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*Sviluppo locale sostenibile, formazione e valorizzazione risorse umane,
pari opportunità e mainstreaming, reti transnazionali, assistenza tecnica agli enti locali*

General Assessment Report Intermediate Phase

“ETHIC”

**Entreprises et Territoires pour une Compétitivité
Haute et Intelligente**

**Project code : 1G-MED08-117
Programme Med 2007-2013**

By Ms Roberta Messina

INTRODUCTION

The assessment of project phases, analyses, surveys and sets of interviews carried out in different contexts, countries and economic and production situations all at the same time is usually done based more on "qualitative" rather than quantitative considerations.

This model has been and is shared by many transnational projects fruitfully promoted by the European Commission/Union over the past two decades.

Clearly, as it is often commonly said, you cannot add “apples and oranges” together, so the feature that needs to be considered is the human variable characterizing any relevant data.

It alone can give, under certain circumstances, a positive drive to the participants assessed to improve their performance and understand the trend along which the interlocutors of choice - being the subject of the study in progress - are moving, either knowingly or more often unknowingly.

This methodological approach, empirical to a certain extent, is easily criticized by the gurus of the scientific, multilevel assessments that are carried out in homogeneous projects within a same territory.

However, a greater attention to the human factor, to unforeseen variables, to the influence of the context and to the enhancement of diversity could, in my opinion, help assessment reports break free from the aseptic scientific approach (which is often extremely and probably uselessly long-winded) restoring them to their primary function, namely correcting the actions implemented and being a primary tool in the construction of future policies.

Easily accessible, comprehensible, applicable.

“ETHIC” Project - *Entreprises et Territoires pour une Compétitivité Haute et Intelligente* – Project code : 1G-MED08-117

Programme Med 2007-2013

Axe 1: *Renforcement des capacités d'innovation*

Objectif 1.2: *Renforcement des coopérations stratégiques entre acteurs du développement économique et autorités publiques*

The monitoring activities generally refer to the description of the project's state of progress from various points of view. These consist in logging the mainly quantitative data collected along the way and are aimed at charting the project's entire course as it unfolds in an orderly fashion, in order to allow for adjustments during the process and a posteriori, in view of a future project and/or mainstreaming action for the project's outputs.

The assessment activities, instead of starting from the monitoring data, unfold through a more in-depth qualitative analysis, which starts along the way, but must be concluded *ex post facto* and in the last phase of the project's action. Only then is it possible, considering the various adjustments made by the project's partners, to determine the effectiveness of the actions and the correspondence between the goals set and the results achieved during implementation.

The assessment process is hence necessary to determine whether the project has ultimately brought about the changes in the reference target – in this case public and private networks, which aim at supporting a certain entrepreneurial fabric – and to identify any technical and organizational limits during implementation.

Moreover, the ETHIC project has two levels of analysis, one consisting in the actual monitoring of the set of project actions and the other, which takes into account the data collected using the questionnaires administered by the firms in the four different contexts/areas of the partner countries.

Both levels are to be analyzed to allow the partners driven by the lead partner Confindustria Palermo, at the mid-period assessment, to make adjustments addressing any criticalities in the project and to implement actions based on data and the needs expressed by the firms and hence the project's real objective.

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The project aims at developing an innovative model of economic development for small enterprises centered on traditional products and tourism.

In order to reach this goal, the project will carry out an experiment on services for enterprises in order to increase their activities locally and internationally as well as positive relations among enterprises of various European regions. The expected results envisage the creation of new production and marketing outlets and a common "ETHIC" brand capable of positively conveying the entrepreneurial style based on ethics and fairness, which, starting from the lead partner Confindustria Palermo, can be spread to the Greek, French and Portuguese partners in Europe.

The partnership brings together public and private entities, which have already gained experience in all the sectors of the services offered to enterprises. Therefore, the partnership is consistent in functional terms and complementary in geographical terms and has greater value in organizational terms (each partner has its own network of enterprises and public entities).

With regard to the answers provided through the questionnaires, please refer to the relevant section, as the partnership's general surveyor – appointed by the lead partner – was assigned the task of comparing and homogeneously assessing data from the various countries.

Even the homogeneous analysis is rather complex. In addition to a series of questions and hints prepared by the four partners, there is also a customizable section for each country. The core for the transfer of experience lies in Italy and consists in the concept of ethical enterprises, the driving force of the entire project. It focuses on the concept of legality and on how it can be a source of economic growth for an enterprise.

To date, the data received is scarce in numerical terms (and in terms of quantity, a variable which is of little interest for the project for the time being), but is extremely interesting in qualitative and human terms. For the purpose of the project's objectives, what is of most interest to the general surveyor and best fits with the idea of "Ethic" is to create a valid and transferable tool for policy makers at an EU level.

The questionnaires administered, which by decision of the partnership (joint conference of February 22, 2010) are centrally analyzed and assessed by the transnational surveyor, amount to 16 for Greece, 17 for Italy, 8 for Portugal and 4 for France.

For more detailed data, please refer to the specific document drawn up by the relevant staff and to the present author's general comments.

