

Objective and scope of the study

The „Evaluation study on the application of the principle of equality of opportunity between women and men and of the principle of equality of opportunity and non-discrimination, including accessibility for persons with disabilities, within Cohesion Policy 2014-2020 and on the assessment of implementation of the Governmental Programme - Accessibility Plus 2018-2025” has been divided into two research modules. This report presents results of the evaluation for Module II, which concerns the implementation of the Accessibility Plus Programme.

Overall assessment of the Accessibility Plus Programme

The Accessibility Plus Programme was started up in 2018 and it was a fast and efficiently prepared response to an urgent social need related to providing improved accessibility of space and public services for persons with disabilities. From the 3-year perspective the effects of the Programme implementation should be assessed positively.

One of key achievements of the Programme is including the question of accessibility in public debate. The Accessibility Plus Programme has been even referred to as a *game* changer of Polish policies towards persons with disabilities and persons with special needs. Positive effects of the Accessibility Plus Programme have been presented by both female/male representatives of the public sector, NGOs and representatives of the interested community. All female/male participants of this study have agreed that thanks to the Accessibility Plus Programme the issues related to accessibility have taken top positions on political and programming agendas of institutions and organisations. Visible effects have been also observed as for changes in awareness and mentality. The study results reveal increased openness (of both beneficiaries and public institutions) to the needs of persons with special needs. This change could be observed at the level of initiatives as well as at the level of the language used to describe them.

The implementation of some legislative amendments, planned within the Accessibility Plus Programme, could be regarded as its greatest achievement. They constitute a solid basis for implementing accessibility in a long-term perspective. Particular attention should be paid to the ‘Act on providing accessibility for persons with special needs’. Raising the issue of providing accessibility at the level of legal regulation has significantly contributed to setting priority initiatives taken in this area by different public institutions. As a rule, it is the legislative alterations that should be regarded as the most significant and potentially the most sustainable effects of implementation of the Accessibility Plus Programme.

The results of this study show that the objectives of the Accessibility Plus Programme are fully consistent with the objectives of implementing the ‘principle of equality of opportunity and non-discrimination, including accessibility for persons with disabilities’ within Cohesion Policy. There is a visible synergy between these two interventions and it is necessary to fully make use of the potential with regard to the start up of the subsequent EU financial perspective. It is even more important in view of the fact that EU funds constitute the most important source of funding within the Accessibility Plus Programme. Therefore it limits to some extent one of its weaknesses, which is the lack of a stable budget.

Module II – summary of the report

The lack of a multiannual and stable budget (it refers to some activities funded from national resources) is undoubtedly one of key difficulties in implementing the Programme. It is necessary to take account of the fact that -to much extent- the period of the Programme implementation has coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, which has lasted since the first quarter of 2020. The restrictions issued over 2020-2021 (until this study was completed) were a significant hindrance for activities planned to be undertaken in that period – by both public institutions responsible for particular initiatives and beneficiaries of the Accessibility Plus Programme. Due to the lack of detailed work schedule for the Programme it is difficult to unambiguously assess risks related to not undertaking particular initiatives. An update of objectives and outcome indicators included in the Programme and defining indirect values constitutes one of the key recommendations of this study.

Another horizontal challenge with which beneficiaries of the Programme have to face up is an immense scale of needs (particularly it concerns undertaking infrastructural initiatives) and an insufficient financial allocation to these objectives. The problem is additionally deepened by an increase in prices of goods and services which are directly related to accessibility¹. Prices of the equipment and services of this kind have increased due to among others, a high market demand and a supply which falls behind with the former (particularly it refers to specialist expertise services with regard to accessibility). The number of experts who possess appropriate knowledge and competence regarding the problem of accessibility in a broader sense is not sufficient.

Conclusions regarding particular areas of support

Architecture. In the area of architecture a considerable part of tasks has been started. The activities undertaken are oriented at an objective and are addressed relevantly. Changes regarding the necessity of taking account of accessibility standards as early as at the stage of designing newly-erected buildings should be regarded as the most important ones in this area. It is a revolutionary change, which will have the biggest impact on the accessibility of a built environment in a long term (along with changes introduced into the mode of educating architects). Unfortunately, the scale of needs in this area is much larger than implementational and financial capacities planned in the Accessibility Plus Programme.

Transport. The implementation of a considerable part of the tasks planned in this area has been started. The main hindrances have appeared in implementing a training project targeted at transport employees and in delivering COMBO carriages. As compared to other areas of the Accessibility Plus Programme, an important facility in the area of transport is the TSI PRM (Commission Regulation (EC) regarding accessibility of vehicles and railway infrastructure). Well-founded and unambiguously-defined standards in the area of railway infrastructure facilitate undertaking many activities related to providing accessibility.

