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Transparency of lists of beneficiaries of Structural Funds in Europe: state of the art in 2014

The survey on transparency of the lists of the beneficiaries of the 2007-2013 Operational Programmes in Europe

The paradigm of the **Open Government Data** is based on the idea that through technology governments can provide more transparent access to documents and procedures and to encourage active participation. The availability of data about public processes and actions, governmental revenue and expenditure, financial resources programmed and spent is an essential element to facilitate information reuse and to guarantee an informed participation to public policies.

Indeed, on the one hand, the availability of open data on what is managed by the public administrations, be they European, national or local, gives users the ability to learn, use, and reprocess this data to investigate trends, check costs and investments made in the common interest and, in some cases, offer applications and services based on this data. On the other hand, even those who are called to assess public investment and to check on the use of these resources can have instruments which apply different evaluation methods to enrich the public debate, offering informed studies, research and indications (more information **here**).

Territorial cohesion policies typically financed with EU resources through the Structural Funds and with national funds, for example, in Italy, the Development and Cohesion Fund, are involved in a path aimed at always ensuring greater transparency and control over resources provided to local authorities and central governments, companies and individuals to reduce disparities between territories. The information on "the beneficiaries of public funds" that comprise the beneficiaries of European structural funds and therefore fall within the first public source data to be made available for greater transparency at European Union level, also given the significant share in the EU budget of the regional policy which absorbs about a third of the total budget. In addition, all regions and the EU member states share common standards and regulations designed to promote the transparency of this information. The fact that the rules then only concentrate on a minimal set of requirements for data publication on the web, leaves room for autonomous initiatives aimed at improvements in terms of details, quality, access and visualisation.
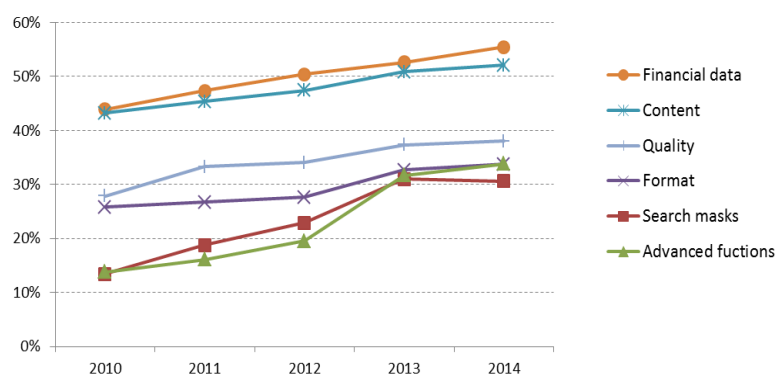
With this in mind, this analysis presents some **results updated to 2014** of the survey carried out within the OpenCoesione initiative on the **characteristics of "lists of beneficiaries" of the Structural Funds in Europe** (**Pillola n.7 - Open data on the beneficiaries of Structural Funds in Europe**) undertaken in order to shed light on some evidence concerning the evolution of the modes of publication and of content made available at European level on the beneficiaries of EU resources for cohesion policies.

The survey, launched in 2010, analyses with annual frequency the data of lists of beneficiaries published by 363 ERDF and ESF Operational Programmes of the 27 EU countries of the 2007-2013 Programming, by directly visiting all the sites of the Managing Authorities of the Member States. In the last year, additional information was also collected via an online questionnaire, available for about 30% of Operational Programmes, on "*back office*" aspects for the publication process on national portals or on the Managing Authorities' sites.

What emerges from the 2014 survey?

The data updated to **December 2014** shows a growing trend for all key aspects linked to the transparency on the beneficiaries of Structural Funds in Europe. The values are based on the availability of selected *target* characteristics of the data, such as format, completeness of information, availability of tools to browse effectively through the data, and so on.

Indices of openness and transparency of lists of beneficiaries of the 2007-2013 Structural Funds in Europe

The **"Financial Data"** index refers to the publication of financial data by individual project and, as previous years, obtains the highest values followed by the **"Content"** index, referred to the level of detail of the information published relating to Operational Programmes beneficiaries. Therefore, this refers to the two aspects that have greater prominence in the publication strategies of the information by the Managing Authorities. The most significant changes that took place between the 2013 and 2014 relate to the **"Advanced Functions"** index that highlights how the tools for the presentation of data, including graphs and maps, are increasingly used for the dissemination of information relating to the operations and the beneficiaries of Structural Funds, even if not expressly required by the EU Regulations.