One inevitable recommendation is the need to expand the body of data especially for France, which, with just 4 examples, cannot provide a set of data that can be analyzed or compared in depth with those of the other countries. Anyhow, it would be appropriate to reach the same number of enterprises in all the regions, possibly setting 20 interviews as the optimal goal for a comparative assessment.

GENERAL METHODOLOGY

Delays in the start of some project phases and particularly in the appointment of the national surveyors and in the collection of the interview data have led the general surveyor to work mainly with the transnational coordinator and lead partner, which is responsible for filling out the periodic reports of financial and procedure monitoring to the Managing Authority of the MED programme.

The problems arising from the economic crisis, which have hit Greece, in particular, and substantially affected the project's management by the public partner – which has had to address the national rules of the domestic stability pact and the new restrictions requested by the EU for the economic rescue package - have given rise to several problems in the continuous monitoring and assessment. At the same time, the variability in the political and institutional scenario of the French colleagues has probably led to a certain disconnect in the consolidated network of supported enterprises to the point that the data collected and the appointment of the French national surveyor have been delayed. To date (May 2010), a factual partnership relationship has been established only with the expert appointed by Portugal, who, already at the first transnational conference (Evora, P, December 2009) produced an interesting preliminary presentation on the assessment, methodology and data to be collected.

As for the entire set of project actions, an analysis of the various actions envisaged follows and it illustrates the criticalities and possible solutions, which will be proposed to the lead partner so that they can be shared with the partners and discussed in a dedicated meeting (possibly Brignolles, September 2010).

Therefore, the detailed “step-by-step” overview of the set objectives with the criticalities and solutions follows below and it will be discussed at the transnational meeting, because it requires a joint answer by the four coordinators in the partner

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countries. In case of problems preventing all of the partners to attend the transnational conference in September, the issue will be discussed in a following video-conference. The comparative responses of the coordinators will be channeled into a joint assessment report, which, in the general surveyor's intentions, can be a useful tool in making adjustment to the project.

The "questions/hints" following each of the objectives will be submitted in advance to each of the coordinators for “*ex ante* consideration” to speed up and facilitate sharing the remarks and finding solutions. This document, once validated by the lead partner Confindustria Palermo, will be translated into English and sent by the end of June 2010 to the partners.

OBJECTIVE: joining of manufacturers of the sectors identified in the “ETHIC” pathway.

Criticalities in all the countries/regions involved, the partners had major difficulties in the participation of the single or associated enterprises in the *ETHIC* project starting from the replies to the questionnaires. The explanations most commonly given by the entrepreneurs are: the project objectives are too abstract; no positive effects for entrepreneurs; just another brand.

Solution: in each of the regions, after the first period without replies, personal interviews with entrepreneurs were held and the services to be provided by each “*single office*” were reviewed in order to offer services that enterprises really need. The partners have also reviewed a set of promotional materials (with an increase in the envisaged budget) in order to have more instruments for awareness-raising.

Questions/hints: what impact did the current economic crisis have on the initial lack of interest considering that enterprises are often fighting for survival without having the time to devote themselves to innovation and internationalization, which could be the only solution to overcoming the current recession? Considering that the crisis has inevitably brought about a worsening in the administrative burden due to the payment of taxes in installments, the raising of capital, the winning of customers who in turn are often in crisis as well, the repositioning of production and cutting of costs, how much has this crisis affected the initial lack of interest of the target group?

OBJECTIVE: accurate identification of services to be offered to enterprises taken from the extremely wide range envisaged during the planning of the ETHIC project and diversification of the services according to national peculiarities.

Criticalities: the delay in the start-up of experimentation due to the difficulties in identifying the services actually needed by SME's in the agri-food and tourism sectors has marked a setback not so much in terms of planning or in the schedule, but rather in terms of the enthusiasm of the staff responsible for implementing the project in each of the partner countries and hence the initial inability to convey messages rich in empathy to the network of the enterprises involved.

Solution: the partners' reaction was extremely flexible with regard to the offer's adaptability. In particular, in Italy new quality certification pathways are being identified after the completion of *Ethic's* planning in view of offering free technical support to enterprises. In Portugal the focus has been shifted to launching more promotional and communication measures to help the enterprises involved reach new international markets.

Questions/hints: is the adjustment in the range of the services offered positive or is it a deviation from the project's objective? Considering that it is being made just by two of the four partners, does it make the project more effective as a whole? The services offered, which now aim at reducing the expenses that a healthy enterprises needs to cover (quality or internationalization processes) are anyhow affected by the overall need to tackle crisis by cutting costs.

OBJECTIVE: create *ab initio* a well-trained, motivated and close staff capable of managing each of the four “Ethic Single Offices” in the various partners regions and interfacing across-the-board with all the European partners, exchanging information on the criticalities and solutions adopted.

