xenophobia, homophobia and other forms of intolerance***

Projects financed in this area contribute to the better implementation of existing EU legislation in the Member States and to assisting the victims of hate crime and hate speech. In particular, the funded activities support the protection of refugees and migrants against the surge of populism, extremism and intolerance.

- ***Specific objective 3: Promote the rights of persons with disabilities***

The operational aim of this specific objective is to increase awareness and better implementation of the rights of people with disabilities leading to a reduction of barriers, to their full participation in society and enjoyment of their rights. This is mostly done through operating grants supporting the activities of European level networks advocating for the rights of people with disabilities and through procurement activities focusing on data collection, training and awareness-raising activities. Under the 2014 annual work programme, the European Disability Card⁷ was launched with support from the Programme in order to facilitate cross-border travelling for persons with disabilities.

- ***Specific objective 4: Promote equality women and men***

The Programme promotes projects to support Member States and relevant stakeholders in increasing gender balance in all spheres of life, especially in economic decision-making, and promoting equal economic independence of women and men. Funding under this objective also aims to contribute to reducing the gender gaps in pay, earnings and pensions.

⁷ For more info on the European Disability Card, see <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1139>.

- ***Specific objective 5: Prevent and combat violence against children, young people and women, and other groups at risk***

The Programme finances primarily projects which help to protect and support the most vulnerable victims of violence, such as women and children, as well as activities to raise awareness and prevent violence, engaging with non-governmental organisations working on the ground. It also supports the treatment of perpetrators of violence. Strengthening child protection systems is one of the Commission's priorities and the Programme supports the rights of migrant children by funding international organisations working directly for and with these children.

- ***Specific objective 6: Promote the rights of the child***

The rights of the child are promoted through projects focusing on child-friendly justice and on the protection of vulnerable children (like children leaving foster care systems and children in conflict with the law), by supporting, in particular, training activities of civil servants, non-governmental organisations and lawyers dealing with them.

- ***Specific objective 7: Protect privacy and personal data***

With regard to data protection, the Programme is the EU main funding source. The activities carried out within this specific objective are strongly linked with the Data Protection Reform⁸, adopted in 2016. Through this objective, the Programme aims at financing projects to support, in particular, the transposition and implementation of the new data protection legislation by the Member States and the training of data protection authorities and data protection officers.

- ***Specific objective 8: EU citizenship***

The Programme finances projects, mostly awareness raising activities, aimed at fostering the inclusion of EU citizens in the civic and political life of the EU. Therefore, it supports projects which can help citizens to be more aware of their rights deriving from the citizenship of the Union. Information campaigns on EU citizenship rights are financed through this specific objective and a particular focus is on their electoral rights in view of the 2019 European elections.

- ***Specific objective 9: Consumers' or entrepreneurs' rights***

The Programme finances also projects which support individuals in their capacity as consumers or entrepreneurs in the internal market in order to enforce their rights deriving from EU law. EU funds in this area aim at contributing to increase the knowledge and awareness of consumers' rights, especially in the digital market.

⁸ For more info on the Data Protection Reform, see https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/law-topic/data-protection_en.

2.2. Budget

The total Programme's budget for the period 2014-2020 is **EUR 439 473 000**. The highest commitment rate (94.91 %) was achieved in 2016 (see Table 1). According to available sources, the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme allocates about 23 % of available resources to procurement actions, though the distribution between its specific objectives is not homogeneous⁹.