Education. As for the area of education, it is worth paying particular attention to a visible change in the approach and awareness of needs typical of persons with disabilities. The

¹ The increase concerns also the costs of implementing investments- prices of construction materials and services.

amendments introduced in the act on education law should be assessed positively. At the same time it is necessary to clearly indicate financial risks related to project implementation, including, among others, the above mentioned increase in prices. The analysis of the activities planned in the Programme in relation to actual needs shows that the scale and financial resources are definitely insufficient as for existing challenges. The pandemic period and online learning which is related to the former have shown that still there is a great deal to do in order to secure particular educational needs of children with disabilities, who have experienced – at this difficult time- many significant barriers limiting learning along with other male and female pupils.

Services. A vast majority of the initiatives planned in this area is still at the preliminary stage. An important effect of implementing activities undertaken in this part of the Programme is a change in approach, observed mainly among administrative employees at the central and local levels and in culture institutions. It is necessary to assess positively modifications – introduced step by step- in respect of accessibility of infrastructure and resources of culture, tourism and sport for recipients with disabilities. Visible implementation risks concern mainly the sustainability of social services, which results from their project implementation system. The biggest risks related to unimplemented assumptions have been observed in the activity referring to work in the administration².

Health. Despite delays, resulting mostly from the COVID-19 pandemic, the main project implemented in this area – ‘Accessibility Plus for Health’ might contribute to a systemic change in healthcare in respect of its increased accessibility. The biggest limitation of the project is its insignificant scale as compared to immense needs of the sector. At the same time it is necessary to point out that it is one of the largest ventures under the Programme. It is very likely that the activities undertaken will bring positive effects. Undoubtedly, audits of accessibility are very helpful as they allow to optimally target the support. Also, the complexity of ventures is of great importance - combining infrastructural, digital, competence and organisational investments. The planned continuation of the venture within the new financial perspective also deserves a positive assessment.

Competitiveness. The initiatives undertaken could be assessed as relevant in view of the needs in the area of accessibility. Interventions undertaken within the area result from coherent logic. They take account of both direct support within projects for working out innovative products addressing the needs of persons with disabilities and indirect support aimed at increasing knowledge and awareness of entrepreneurs and at building the innovation ecosystem in the area of accessibility. In the context of generally low supply of projects within competitions dedicated to the problem of accessibility, it is necessary to continue and to expand the scope of activities aimed at increasing the capacity of enterprises for developing products which take account of the needs of persons with disabilities.

Digitalisation. The scope of interventions planned and implemented in the area of digitalisation could be assessed as relevant in view of the needs in the area of accessibility. A key element,

² Due to too small a scale of initiatives undertaken as compared to ambitiously-defined objective.

which should translate into positive sustainable changes in a long term, is passing the 'Act on digital accessibility of websites and mobile applications of public entities'. The results of audits point at the first positive effects of the requirements introduced. A systematic improvement of accessibility of websites of public entities is still in progress. As the main barriers for increased digital accessibility of public entities, it is possible to indicate an insufficient level of knowledge and experience in this respect, especially among smaller local government units, as well as a lack of financial resources for adjusting offices to the new requirements. In this context, it should be stated that the initiatives of the Chancellery of the Prime Minister - taken in favour of substantive and technical support granted to public entities as for implementing solutions fostering their increased digital accessibility- should be assessed as particularly utile.

Coordination. An appropriate substantive preparation and a high- standard culture of cooperation (based on participatory methods) of the unit responsible for coordinating the Programme - Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy should be regarded as one of the strongest cells in the area of coordination. Unfortunately, locating the Polish Access Board within the framework of a standard structure in one of the ministries weakens considerably its coordination position and limits real opportunities for exerting an impact on other entities involved in the implementation of the Programme. Therefore, the optimal solution seems to be the transfer of the coordinating unit from the Ministry to the Chancellery of the Prime Minister. Also, the Access Board has been regarded as a systemically necessary entity. The main remarks on its functioning have concerned a large number of its male/female members with a relatively small knowledge of issues related to accessibility and a failure of providing appropriate space for substantive discussion for male/female experts at accessibility. Apart from the institutional aspect, it is necessary to positively assess legislative amendments implemented within the area under discussion as well as changes in awareness which have been made by among others, performing educational and informative activities

Recommendations

- To update the objectives and scope of particular activities as well as implementation indicators with regard to the assumed effects of the Accessibility Plus Programme. In the course of the update it is necessary to analyse in detail the objectives which the Programme is to achieve in the context of limited resources for its implementation
- To continue and to implement new initiatives for building up a potential of competent staff in both administration and other institutions (universities, NGOs).
- To improve the coordination of informative and promotional activities in respect of promoting the Programme brand and to conduct activities disseminating knowledge of the complaint mechanism with regard to a lack of accessibility of public institutions, as an element strongly supporting the implementation of activities related to the improvement of accessibility in the public sector..

The report also includes a number of solutions suggested with regard to particular areas of implementing the Accessibility Plus Programme.