Criticalities: delay by some partners in identifying the staff members (in-house personnel and external experts) needed to carry out the project activities and delay in carrying out the project activities relating to scheduling (GANTT). Clearly, this has led to a further delay in reaching the budget levels. Moreover, these delays are due to new appointments and transfers (France has already mentioned the political and institutional changes that have altered representation in the French partnership) or to institutional impediments (Greece, as a result of the stability pact imposed on public entities for the debt crisis). Then there has been also a delay in the Italian national procedure to appoint the level-1 auditor, which has also blocked the request for the repayment of the expenses of the first semester. Finally, it should be noted that the initial lack of surveyors - except Portugal - still continuing in France and Greece has not allowed the local coordinators to receive any input on how to correctly carry out the project activities and on the reaching of the objectives as scheduled and according to an effective procedure.

Solutions: the partnership has found the resources needed to reach the mid-period objectives among the staff already hired and/or in-house personnel involved in the project. For instance, as already explained in the previous document, the general surveyor is working transversely on all of the questionnaire results and reports to the

transnational general coordinator and to the local coordinators (except Portugal, which *ab initio* has appointed an extremely competent expert). In addition, the Scientific Committee, supported by the activities of the transnational office, has replaced a part of the surveyors for the first 8 months of the project submitting also a monitoring document to the Steering Committee.

This way of proceeding shows a tremendous spirit of flexibility and adaptability by the lead partner and the entire partnership.

Questions/hints: Is it necessary that some of the partners and particularly the lead partner make up for the shortcomings of the other partners by taking on a greater workload? Is the expression of said “solidarity among partners” assessed positively by the MED Management Authority and by the Committee?

OBJECTIVE: create a single package of European services that the MED ETHIC Single Offices can offer both to their own national networks and the enterprises belonging to the network with the partners and - at the end of the project through the mainstreaming action envisaged and supported by the MED Management Authority - to other subjects at the center of entrepreneurial networks belonging to other European regions not directly involved in the project.

Criticalities: the redefinition/review of the services for enterprises by each partner has led each Single Office not to be able to offer the enterprises the services initially envisaged during planning based on the partner's regional peculiarities and characteristics.

Solutions: Within the framework of a positive action of project syncretism when it was impossible to develop the service envisaged by the project, the various Single Offices identified the services included within a topic initially assigned to another partner.

In other words, FLM, the Portuguese partner, has administered a questionnaire on the issues of CSR (company social responsibility) and legality, which were initially assigned to the Italy Single Office (Sicily); France's SMPPV has proposed experimenting an alert software for enterprises on mandatory European regulations, the issue of knowledge of EU regulations and funds for Greece; Metropolis Est, an Italian partner, has developed a pathway to support access to social quality certification (SA 8000), which also regards the quality to be experimented in France.

Questions/hints: is this swap negative for the project? Are sharing and swapping a sign of confusion or rather of the creativity needed to address the crisis and problems that inevitably arise?

It should be noted in this regard that the project's final output envisages a single package of services for enterprises applicable in any context. Therefore, the fact that some services have been shared by the partners right from the experimentation phase is, in our opinion, a strong point.

OBJECTIVE: creation of a common European package of services to be mainstreamed following the conclusion of the MED *Ethic* project.

Criticalities: the review of the services to enterprises is also a positive factor because it addresses the needs of enterprises in terms of competitiveness. However, in Portugal and France the type of services most requested regard: innovative marketing (Portugal) and savoir-faire marketing (France), namely an issue, which has very little to do with the services to be experimented as envisaged by the project. Similarly, the pathway to access social certification (SA 8000) does not fall precisely within the framework of legality as defined in the project.

Solutions: the sharing of the resources, criticalities and solutions identified allows each of the partners to have a multi-country package of experiences already experimented and tested on the field.

Questions/hints: with regard to the achievement of the MED programme's objectives, is it a problem that the partners have changed/reviewed the services to be experimented? The general and specific objectives of the MED programme – Axis I (competitiveness, attractiveness of territories, ...) should be borne in mind as well as the fact that the review of the services is the fruit of the desire to concretely meet the needs expressed by the entrepreneurs.

INTERMEDIATE CONCLUSIONS

There are a series of extremely positive aspects that result from the very criticalities identified and solutions found.

In particular, all of the entrepreneurs involved showed interest in creating a network of enterprises to share good practices.

This request had not been envisaged during planning, but the partners and, above all, the transnational office did their best to identify issues of common interest and for possible exchanges (e.g., France's interest in developing wine tourism and the good practices existing in Portugal and Sicily; the spreading of fishing tourism in Sicily and good practices in France).

The participation of the SME's of all the countries and their publication in the project's website, which has a good number of visitors. A FAQ page has been created for greater appeal and to create the conditions for a network of enterprises. The network, too, must be implemented and stimulated.

General project indicators:

- **Positive:** internet website and number of registered visitors, promotional material produced in Italy; number of enterprises that were contacted and decided to participate; number of public and private organizations, definition of the services; number of transnational meetings (2), number of video conferences (2), number of press folders published in the various countries.
- **Negative:** lack/scarcity of promotional material published by the non-Italian partners, number of other European organizations participating in the networks and/or meetings; lack of hardcopy publications of the analyses performed; lack of printed brochures; no CD-Rom.

All of the quantitative indicators are illustrated in detail in the mid-period report drafted by the transnational coordinator and loaded in the online system.

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