Table 1:2014 – 2016 REC Programme's annual commitment

Year	Amount committed (in euro)
2014	49 719 588.56
2015	48 621 670.69
2016	55 854 156.79
Total 2014-2016	154 195 416.04

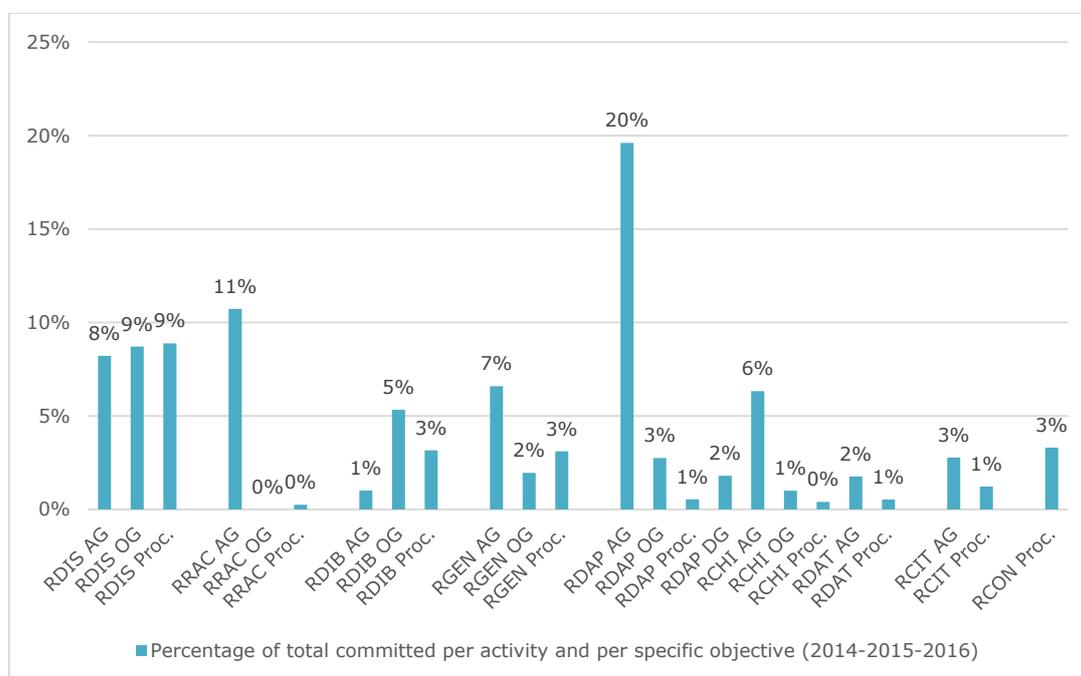
Sources: Annual monitoring reports (reports on the implementation of the AWP's and Project Database for 2016)

In general, most resources allocated to grants have been committed (with a commitment rate of about 90%).

In terms of amount planned, the biggest specific objective is the one on preventing violence against children, followed by the one on non-discrimination. Together these two objectives absorb more than 20% of the committed budget (26%). Instead, always in terms of amount planned, the smallest specific objectives are the ones on the rights of the child, EU citizenship, consumers' protection and data protection.

Specifically, the budget committed to grants has been divided between the Programme's specific objectives as illustrated in [Figure 1](#) below.

Figure 1: Budget committed per typology of intervention by specific objective



Source: Annual Reports on the implementation of the annual working programmes for 2014 and for 2015, extractions from the Project for 2016. AG (action grants), OG (operating grants), PROC (procurement actions), RCHI (Promote the rights of the child), RCIT (Promote the rights deriving from Union citizenship), RCON (Enforce consumer rights), RDAP (Prevent violence against children, young people, women

⁹ Procurement actions represent the total planned spending of the specific objective on the rights of consumers, 65% of the specific objective on citizenship and less than 5% of the total planned budget on the specific objective on the prevention of racism. All other specific objectives allocate to procurement activities between 11% and 55% of the planned budget.