On the other hand, the graph below displays the average level of *compliance* with the European Commission guidelines by Member State on data collected in 2014. This index has been devised by performing a simple average of the scores assigned to the Operational Programmes of each Member State both for the regulation requirements relating to the period 2007-2013 and for those established in the context of the 2014-2020 programming (**Pillola n.12 - Open data on the Structural Funds in Europe: Commission initiatives**).

Average level of compliance with the recommendations of the COCOF for 2007-2013 and with the requirements of the 2014-2020 regulation of the Operational Programmes EU27, year 2014

As can be seen, **the majority of sites include information about the fields envisaged in Annex III to EC Regulation No. 1828/2006** valid for the period 2007-2013 (for example priority, fund, region in which the operation is carried out, etc.), but in many cases not all essential fields are present. This makes clear how the regulations are still not sufficient to guarantee the presence of a minimum set of variables considered essential for the dissemination of complete and high quality information. It is also obvious that, considering the more stringent requirements of **EU Regulation No. 1303/2013**, that must be observed for the publication of data on the projects of the 2014-2020 programming period, the average scores at European level fall significantly, with few exceptions, in spite of an overall improvement compared to 2013.

What conclusions can be drawn with reference to the mode of publication?

Using the questionnaire on the *back office* aspects, some choices made for the publication and the main difficulties encountered in the related processes of data publication.

A positive signal is that the process of publishing data is totally automatic in 58% of cases which involves less risk of errors and/or omissions in the dissemination of information. However, the results still reveal plenty of room for improvement, since the process adopted to publish data is **often semi-automatic with one or more intermediate steps** (34%). In addition, for 8% of Operational Programmes analysed, the publication process is carried out manually.

The constraints to publish data with greater details are found mainly in legal issues and are due to issues related to privacy, to the license of reuse and the ownership of data. However, organisational-type constraints, involving management and technical procedures, i.e. related to the interoperability of information systems, to the structure of data as well as the hardware and software available, are also very important.

A further aspect detected through the questionnaire covers the transition to the period 2014-2020 for which, as stated previously, more stringent rules apply. This confirms that many countries wish to adopt a new single portal with a more extensive set of information than what already published for the 2007-2013 Operational Programmes and the development of new features. The case of France is significant: although it already has a single national portal, it intends to make significant improvements in the quality of the information by simplifying data collection thanks to the adoption of a single monitoring system for all Funds, similarly to what happens in Italy.

Toward the publication of the data related to the 2014-2020 programming period: the Italian case

The publication of project data for the 2014-2020 programming period becomes operative on the national **OpenCoesione** portal, with a bimonthly publication and in open format, from the date of first implementation of the new Unified Monitoring System (Sistema di Monitoraggio Unitario), at the end of 2015. The new Common Data Exchange Protocol (Protocollo Unico di Colloquio - PUC) feeds the Unified Monitoring System information base – it is the result of intense work coordinated by MEF-RGS-IGRUE, with the participation of administrations responsible for the Fund and the same OpenCoesione team and collected valuable recommendations of the Administrations holders of programming tools - represents a significant evolution of the common tracking adopted for 2007-2013, whose universe of application, for the part supported by EU resources, extends to all Structural Funds and European investment and therefore also to interventions co-financed by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and the European Fund for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (FEAMP).

As already highlighted (**Pillola n.14 - Partnership Agreement 2014-2020: the latest news for the OpenCoesione portal**), new features will be made available on the OpenCoesione portal, which, as a single portal, fulfils the obligations of publication provided by Common Regulation for the 2014-2020 cycle,

including **special widgets** which allow for reusing specific OpenCoesione portal content immediately on other web sites. Thus, for example, **the lists of the operations and beneficiaries** can be republished also on the Managing Authorities' own sites, remaining automatically updated and constantly aligned with the OpenCoesione portal.

This setting is designed to take advantage of the publication of information on a "single access portal" as a further opportunity for greater data dissemination and transparency, fully leveraging standardisation in terms of information content and format, which, as shown by the results of our investigation, is a key element in ensuring substantial transparency.

Therefore, on their own web sites, the **Managing Authorities** ensure the publication in open format of the lists of the beneficiaries of approved projects only as a transitional measure and until the end of 2015, i.e. until the publication on the OpenCoesione portal of the data on the projects of the 2014-2020 programming. Conversely, they **guarantee** the publication of **data and information on funding opportunities offered by the programmes and initiatives for public consultation as well as the possible availability of additional data** relative to that required by the tracking of the Unified Monitoring System 2014-2020 throughout the programming implementation period, notifying OpenCoesione of all updates through appropriate procedures for electronic data exchange, for the purpose of providing evidence on the single portal.

For further information on OpenCoesione please consult the FAQs on http://www.opencoesione.gov.it/faq/.