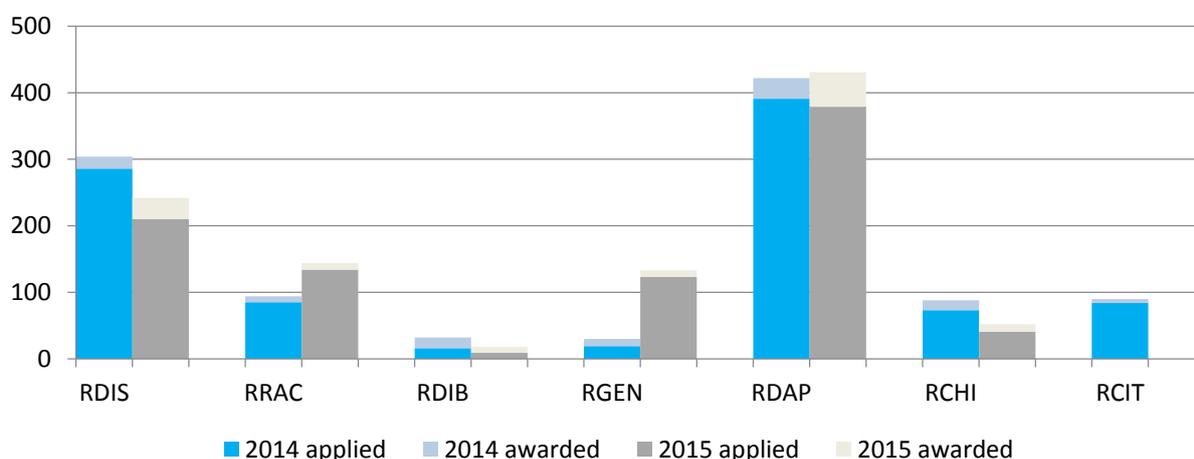
and other groups at risk), RDAT (Ensure the highest level of data protection), RDIS (Promote Non-discrimination), RDIB (Promote rights of persons with disabilities), RGEN (Promote equality between women and men and gender mainstreaming), RRAC (Combat racism, xenophobia, homophobia and other forms of intolerance)

While the specific objective on non-discrimination is implemented through a balanced mix of action grants, operating grants and procurement activities, the specific objective on combating violence is implemented mostly through action grants.

2.3. Applications received and projects selected

Data for 2014 and 2015, concerning both action and operating grants, have shown that the specific objectives that attracted the highest number of applications are the ones related to the promotion of non-discrimination and prevention of violence (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 2: Number of action grants and operating grants awarded and number of applications by specific objective and year (2014-2015)



Source: Annual reports on the implementation of the 2014 and 2015 annual working programmes. RCHI (Promote the rights of the child), RCIT (Promote the rights deriving from Union citizenship), RDAP (Prevent violence against children, young people, women and other groups at risk), RDIS (Promote Non-discrimination), RDIB (Promote rights of persons with disabilities), RGEN (Promote equality between women and men and gender mainstreaming), RRAC (Combat racism, xenophobia, homophobia and other forms of intolerance)

In the period covered by the 2014-2016 annual work programmes, 352 projects have been funded. On average, by looking at the awarding rate of calls for proposal in 2014 and 2015¹⁰, this ranges between 7% and 27% for almost all the specific objectives, which is quite low. Only under the objective on the promotion of the rights of person with disabilities, almost all the applications submitted were awarded a grant. The second highest awarding rate (almost 58 %) was observed for 2014 in relation to the specific objective on gender equality.

A drop in applications received was registered in 2016, coinciding with the rollout of the Participant Portal¹¹. However, this trend did not bring about a significant reduction in terms of approved projects.

¹⁰ The awarding rate cannot be calculated for 2016 on the basis of the information available.

¹¹ The Participant Portal is an electronic platform used to manage the applications received for calls published in the framework of the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme. According to the evaluation results, the new Portal could be further simplified, in particular in relation to the administrative documentation to be provided, in order to encourage the participation from smaller or less experienced organisations.

2.4. Main achievements of the Programme

The introduction of a system of indicators for the current Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme has proved to be adequate for measuring its achievements.

For the **general objective** of the Programme (namely “the further development of an area where equality and the rights of persons as enshrined in the TEU, in the TFEU, in the Charter and in the international human rights conventions to which the Union has acceded, are promoted, protected and effectively implemented”), targets have been set, based on five indicators¹².

As the progress in achieving the Programme outputs and outcomes has been good so far, it is reasonable to expect that the Programme is making good progress towards achieving also its general objective. However, the key analytical difficulty is tracing and attributing the change in the global indicators to the specific interventions of the Programme.

In particular, it can be expected that two of the five targets set regarding the general objective of the Programme will be reached: namely those relating to the gender pay gap and the awareness of EU citizenship rights. In particular, the contribution of the Programme to the achievement of the outcomes on awareness of EU citizenship rights is likely to be substantial, as there is direct impact of the Programme through its focus on awareness-raising measures aimed at enabling change.

In contrast, the contribution of the Programme is likely to be more indirect for the achievement of targets in relation to female employment rates, the representation of women in the higher decision-making levels and the employment rate of people with disabilities, as change in these areas requires a more structural change in the labour markets and economic structures which are outside the direct sphere of influence of the Programme. However, according to the evaluation carried out, the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme is playing an important role in supporting also such structural changes.

Concerning the progress in the achievement of its **nine specific objectives**, the Programme’s contribution is direct and the targets are likely to be achieved with regard to the specific objectives on anti-discrimination, awareness of UE citizenship’s rights and consumer rights.

In other specific objectives, instead, its contribution is more indirect. This is the case for the specific objective on the promotion of gender equality, where most of the targets are likely to be missed since a more- structural change in the labour markets and economic structures is required and this is outside the direct sphere of influence of the Programme.

In general, according to the results of the evaluation, the Programme activities are contributing to the achievement of its specific objectives, but the impact is quite moderate, due both to the limited amount of Programme resources (such as in the area of gender equality and EU citizenship’s rights), as well as change being influenced by many other different factors and policies.

2.5. Participants and partnerships

Transnational partnerships, thanks to their networking and interconnectedness between, are essential contributors to the effectiveness of the Programme. Indeed, according to the majority of respondents, the partnerships developed under the Programme have improved their organisational structures in terms of project implementation, sustainability of results and

¹² Result indicator 1: female employment rate 20-64 age group: Target: 75 % (for both women and men): Europe 2020 headline target; 71 % for women. Result indicator 2: employment rate of people with disabilities: Target: 55 %. Result indicator 3: the gender pay gap: Target: 14 %. Result indicator 4: the percentage of women among non-executive directors on boards of listed companies: Target: 40 %. Result indicator 5: Percentage of Europeans who consider themselves as “well or “very well” informed of the rights they enjoy as citizens of the Union: Target: 51 %.

overall capacities. A smaller number of beneficiaries reported also that the partnerships had a positive impact on their fund-raising capacities.

The evaluation of the partnerships formed has shown also an appropriate representation of beneficiaries by type of organisation (39% of the total beneficiaries are non-profit organisations, while only 5% are private for-profit entities), but an uneven geographical composition of the participating organisations (as was the case with the predecessor programmes).

Italy (for the most part) and Spain (to a lesser extent) are the countries with the largest number of applying organisations (as either coordinators or partners), followed by the Greece, the United Kingdom, Romania and Bulgaria. Organisations from the same six countries account for about 50% of funded action grants.

3. WHAT HAS THE REC PROGRAMME ACHIEVED?

As evidenced by the evaluation, the Programme is performing generally well at mid-term with regard to its specific objectives in terms of effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence/complementarity/synergies and EU added value. Improvements are needed, in particular, regarding its equity.

3.1. Effectiveness¹³

The Programme is making good progress towards achieving its general and specific objectives. However, sometimes is challenging to trace and attribute the changes in the global indicators to the interventions of the Programme itself since some changes are influenced by many other different factors. **The monitoring indicators selected for measuring the achievements of the Programme are overall adequate,** but some improvements could be implemented.

The key result achieved across the specific objectives is the improved skills and competences of professionals. Another important achievement of the Programme is **the contribution to systemic change by project results, including better tools, procedures, services and policies developed across the specific objectives.**

According to the majority of beneficiaries, **the communication activities undertaken by the Commission to promote the Programme have been largely successful** and the popularity of the Programme has, therefore, increased compared to the predecessor programmes. However, efforts need to be maintained to ensure all potential applicants in all Member States are reached.

The benefit of the Programme has been high compared to the predecessor programmes also in terms of applications received and awards granted.

An additional positive development has been **the high level of financial implementation of the Programme** since the level of funding requested by applicants and granted in relation to each specific objective in years 2014-2015 is slightly higher than in the predecessor programmes.

Moreover, based on several indicators and according to the surveyed and interviewed stakeholders, the evaluation showed positive progress in delivering **improvements in the level of knowledge of EU law and EU policies, rights and values.** Moreover, the partnerships formed during the Programme activities have had positive impacts on beneficiaries and Programme participants' skills and capacities.

Concerning the **sustainability** of the Programme's activities after the end of the funding, the majority of surveyed stakeholders considered that actions are very highly likely to be

¹³ **Effectiveness:** whether and to what extent the Rights Equality and Citizenship Programme has achieved its general objective, as well as its nine specific objectives, and which are the factors that have contributed to these achievements.

sustained in terms of acquiring new skills and knowledge, increased awareness and the creation of tools and procedures outlasting the projects. Slightly lower was the expectation of the training activities lasting after the project completion. However, only a third of respondents expected the partnerships which were funded during the project to last beyond the funding period. Similarly, low is the proportion of the stakeholders who considered that the partnerships formed during the projects financed by the Programme have increased their fundraising capabilities. In general, there is very little evidence about the sustainability of project results after the end of funding.

Finally, more than 80% of survey respondents state that **the Programme is (very) highly effective in meeting the needs of the relevant target groups**. Over 70% of the Programme beneficiaries surveyed in the evaluation also considered that the Programme has been highly and very effective in targeting the right policy areas and the most relevant target groups.

3.2. Efficiency¹⁴

The analysis of the efficiency is based on a qualitative evaluation of the beneficiaries' perception of the cost-effectiveness of the actions since the limited data available in relation to the costs and benefits of the Programme's intervention do not allow for the application of standard quantitative methodologies for a cost-benefit assessment. According to the majority of beneficiaries and Member States representatives, **the costs of the Programme are either proportionate to benefits or outweighing them**. In particular, the performance of the projects in terms of training activities is beyond expectations for several specific objectives. This is true for the specific objective on preventing violence against children, young people and women and this is also more remarkable in the light of the reduced incurred expenditure (at around 60% of the estimated).

A key achievement of the Programme, compared to its predecessors, has also been the **lower demand on beneficiaries in terms of time and financial resources**.

Moreover, according to stakeholders, **the changes in the design of the Programme, compared to 2007-2013, are the most important factor for the efficiency of projects in achieving the results**.

Beneficiaries consider current funding instruments as adequate for the Programme. However, they consider that there can be scope for using alternative measures, such as microcredit and small loans.

Finally, several beneficiaries pointed out to the issue of the relative **long time span between the application and the start of project activities as problematic for their efficiency**, since, in this long period, contextual factors may change, requesting an additional effort in adapting the project to the new context.

3.3 Relevance¹⁵

The Programme is highly relevant to the needs of its stakeholders and beneficiaries, e.g. in terms of knowledge development, training, awareness raising and structural support. Indeed, the stakeholders surveyed in the evaluation were very positive about the relevance of the Programme actions in meeting their needs. However, the evaluation also found some gaps in relation to the needs of some stakeholders and citizens that could receive greater attention

¹⁴ **Efficiency:** whether and to what extent the costs of the Programme were proportionate given the benefits achieved and which parameters/factors participated in these results.

¹⁵ **Relevance:** whether and to what extent the Rights Equality and Citizenship Programme addresses needs and problems of the target groups identified in the 2011 Impact Assessment¹⁵ and in the legal basis of the Programme, as well as emergent issues, and whether its objectives are still relevant for the needs and problems of the beneficiaries.

by the Programme, such as women subject to multiple discrimination (e.g. migrant, disabled, and older women).

The needs identified at the time of the Programme's adoption are still relevant, since, as demonstrated by the evaluation carried out, the achievement of several targets, relating, in particular, to gender equality or rights of disabled people is unlikely as progress has been slow.

The Programme is also flexible enough to incorporate emerging needs.

Another indication of the continuing relevance of the Programme to the current needs is the **increase of demand for grants funded compared to previous programmes**, especially concerning the specific objectives relating to the violence against children, non-discrimination and combating racism.

3.4 Coherence, Complementarity, Synergies¹⁶

According to beneficiaries, **the Programme presents a high level of internal coherence** (between the specific objectives and interventions) **and a high level of external coherence and complementarity with other EU instruments, programmes and actions.**

No significant overlaps with other EU funded programmes have been found in the evaluation. This would seem to confirm that specific objectives are more streamlined and clearly defined if compared to the predecessor programmes.

Moreover, the Programme is highly coherent with the internationally agreed principles, such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

In addition, according to almost 90% of beneficiaries, **the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme is also overall consistent, in its objectives, targets and types of actions, with national policies in the same field.**

3.5 EU added value¹⁷

The inherent "European" and transnational dimension is at the core of the EU added value of the Programme. According to the majority of beneficiaries, in the absence of the Programme activities, similar projects would not have taken place or not be possible with the same coverage in terms of beneficiaries and target groups, due to lack of available resources at Member State level. This is particularly relevant for the training actions in the field of prevention of all forms of violence and in the field of data protection. Similarly, EU funding for EU level organisations is particularly vital as national funding for a transnational network would be even more difficult to obtain. Moreover, **projects financed by the Programme**, according to surveyed stakeholders, seem to have **higher quality** and to be **more innovative than those funded at the national level.** In particular, these projects, by allowing innovative approaches to be experimented with, can be used to show national governments the benefits of the activities undertaken. For example, trainings at schools in the field of bullying would not apply innovative methods, such as those involving both perpetrators and victims and another example are the projects aiming to pilot the EU disability card. These were supported under the specific objective on the rights of people with disabilities and aimed at setting up the respective EU Disability Card national organisations (governmental or nongovernmental

¹⁶ **Coherence/Complementarity/Synergies:** whether and to what extent the Programme is coherent with other interventions at the EU and international level, such as with the predecessor EU programmes in the field¹⁶, with activities supported by other Union instruments and, in general, with the European priorities in the fields covered by the Programme.

¹⁷ **EU added-value:** to what extent the effects from the EU action are additional to the value that would have resulted from action at the national level only.

entities) and establishing the respective national package of benefits that Member States are ready to mutualise.

Finally, **the demand for Programme funding has continued to be high throughout the implementation of the Programme.** All these findings suggest that there is sustained demand for EU-level action in the fields covered by the Programme.

3.6 Equity¹⁸

The Programme has provided specific support to the promotion of the cross-cutting priorities of gender equality, rights of child and rights of people with disabilities.

The issue of the gender mainstreaming is promoted through a dedicated specific objective. Furthermore, gender equality specific actions have also been funded under other specific objectives. This means that significant financial resources have been dedicated to the promotion of gender equality and gender mainstreaming directly. Gender mainstreaming principles and mechanisms are reflected in all Programme phases of programming, implementation and monitoring but still there is scope for strengthening the protection of women facing multiple disadvantages and also for involving more the equality bodies in the setting of Programme priorities.

Concerning the protection of the rights of the child, the Programme has two specific objectives directly targeting the promotion of the rights of the child. Furthermore, also other specific objectives could fund actions potentially relevant for children. Moreover, the respect of the rights of the child is enhanced by the fact that organisations applying for funding, which will work directly with children during the project implementation, must provide the Commission with a description of their child protection policy. However, the mainstreaming of rights of child across all Programme phases could be further improved, in particular through the involvement of bodies representing the interest of children in the setting of Programme priorities.

The Programme envisages a specific objective for the **promotion of the rights of persons with disabilities** and one on the promotion of the effective implementation of the principle of non-discrimination, including based on disability. All applications submitted under this specific objective have been awarded. The mainstreaming of rights of rights of disabled people across all Programme phases needs to be increased, in particular through a direct link with the EU Disability Strategy 2010-2020 and a more involvement of bodies representing the interests of disabled people in the setting of Programme priorities.

Always in relation to equity, **the Programme does not seem to capture the needs of people suffering from multiple disadvantages,** as the specific objectives do not support synergies and actions for groups falling under two or more of them.

In addition, **co-financing seems to be a barrier for small non-governmental organisations wishing to participate in the Programme.**

Finally, in the future, the Programme should try to distribute its resources in a more balanced manner across the different target groups of beneficiaries and Member States.

To understand better how the Programme promotes equity through the funded activities, participants' data broken down by sex, disability status or age, as required by the Regulation, shall be collected. This is, however, not yet done.

¹⁸ **Equity:** whether and to what extent the Programme has distributed the available resources fairly among beneficiaries in different Member States, took into consideration the needs of target groups, promoted gender mainstreaming, the rights of the child and the rights of people with disabilities.

3.7 Scope for simplification¹⁹

According to the evaluation, **the current direct management mode is adequate given the size and objectives of the Programme**. However, according to the majority of beneficiaries, **there is scope for further simplification of the implementation, management and design of the Programme**. Among the reasons provided, beneficiaries indicated, in particular, that the financial reporting is too detailed, especially compared to the ones applied within other EU Programmes (e.g. Horizon 2020 and Erasmus+) and underlined the possibility to reduce the current administrative burden in terms of proposal drafting and monitoring and reporting requirements.

Another current key suggestion from beneficiaries concerns **the operating grants**, whose duration in their view could be extended to cover at least two years (instead of one) in order to reduce the administrative burden in terms of project application and management procedures. However, the annual operating grants allow the Commission to have oversight of the activities of the funded organisations and allow more flexibility to adapt the work of beneficiaries to the emerging needs in their respective fields of expertise.

Furthermore, the absence of **standard costs** implies sometimes lengthy negotiations among project partners on the costs of the different activities.

On the positive side, beneficiaries and Commission officials agreed that **the recently introduced system for applications (Participant Portal) goes in the direction of simplifying the application process and improving the collection and aggregation of monitoring data**. However, there could be still room for further simplifying the process, particularly in relation to the administrative documentation to be provided.

Moreover, another key issue according to beneficiaries is that most of the funding available in the Programme is relatively inaccessible to small civil society non-governmental organisations, due to the co-financing amounts required for the set size of grants.

Finally, an element of administrative burden, as widely shared by all beneficiaries, is the excessive length of the period from the application until the start of project activities.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND WAY FORWARD

The **crucial role played by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme** in the development of a European area of equality and rights was especially important at the start of the Programme itself, where the effects of the economic crisis and the related political and societal developments in Europe could still be felt in many Member States.

This report on the interim evaluation of the 2014-2020 Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme confirms its relevance in contributing to the promotion of relevant EU values, such as the respect for human dignity, fundamental rights, non-discrimination, tolerance, solidarity and gender equality and in reinforcing and supporting the development of a stronger EU citizenship. The Programme's current structure appears to be adequate and sufficiently flexible to achieve its general and specific objectives. In particular, the specific objectives of the Programme show an effort to tackle the issues identified in the previous programmes in a cross-cutting perspective. This effort has resulted in a more streamlined programme, positioned at the intersection between equality and rights of persons, where the contribution of the activities to the achievement of specific objectives is more straightforward.

¹⁹ **Scope for simplification:** whether and to what extent the management of the Rights Equality and Citizenship Programme could be further simplified.

In these years, the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme has demonstrated its high EU added value both in its positive impact on participants and target groups and in its role as a complement to other EU funding instruments and policy initiatives.

In the framework of the preparation of the future EU budget and funding programmes, the Commission based on the findings of the interim evaluation will address all aspects that have been identified for improvement, in particular the need to focus more on emerging needs, the revision of the monitoring indicators and the achievement of a more geographic balance among the beneficiaries.